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(Hansard)

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	Mr Ian Paisley Jnr

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 25 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: The Rt Hon Peter Robinson raised a point of order, during the Consideration Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill on Monday 18 June, in relation to a Member's having a right of reply under Standing Order 17 when speaking to a notice to oppose the Question that a clause stand part of a Bill. It was an interesting and genuine point of order — I can assure Members that genuine points of order can be scarce in this House. The Member's point of order concentrated minds.

I have considered the matter and have noted that Standing Orders 34 and 35 provide the Speaker with discretion to allow a Member to speak more than once during a debate on the Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage of a Bill. I intend to use that discretion to allow Members to wind up when a notice to oppose the Question that a clause stand part of a Bill has been published on the Marshalled List.

Mr P Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Should I conclude from your ruling that Members do not have an automatic right to do as you suggest, but that it is entirely at the grace and favour of the Chair?

Mr Speaker: Once again, the Member is absolutely correct. The key to this matter is that there is a slight difference when a notice to oppose the Question that a clause stand part of a Bill has been published on the Marshalled List. We could debate this matter all day. However, Erskine May's 'Parliamentary Practice' is quite clear that notice of an intention to leave out a clause or schedule may be shown and numbered on the Marshalled List.

One would ask the question, if the clause had been voted on, and rejected, in the House, would it have ended up as an amendment to the Bill? That is where the issue of procedure comes in.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

June Monitoring Outcome

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Executive about public spending in 2007-08, following the June monitoring round. I also want to highlight the actual spending by Departments in 2006-07.

As Members are aware, the in-year monitoring process seeks to underpin the effective management of the overall public expenditure position by identifying emerging pressures and flexibility across all Departments, and seeks to offset such issues on a strategic basis. Therefore, the process is a key mechanism in the system that allows emerging or unanticipated issues to be addressed without detriment to other public services. That is achieved by asking Departments to identify reduced requirements, which are amounts that were allocated to Departments in previous Budget processes on the basis of Estimates of cost and demand for services that were not required in the light of emerging and more up-to-date information. Any and all such amounts should be surrendered for central consideration and reallocation rather than retained in Departments.

Furthermore, the monitoring process offers Departments the opportunity to identify emerging pressures or to firm up issues that could not be fully quantified at the time budgets were originally set.

An additional factor that has a major impact on managing the in-year position is the planned overcommitment of resources. The concept of overcommitment has its origins in the previous Executive, and reflects that, as a consequence of a combination of factors in the early part of this decade, Northern Ireland Departments experienced some significant underspends. In response to that, the previous Executive, and subsequently direct rule Ministers, adopted a planned overcommitment approach, which means collectively allocating more to spending programmes before the start of the year than is actually available, on the basis that some underspend is inevitable. Therefore, the actual end-of-year spend will be within the upper limits of what is available. That approach is designed to maximise the actual spending in any financial year, and, if it is to be considered sensible and pragmatic, it must be used with caution.

The Executive have inherited an overcommitment of a little under £153 million on current expenditure for this year. That means that departmental allocations are £153 million more than is available to the Executive for spending this year.

Although I have already mentioned that some year-end underspend is inevitable, up to £100 million should be retained during the year by exercising a first call on any reduced requirements that emerge in monitoring rounds. That reduces the in-year flexibility available to the Executive. Therefore, reduced requirements are not available for reallocation to emerging pressures.

Assuming that the underspend is in the region of £50 million, that £100 million must be found in-year. Hence, the level of overcommitment must be reduced to that figure by the end of the year to ensure that the risk of exceeding the amount available to the Executive is minimised.

That illustrates how managing the in-year position and seeking to reduce departmental underspend by the use of overcommitment are inextricably linked issues. On the one hand, the allocation of more than is available helps to reduce underspend by anticipating average levels of reduced requirements and, accordingly, adjusting the total level of resources allocated to programmes.

On the other hand, during the course of the year, we need to manage the position through the assimilation of reduced requirements. Failure to assimilate reduced requirements reduces in-year flexibility and the capacity to respond to any in-year unforeseen pressures. We must strike the right balance between the two.

As I have said, the use of overcommitment can only represent a sensible approach to financial planning if it is not taken to extremes. I must say that the position that we have inherited from our direct rule predecessors for the current financial year tends towards that extreme position.

With that in mind, I plan to review the level of overcommitment in future financial allocations. The challenge is to strike the balance between facilitating long-term planning — and, hence, optimum value for money through spending — and the creation of an environment in which some flexibility will occur to provide the capacity for the Executive to deal with emerging pressures. I will return to that issue when I present the draft Budget in the autumn.

I wish to provide some more detail on the current financial year. The starting level of overcommitment that we inherited from the direct rule Ministers was in the region of £153 million. Reduced requirements declared by Departments during the June monitoring round amounted to some £11 million. Members will find summary details of those figures in table 1 attached to the printed copies of my statement that I have provided to Members.

Alongside the reduced requirements, some resources that have been held centrally and not previously allocated — largely as a consequence of the Chancellor's

most recent Budget, which was announced after the financial allocations for the 2007-08 financial year were set — and some other minor adjustments, reduce our overcommitment to a figure in the region of £138 million.

By the end of the financial year, the final level of overcommitment should be in the region of £50 million. That means that, between now and the end of the financial year, we require a further £90 million of reduced requirements to be identified and offset against the level of overcommitment. I am advised that, in previous years, a level of reduced requirements in the region of £120 million to £140 million has been the norm.

However, in the June monitoring round, Departments identified and declared only £11 million of reduced requirements, as against previous patterns of savings in the region of £30 million to £40 million at this stage of the financial year. That difference suggests either that Departments have been reluctant to declare reduced requirements, or that the financial position for many Departments is considerably tighter than in previous years, and thus the previous level of reduced requirements may not be repeated in the remainder of this financial year.

I have, therefore, emphasised to my Executive colleagues the absolute necessity of undertaking a robust review of the financial position in advance of the September monitoring round, with a view to declaring any and all reduced requirements at that stage of the financial year, rather than leaving it until the second half of the year.

A further issue to consider relates to the flooding that occurred in the past two weeks. Members will know that the Executive made up to £5 million available by way of response to the needs of those in crisis. That amount, of course, did not exist in any Budget lines and, therefore, represents a potential further call on the overcommitment position, taking us from £138 million to approximately £143 million.

My Executive colleagues and I agree that making up to £5 million available was a necessary and proportionate response to the issues that arose. However, allocating that money does place a further pressure on the in-year financial position.

In view of what I have outlined, at this early stage of the financial year, the Executive have concluded that we must adopt a prudent and cautious approach. Therefore, at this time, we do not have any scope for additional current expenditure allocations to Departments. We will, of course, review our position in the September monitoring round.

The June monitoring round has focused primarily on current expenditure. The position on capital investment will be the subject of further and separate

consideration, following the conclusion of a departmental capital re-profiling exercise.

The aim of that exercise is to set sensible and deliverable capital investment plans for 2007-08 by allowing Departments to reassess their capacity to deliver their planned capital programmes this year. The outcome should provide an opportunity for the Executive to address any emerging in-year capital pressures.

12.15 pm

I now wish to turn to actual spending by Departments in the last financial year, 2006-07. Details of the provisional out-turn for each Department, in terms of both current expenditure and capital investment, are set out in tables 2 and 3 attached to the printed copies of my statement that I have provided to Members.

Total current expenditure by Departments amounted to some £7.5 billion, representing growth of over 2.5% in real terms on the previous year. Although, as I indicated earlier, we can accept that some underspending is inevitable, last year's performance in a number of Departments suggests that there is scope for improvement.

In 2006-07, the total capital expenditure of Departments was in the region of £1 billion, sustaining the level of investment in 2005-06, which represented a significant increase over previous years. Aligned to that, the level of underspend — at just under 9% — represents a significant improvement on previous years.

Again, however, there is scope for improvement, and the development and roll-out of firm capital investment plans represents the key challenge for us in the months ahead through the development of the second iteration of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

I will emphasise two key points. First, the public expenditure control environment in which Departments operate means that some underspend is inevitable. The challenge for Ministers and officials is to ensure that, while maintaining the integrity of the control system and ensuring that unauthorised spending does not take place, we maximise the impact of the available resources and achieve as high a level of spend as is possible within authorised limits.

Secondly, we must recognise that none of the underspend is lost to Northern Ireland. All amounts available for spending, but not spent, in 2006-07 will be available to be carried forward for use in Northern Ireland in the future. Although access to this stock of unspent resources represents an ongoing issue with the Treasury, I emphasise that that is an issue of timing.

In the continuing discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the financial package for Northern Ireland, we have made some good progress on both current and capital expenditure. Members will be aware of the public expenditure climate across the

United Kingdom and the severe restrictions that the Chancellor is placing on such issues, both for the devolved Administrations and for Whitehall Departments. Therefore, the progress that we have made so far is meaningful and helpful to us in the planning and delivery of public services. However, we will not stop there; we will continue to press the Chancellor as necessary for further improvements in our position.

In conclusion, the June monitoring round has not offered the Executive the opportunity to make any reallocations of expenditure. However, the exercise has been helpful in that it has clarified for the Executive the extent of the challenge, both of the overall public expenditure climate and the position that we have inherited from direct rule Ministers. In the coming months, the key task for the Executive will be to identify any and all flexibility in those existing allocations in order to manage the high level of overcommitment that we have inherited and to generate some flexibility to deal with emerging issues at local level.

The exercise has also served to remind us of the constrained public expenditure position that we face and the need to ensure that any and all financial pressures are considered in the context of the overall position and in the light of the strategic priorities for Northern Ireland. We must all bear that point in mind as we move forward to the remainder of this year's monitoring process, and also when we consider the draft Budget proposals in the autumn.

I look forward to working with my Executive colleagues and with the Assembly on all these matters.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his statement. I also thank him and his officials for the briefings that they have provided to the Committee in the past few weeks, and to the Deputy Chairperson and me this morning. The briefings have been useful in dealing with the complexities of managing cross-departmental issues.

The Minister has spoken in some detail about underspend and overcommitment. The Committee has discussed those issues, which have been of some interest to it in recent weeks. We will work with the Minister and his team to develop proposals or recommendations. During the Committee's discussions on the underspend, the added costs of inflation on capital projects was of particular concern.

Mr Speaker: Could the Member focus on a question?

Mr McLaughlin: I am coming to a question.

I welcome the information in the Minister's statement on the reduction in scale of the underspend this year. However, we must recognise that under-

spending remains to be resolved satisfactorily. The Minister has set out the rationale behind what might be regarded as a phenomenon: the planned overcommitment of £153 million. That is £153 million more than is actually available to the Executive. Although there may be a rationale for that, the Minister has recognised through his statement that it can lead to sloppy financial planning and budgetary management in Departments. I very much welcome his commitment to addressing that.

My question for the Minister, you will be relieved to hear, Mr Speaker, is this: will he bring specific proposals to his Executive colleagues on reducing the underspend and the planned overcommitment that he addressed in his statement?

Mr P Robinson: I again emphasise that I am happy to work with the Committee, as are my officials. A well-informed Committee will have a greater contribution to make to the debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee raised several issues. On capital expenditure, I hope to provide the Committee with some papers on the underspend on capital projects before the end of July. The Executive will presumably wish to take a position on whether they will reallocate the funds or on whatever stance they wish to take. My Department and I will be happy to hear the Committee's views at that stage.

The Chairperson specifically enquired about the advice that I might give to the Executive on the planned overcommitment and the underspend. I made it clear in my statement that an overcommitment is a useful planning tool. I understand that the concept was first introduced during the tenure of the Member for Foyle as Minister for Finance and Personnel.

I wish to continue to have that planning tool, but not perhaps to take it to the extent of £153 million. That would entirely remove the flexibility that might be available in a year. At the same time, however, the overcommitment may have to be reduced in stages, rather than doing so in one fell swoop, as that would clearly have consequences for the overall shape of the Budget.

As far as the underspend is concerned, the financial year 2005-06 showed an underspend somewhere in the region of 1.9%, moving up to 2% in the last financial year. The optimum would be to reduce the underspend to close to 1%. That will require the co-operation of all Executive colleagues. It will also require the early identification of any flexibility that their Departments may have.

Having been a spending Minister myself at one stage, I know the reluctance of such Ministers to hand back funding to the centre that they think could be reallocated elsewhere in their Departments. However, earlier identification of the amount of underspend will allow a much better spending programme, rather than

throwing money at projects where it can be spent at the last minute. I am seeking to reduce the underspend and the overcommitment.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that it is vital that, when they rise to ask a question, they actually do so. When Ministers are making statements to the House, Members are continually making statements themselves, and then asking questions. I remind the House that Members should ask questions of the Minister about his statement.

Mr Storey: In order to ask my question, Mr Speaker, I will have to set it in context and, therefore, make a statement. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank his departmental officials for the briefings that they gave to the Committee, as mentioned by the Chairperson of the Committee, and for their help in trying to ensure that the Committee had an understanding and a grasp of these difficult and complex issues.

The Committee, in its scrutiny role, examined the spending in respect of the priority funding packages, which cover children and young people; skills and science; and the environment and renewable energy. In particular, the Committee examined the actual spend for 2006-07 for those packages, which have an overall budget of some £77.7 million. The Committee found that, during direct rule, the resource underspend for those three funding priority packages amounted to 23% of the available funding. The capital underspend on the packages was over 28.2%.

In that context, can the Minister — and here is the question, Mr Speaker — *[Laughter.]*

Given the importance of the priority funding packages, can the Minister comment on how they will be progressed in the current financial year?

Mr P Robinson: Department of Finance and Personnel officials are already in discussions with officials in the other Departments that have the lead responsibility for advancing those priority packages. It has become apparent from those discussions that there may be some underspend in those packages. I shall therefore look to the September monitoring round for any reallocation that may take place as a result.

Mr Beggs: Can the Minister confirm that Northern Ireland Departments can declare underspend on a number of occasions throughout the year? What is the Minister doing to ensure that, in future, Departments declare any underspend early in order that money can be spent in a planned fashion? Does the Minister accept that Northern Ireland Departments are performing less well than their Scottish or Welsh counterparts and, furthermore, that we need to ensure that money is spent in a planned fashion?

Mr P Robinson: I entirely agree with the Member that any money that is not spent should be declared as such as early as possible. I hope that all Ministers, including those from his party, will take his very good advice.

As far as the Northern Ireland position in relation to the other devolved institutions is concerned, the latest available UK figures for the end-year flexibility, at the beginning of the 2006-07 financial year, show Northern Ireland stock of end-year flexibility to be 3% of the annual budget. That was lower than Scotland, where the end-year flexibility was 4%; lower than Wales, where it was 3% of the annual budget; and lower than the Northern Ireland Office, where it was 27.3%. The Northern Ireland stock of end-year flexibility (EYF) was also lower than the UK total, which was 3.4%.

The Member's point about the early identification of underspend is important. As I have said, I am examining ways to ensure less underspend at the end of the year. However, I point out that underspend does not mean, or equate to, lost money.

Mr O'Loan: This Assembly was elected by the people to address an urgent agenda. As such, what assurance can the Minister give the Assembly — and, more importantly, the people who elected us — that resources will be available in this financial year so that the Assembly can be seen to be making a real difference to people's lives?

Mr P Robinson: The Assembly has considerable resources at its disposal in respect of current expenditure and capital expenditure. I do not think that a Minister with responsibility for finance will ever appear before the House and indicate that he has more money than he needs. We could always do with more finances. If we had more finances, we could use them — and, I believe, use them well. However, it is the job of the Executive to operate within the allocation of resources from the Treasury or, alternatively, to supplement that through the regional rate. We must ensure that spending plans take account of what is available and what our ratepayers can afford to pay.

12.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: The Minister referred to the opening allocations and to last year's departmental underspend, which I understand is based on a comparison between the actual spend and the final allocations, thereby taking into account any adjustments made as a result of the monitoring rounds. In recent years, what proportion of the opening allocations was not spent on those projects to which that money was allocated? That information might give Members some understanding of any flexibility that there might be in the opening allocations for this financial year.

Mr P Robinson: I think that the figure that the Member is looking for is about 4%. We need to be

very careful; during the course of a year, Departments need to have some degree of flexibility. Equally, however, there is a tendency for Departments to hold on to resources that could be reallocated from the centre. I know of examples — Ministers may not think that I know of examples, but I do — where funds could come forward at this stage, but do not. We need more of a collective agreement among colleagues that when resources are available, they are brought to the centre. We have a significant overcommitment to reduce, and there are significant pressures that could be met through reallocation.

Therefore, approximately 4% of departmental funding has been reallocated. It is good sense to allow for that reallocation because, from the time when budgets are set to when they are operated in Departments, changes will take place and new pressures will emerge. To some extent, we rely on underspending to meet those unforeseen pressures and issues.

Mr Attwood: I would like the Minister to clarify a matter. Could it be that the issue is not Departments having more money than they need; rather, is it that Departments have more money than they think? Last Wednesday, at the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Department's deputy secretary reported that the amount of money returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel in increased receipts and reduced requirements was £5.5 million. However, the tables attached to the statement that the Minister made earlier give a figure of £4 million. There may be an easy way to reconcile those figures, today or subsequently. The Committee was advised that the Department for Employment and Learning's increased receipts and reduced requirements amounted to £5.5 million.

Does the Minister agree that it might be helpful, both to him and to everyone else, if, in addition to the tables that he has attached to his statement, a table indicating the current pressures in each Department at the end of the first quarter were included? Again, the Committee for Employment and Learning has been advised of current pressures in the Department totalling £5 million.

Mr P Robinson: Officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Employment and Learning produced the figure in my table based on their consultation. I will ask my officials to look back at the available information, and if the Committee has come across an issue, I will write to the Member about that.

As far as the wider issue is concerned, Departments will always want to have the funds available to meet all their needs, but the Department of Finance and Personnel will never be able to meet the hopes and aspirations of every Department at all times.

I cannot quite recall the Member's second point.

Mr Attwood: It was about the pressures and increased demands each quarter.

Mr P Robinson: During the monitoring rounds, Departments could be invited to bring forward bids based on the pressures that they might have.

The fact is that we have not received any bids, because we did not ask for any, which in turn was because we had a fair indication that there would not be an allocation. However, if Departments were experiencing pressures that they could not bear, I am sure that the Ministers responsible would have brought them to our attention, and we would have sought to address them in some other way.

It is, therefore, unhelpful to encourage people to make bids when the necessary resources are not available. However, I would be surprised if any Minister with pressures in his or her Department had not been whispering in my ear before now. It appears that Ministers have been able to deal with the pressures within their existing allocations, and the Executive will listen to any Minister who has not.

Mr Weir: There are significant pressures to increase spending in certain areas, and I am sure that every Member could suggest worthy projects on which twice the value of the Budget could be spent. However, does the Minister believe that a Department's historical underspend — when its actual spend is compared with its opening or February position — should be considered when that Department's baseline is being set in the Budget process this autumn?

Mr P Robinson: That is an interesting question — if there are serial offenders. The Department of Finance and Personnel has to consider the demands that are made for funding, and when they outstrip the amount that is available, we must prioritise. When we look at allocations, we have to look at a Department's track record in how it has spent previous allocations. That is one of the elements of assessing the robustness of any bid.

However, I exercise some caution. I am not advocating that Departments should spend for spending's sake simply to minimise their underspend. I fear that, if my Department punished others for their past practices, such a situation might arise. Following a Department's bid, I look at its plans and not only test them against the Department's past record, but seek assurances that they are capable of being delivered within the allocation period.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is he concerned about the large underspends that are recurring in the same Departments every year — and not necessarily the highest-spending Departments?

The Minister said that an underspend of 1% was considered to be acceptable. Do the Executive have

plans to impose that limit on all Departments for future financial years?

With regard to the budget-setting process, what plans does the Minister have to move from making incremental changes to the Budget to a system of determining outputs and then calculating the resources that are required to meet those outputs?

Mr P Robinson: The Member's question is not dissimilar to the previous one in that it relates to Departments that have a history of underspending. It is more difficult to make calculations in some Departments than it is in others. For instance, some Departments can ensure that they have less underspending because their money goes out to other agencies in a fixed way. In such cases, the Department can see the money being transferred and used.

The Finance Department commissioned a review by PKF (UK) LLP. It looked at a number of possible ways of tightening monitoring and of ensuring less underspending and better delivery. That review is available for Members to see.

What was Dr Farry's second question?

Dr Farry: I asked about imposing a 1% underspend target across all Departments.

Mr P Robinson: That was not the Member's second question. His second question was about future budget-setting processes. The Member said that he had two questions and has managed to squeeze in another one.

The Member referred to capping the underspend at 1%. It is not possible to have a single level of underspend as a target for each Department, as some Departments could better that target. I would not want to allow those Departments to slacken. We must consider the maximum degree to which we can tighten up the process for every Department.

Regarding future budgeting, the Executive have decided to agree first the Programme for Government. Once our priorities are decided, we will consider the available resources and commit our spending based on the priorities identified in the Programme for Government. That is the sensible way to proceed. I am sure that there will be priorities for which there will not be sufficient funds, but that will be a matter for the Executive to timetable. The approach that Dr Farry suggests is the right one.

Mr McQuillan: How does our end-year flexibility position compare to that maintained by the NIO and those in other parts of the UK?

Mr P Robinson: I emphasise that I do not want to set targets for Northern Ireland that are based on other budgets. However, as I said earlier, the Northern Ireland Office does not have the best record for

end-year flexibility. I hope that the Executive do not follow its example.

The Scottish Executive have considerable end-year flexibility stock, in the region of £1 billion. Presently, Northern Ireland has about £150 million end-year flexibility stock, which the Chancellor has agreed to allocate fully over the next two years. The underspend from this year will be added to that, and we will be in contact with the Chancellor and HM Treasury to ensure that that allocation is received.

When compared to others, Northern Ireland has a satisfactory record. However, it is not satisfactory when compared to our aim, which is to reduce the level of underspend considerably.

Mr Burnside: The Minister referred to the financial package for Northern Ireland. I am pleased that good progress is being made with the Chancellor on current and capital expenditure. When will the Minister announce and quantify in the Chamber the increase in current and capital expenditure? There is no mention of that in his statement.

If, after 30 June, his ministerial colleague authorises the building of a new national stadium, will there be enough money in next year's Budget to fund the project at any of the prospective sites? The Minister will realise that some of his colleagues, including the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, disagree on where the new stadium should be located.

Mr P Robinson: I congratulate the Member on his dexterity in getting in a question about the national stadium.

The Member has, however, misunderstood the reference in my statement to the Chancellor's package. My statement refers to the end-year flexibility position on resource and capital. There is an agreement with the Chancellor regarding the availability of our end-year flexibility stock, both in resource and capital funding. That has been outlined and was included in the Chancellor's statement and in statements released subsequent to the four main parties first meeting the Chancellor at Downing Street.

This year, £75 million will be allocated; next year, £65 million will be allocated to the resource side, and £100 million will be given on the capital side. We are still working with HM Treasury to increase those figures. Ongoing talks are particularly important if a large underspend, such as that which I have outlined, occurs in the financial year. However, there is a number of other elements in the Chancellor's package, and I hope that the position on those will be clearer in due course.

12.45 pm

As far as the national stadium is concerned — and I address the issue with caution — the Department of Finance and Personnel can only consider a proposal

when a business case has been produced. When business cases are produced for whatever number of alternatives there may be, the Department of Finance and Personnel will look closely at them and give a view on whether they are affordable in the first instance — some may be affordable while others may not — and whether they would give value for money. I am not therefore bound to any project or location until I see the business case. To date, I have not seen a business case for any of the suggestions that have been reported by the press.

Lord Morrow: I too thank the Minister for his statement. Others have touched on the subject of my question, and the Minister may feel that he has answered it already, but I will ask the question in a more direct manner than others have done. In the light of the tighter rules on access to EYF, should the automatic entitlement to EYF in certain areas of expenditure be re-examined?

Mr P Robinson: There is a second issue that we have not talked about contained in that question. There is the EYF situation with regard to Northern Ireland's relationship with the Treasury, but there are also arrangements through which departmental commitments can flow from one year to the next.

I have asked officials to look at all those matters urgently, and I will advise the Executive following the review that is being carried out. I do not want to say much more until the review is complete, but the Executive will have to consider it. If Departments have had EYF in previous years, we will want to review the necessity for that and the case for Departments having that degree of ring-fencing. That will be looked at, and I will be happy to report our findings.

Mr Durkan: The Minister rightly expressed caution about overcommitment with respect to the Budget. I assure him that I share his concern. I remind him that when the Executive originally went down the road of overcommitment it was when we were providing indicative allocations to the Executive programme funds that entirely absorbed any underspending. Will the Minister tell us more about how the caution he wants to apply now will be applied in future?

Furthermore, will he anticipate how pressures might be factored into future monitoring rounds, if that was not allowed this time? Many groups in the community and voluntary sector are hearing about underspending in Government Departments. They also find that Departments and public bodies are reducing their commitment to the groups because of efficiency savings that have to be delivered or because of the review of public administration consequentials, which means that the slippage money that was given to local groups no longer exists.

Many groups are trying to deliver neighbourhood renewal under severe pressure — they do not know what, if any, money they will get. In that context, will the Department for Social Development at least get the funding that it is being forced to give to the UDA? After all, the UDA does not have to engage in the evaluations and appraisals to which all the other groups are subjected.

Mr P Robinson: I am happy to take the lessons about overcommitment that the Member learned during his experience as Minister of Finance. I am aware that there is a slightly different position now as regards Executive programme funds, which to date have not been operating in the way that they did during the previous Executive. However, I recognise that there will always be pressures in the system.

I know that if I was in a community group that was seeking money and I learned that the Department for Social Development was underspending, I would ask why the Department could not give the money to my group. However, those are issues that cannot be solved. Departments will always need to take decisions about where their resources should be allocated, and there will always be circumstances in which Departments will be unable to spend all the resources that they have been allocated. Indeed, we would be in a difficult position if there was no underspending, because the Budget that we inherited from direct rule Ministers requires us to achieve £150 million of underspending if we are to be on an even keel. Therefore, we need some underspending in the system.

The particular issue about the allocations that direct rule Ministers made to the Department for Social Development would be better taken up with the Member's colleague. As I understand it, sufficient funds are available to enable the Department for Social Development to deal with all those matters that are contained in its present business plan.

Mr Newton: My question is on similar lines to that of the Committee Chairperson and, to some extent, to that of the Member for Foyle. How does the £153 million overcommitment that the Minister mentioned compare with that of previous years? Is it desirable to continue with that sort of situation in future?

Mr P Robinson: This year's overcommitment is of about £153 million, which I think is the highest level that we have had. We had an overcommitment of the order of £135 million last year, and the level has been going steadily up. It has been easy for Ministers to say that, no matter what level of overcommitment they set, there will always be underspending by the end of the year, so they keep hiking the level up. However, the difficulty with continually doing that is that, the next time we come to the June or September monitoring round, we will be unable to make allocations to deal

with in-year pressures. Ministers need to take account of the fact that pressures will always arise within a year and that unforeseen issues will jump out at us. We need resources to deal with those. We cannot deal with them unless there is underspending and money can be freed.

In answer to the question that the Member for East Belfast asked, we are going in the wrong direction by heading towards larger overcommitments. We need to start having a sensible level of overcommitment. The previous Executive had a reasonably sensible level of overcommitment, but that was stretched and stretched by direct rule Ministers since then.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for providing us with the detail that he has given us today. Like other Members, I have visited many schools, including primary schools, the conditions of which can be described as being straight out of a Charles Dickens novel. Given that, has the Department of Education explained why its capital investment budget was underspent by almost £31 million?

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that the Minister of Education will be happy to go into detail about underspending in her Department, but a great deal of that will relate to the education and library boards. On the conditions in schools, maintenance and so forth can be tackled by the resource budget, but dealing with the Dickensian situations that the Member described probably falls more adequately to the capital budget. We will deal with that when we get to underspending on the capital programme.

Mr P Ramsey: Given the legislative and statutory requirements to improve safety at Northern Ireland's big sports grounds — soccer, Gaelic football and rugby — will the Minister of Finance and Personnel support the £22 million bid that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has made to assist with the improvement of sports grounds, such as those of the two senior clubs in my constituency — Derry City Football Club and Institute Football Club — that are in need of such development?

Mr P Robinson: At this stage, I am not involved with the settling of bids. The Executive, at the appropriate time, will want to consider that bid alongside those from the other Departments. As I told the Member for North Down, that will be a matter for the Executive to consider in their spending plans for the next three years, based on their Programme for Government for the next three years. However, I am sure that the Member will know that the Executive, and the rest of the House, will want to consider carefully issues of health and safety.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister state whether he has any specific ideas that would support cross-departmental working in areas such as support for carers? That is one of several areas that has resource

implications for many Departments — especially the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but also the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, amongst others.

Mr P Robinson: Again, that matter does not relate either to the June monitoring round or to the out-turn for the previous year. Obviously, cross-cutting issues bring onto the radar the role of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. If the Office is to be involved in cross-cutting issues, the Member can raise that matter with the Deputy First Minister at Question Time later today.

Every Member could produce a long list of issues that are important to him or her. That being the case, those issues cannot be dealt with on an ad hoc basis. It is important to consider all those pressures and requirements as part of a comprehensive and strategic overview of where our money should be going. That will be done as part of the process of considering the comprehensive spending review, which will occur over the autumn. I hope that the Member will engage in that process and that full consultation will take place.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Budget Bill [NIA 3/07] do now pass.

Again, I thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for agreeing to the accelerated passage of this Bill. Although I appreciate that the Bill is effectively authorising spending plans that are linked to a direct rule Budget, the preceding debates have been constructive, and, again, I thank Members for their contributions.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Rather than risk your ire, I am not going to repeat what has already been said. The Minister set out the proposition. It was entirely pragmatic and sensible to take that approach, and my Committee was happy to support the Minister's proposal.

Mr Beggs: First, I want to reiterate my previous support for the Budget Bill. It would have been impractical to have tried to change the Budget in the midterm, and, for that reason, I will continue to support the Budget Bill in its Final Stage.

However, I want to highlight some issues contained in the Budget Bill and the Northern Ireland Estimates 2007-08 booklet that Members will have to consider carefully at departmental level and on subsequent occasions.

The Budget allocates some £80 million to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The net cash provision for the previous financial year was £60 million. That amounts to a 30% increase in one year, which is a significant increase. Interestingly, the last provisional figures that I was able to get my hands on showed £42.6 million for 2002-03. Therefore, since the last period of devolution, funding for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has almost doubled.

It is important to remember that many of the functions of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister do not deliver services. It is important that the amount of funding that is granted to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is balanced, because, on many occasions, it does not deliver goods on the ground.

1.00 pm

I noticed one particular resource request from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First

Minister — “To assist Government in making and implementing well-informed decisions and improving public services” — for £41 million, which is a 30% increase on the previous financial year. The amount requested for the last full year of devolution, 2001-02, was £15 million. That is a 268% increase during the intervening period.

I accept that some specific expenses account for some of that increase, including £9.5 million for the Strategic Investment Board and £6 million for an Executive programme fund initiative that was previously not in full swing. Nevertheless, there are other headings on page 269 of ‘Northern Ireland Estimates 2007-08’ that show that OFMDFM is absorbing significant amounts of money. Under the heading “Support for government and other services”, there is a 60% increase in the request for funding: from £11.8 million in 2001-02 to £18.9 million in 2007-08. There is a massive increase in Government bureaucracy, which does not deliver services on the ground.

It is important that we all have markers when we return to our Committees to start the process of considering future Budgets. We must ensure that money goes to services and their delivery.

As I went through the detailed Estimates, I attempted to ascertain whether any outcomes from the St Andrews Agreement were addressed in the current Budget, but I could not find any. Can the Minister advise us of any costs that might flow from the St Andrews Agreement? I refer in particular to the commitment that has been made for there to be two new North/South bodies; the new all-island consultative forum, which many had previously opposed but which has now been agreed; and the new North/South parliamentary forum. No Estimates for those bodies appear to have been provided, so it would be helpful to know how those additional bodies are to be financed.

Dr Farry: We, like others, are content with this Budget, which has been inherited from direct rule Ministers. Due to the timing of devolution, the Assembly has had little opportunity to influence the Budget’s shape. However, in order to ensure the continuation of public services, it is our duty to ensure that funding is in place. That said, we cannot be complacent and underestimate Northern Ireland’s public-expenditure problems or ignore the efficiency savings that the overall Budget contains.

I point out to Mr Beggs that under devolution in its previous incarnation from 1999, OFMDFM acted as a huge vacuum cleaner, sucking up functions that ordinarily would belong to other Departments.

It is also worth pointing out that there are considerable inefficiencies in Northern Ireland because of the sheer number of Departments that we have. Moreover, the division of functions among

Departments is not always logical, and that creates budgeting difficulties. The Minister mentioned the large degree of underspend. The proliferation of Departments creates difficulty in maintaining firm discipline right across the board.

It is important that, in future, we do not simply use this Budget as our template and make only minor variations here and there to suit our changing priorities. We must take a root-and-branch look at what our public spending priorities are. We must ensure that we have a defined set of priorities that are linked to specific outputs, and we must allocate the necessary resources based on those priorities. The Assembly should, as far as possible, work from a clean sheet when allocating our public expenditure.

As things stand, however, these Benches are happy that the Budget Bill pass.

Ms J McCann: I agree with the Committee for Finance and Personnel and its Chairperson, but I wish to make a few comments on the Budget.

The economy of the North of Ireland is characterised by unacceptable and unsustainable levels of poverty. Some 31% of 16- to 60-year-olds lack paid work. Some 22% of the workforce is on low wages. Nearly 25% of households are unable to afford adequate home heating. Almost 100,000 children and 50,000 pensioners live in income poverty, and there are 3,000 premature deaths per annum as a result of disadvantage and poverty.

Those unacceptable and unsustainable levels of poverty expose the extent of discrimination and disadvantage in our society. In the past, we have had no control over our own resources, and that has left us with an economy with patterns that, year after year, have produced alarming evidence of intensifying inequality and disadvantage. We must correct the huge infrastructure deficit that has arisen from the successive failures to invest in essential services such as water, sewerage, transport, hospitals and education.

It is not good enough, year after year, to allocate money that results only in the deepening of patterns of inequality and disadvantage. Only a firm commitment to address the issues of discrimination and disadvantage will allow us the opportunity to overcome that which is morally and economically unsustainable. The examination of how public procurement expenditure can integrate economic and social requirements, and the ring-fencing of projects that directly impact on discrimination and poverty, are examples of ways in which we can begin to reverse the conditions that have created the so-called basket economy. There is a huge budget for procurement, and we must agree measures such as local labour clauses that ensure that procurement meets equality conditions.

We must ensure that the companies that receive those contracts meet base conditions, which include

good wages and employment of apprentices, and, thus, contribute to local economic welfare and growth. It is only through our joint commitment to ending discrimination and poverty, and by securing human rights for all our people, that we can do that.

Mr P Robinson: First, I shall address some of the points made by the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs, who referred to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and complained — or asked — about the increases in its spending. OFMDFM is a creation of the Member's party, and the DUP would have done things differently. Mr Beggs will not draw me into a position where I end up defending this Budget — this is not our Budget. Like everyone else, we are accepting the Budget because we are already into the financial year. We cannot change course, particularly as allocations had been made to Departments before devolution and, as a result, they had made all of the agencies and other bodies aware of the funds that would be made available to them.

It is not our Budget — we accept it, but we shall not defend it. It is, as has been indicated, the inherited direct rule Budget. Mr Beggs asked specifically about additional costs that arise from the St Andrews Agreement. There would be considerable savings for the public purse as a result of the St Andrews Agreement if people gave their support to the police, the courts and the rule of law. A lawful society will cost a lot less than one wherein we have to pay compensation, replace buildings and the like.

I also point out to Mr Beggs that the St Andrews Agreement was not signed up to by any of the parties — it was an agreement between two Governments. There are elements of that agreement that the DUP has publicly opposed, and continues to oppose politically. I suspect that the elements that Mr Beggs referred to are proposals from the two Governments, but I will take no lessons from the UUP on setting up bodies and structures that are costly. The labyrinth of structures that were created as a result of the Belfast Agreement are down to the UUP, and Mr Beggs did not get to his feet in the Chamber to complain about the cost of all of them, so we will look at his record before listening to his remarks.

It is becoming unhealthy, but I often find myself agreeing with the Member for North Down Dr Farry. He mentioned the number of Government Departments — perhaps he will be joining the DUP. The Member must realise that the more Departments there are, the more difficult it is to get a co-ordinated and, as he describes it, disciplined approach. The Assembly must address the number of Government Departments. An institutional review Committee has been set up, and that is one of the issues that it is looking at, I hope energetically, so that we can address it quickly.

I agree with him that the priorities that we set must be linked, and there has to be a direct correlation between our priorities and strategies, the Programme for Government and the expenditure that we set aside in the comprehensive spending review.

The Sinn Féin Member Ms J McCann spoke about disadvantage and poverty. They were considered by the Programme for Government Committee or the Preparation for Government Committee — I am never sure which, as we morphed from one to the other during the summer months. Those issues represent a challenge to the Executive.

If devolution is to mean anything, it has to make a difference in people's lives. I am not just thinking of the high flyers in society but of those who are disadvantaged and find it difficult to make ends meet as well. However, we are better able as a society to deal with those people if we have an economy that is robust and has grown and if it is a high-value-added economy. If there is more money in the pockets of the people of Northern Ireland that helps to boost the economy too.

Those are the main issues that were raised during the course of the short debate. I welcome the continued contribution of Members, and when we get down to the busy process of working out the Budget in the autumn, we will all want to see our thumbprints on it. We will work through the Assembly and its Committees, and I hope that we can have an energetic discussion during the course of the consultation, so that when we come back we will have a Budget that people can support. We want a Budget that people will recognise does have a Northern Ireland impact, the nuance of those who are elected by the people to speak on their behalf, and priorities that are linked to the needs that we find as spokespersons for the electorate and citizens of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: No other Members wish to speak to the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. 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 Budget Bill [NIA 3/07] do now pass.

Welfare Reform Bill

Final Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to move

That the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 1/07] do now pass.

I do not wish to go over the provisions of the Bill in any detail, but I should comment briefly on what has been achieved. The Bill introduces a new employment and support allowance to replace the current incapacity benefits. The allowance will help to give individuals more relevant support to enable them to stay in, or return to, work. There was a lengthy debate on how people suffering from a mental-health condition may be affected by some aspects of the new allowance.

I reiterate that it is our aim to help and support people to get back to work. The new system will handle people sensitively and sympathetically, and I fully appreciate that this is about people and their concerns. I want to assure them that they will get all the help and encouragement that they need to fulfil their potential, and we will support those who suffer from mental-health conditions at every possible opportunity.

1.15 pm

The Bill also provides the framework to reform and improve how housing benefit is designed and administered, including the introduction of a local housing allowance in the private-rented sector.

Concerns have been raised about some of the housing benefit reforms, particularly the power to pay the benefit directly to the tenant rather than to the landlord. I have made it clear that I wish to proceed cautiously on that matter, and I have agreed to work with the Committee for Social Development to consider all the issues before deciding on the way ahead. The important point is that I will consult the Committee before making any decisions on how to proceed.

The Bill also creates greater power to tackle benefit fraud. It includes measures to clarify the law on disability living allowance (DLA) and attendance allowance. Other minor, but important, issues are included in order that various aspects of existing legislation can be clarified, with the aim of making those provisions simpler to administer and easier to understand.

The Bill also provides an easing of the relevant employer conditions, making it easier for a person suffering as a result of having certain dust-related diseases, including mesothelioma, to claim a compensation payment. It is anticipated that the corresponding provisions of the Westminster Act will come into force in July 2007. Subject to Royal Assent,

our aim is to commence our provisions as close as possible to that date.

The debates on the Bill have been lively and challenging, and although I have not always agreed with some of the views that have been expressed, they have been worthwhile. I appreciate Members' concerns about ensuring that the most vulnerable are treated properly as a result of the Bill. I too share those concerns. I am grateful for the support for the Bill from parties across the House.

Some Members expressed reservations about the use of accelerated passage. In truth, I would like to be able to introduce legislation on social benefit, but parity and financial implications mean that other measures become necessary. Had we not been able to avail of accelerated passage, in all probability, the Bill would have taken several months to complete its passage. Indeed, the process would probably have been completed near the end of the year. Therefore, there would have been financial implications for the types of people about whom I have already spoken.

In the earlier debates, I spoke at length about parity, and I trust that all parties recognise the major advantage that that brings. It is difficult to argue that the implementation of parity social security legislation should be delayed for several months. We can avail of accelerated passage, so why deny the people of Northern Ireland the same rights as people in Britain? I am not saying that that procedure is perfect. However, as the Bill proceeded, we were able to debate fully the issues that Members wanted to discuss. As far as I am aware, every Member who wanted to speak was able to do so, and I trust that I answered every question that was asked of me.

As I said before, I do not seek to use the accelerated passage procedure lightly, and I firmly believe that each Bill must be considered on its merits. However, I ask those Members who expressed concern about the use of accelerated passage to consider carefully what I have said.

I am grateful to the Committee for Social Development and to Assembly Members for the positive way in which they have worked with me to progress this important Bill. I thank Members for their contributions to what have been lively and worthwhile debates, from the acceptance of accelerated passage and through each of the Bill's Stages to today's Final Stage.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): As I mentioned at an earlier debate, the intention to break the link between welfare and dependency is to be welcomed. Hopefully, that somewhat ambitious aspiration will become a reality.

The Bill was granted accelerated passage, so the Committee for Social Development was not able to conduct a detailed examination of it. However, I want

to assure the House that the Committee will play a major role in considering the practical implications of welfare reform.

Several proposals for statutory rules will emanate from the Welfare Reform Bill, and the Committee for Social Development will consider the merits and policy implications of each one. I would like to thank the Minister for Social Development again for giving an unequivocal undertaking to consult fully with the Committee, at its request, before making any regulations that would change the current method of paying housing benefits to landlords. The Committee does not want to see the people whom the Bill is designed to help become more dependent on welfare.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin's objections to certain sections of the Welfare Reform Bill have been well aired. While there are parts of the Bill that we can support, Sinn Féin was put in a position where if it had opposed the Welfare Reform Bill on the grounds of accelerated passage, those most in need would have had benefits withheld, which would have been unacceptable. Subsequently, Sinn Féin was told that that would not have been the case for the majority of those receiving benefits, so the Minister for Social Development certainly succeeded in muddying the waters.

The amendments were tabled by Sinn Féin for the right reason: to make the Bill work more effectively for the people affected by its remit. Members who voted against them may consider that they were relevant when they are representing constituents, particularly at tribunals. The amendments were not tabled to score political points but to help those whom Members represent.

The agreement to allow a Bill to receive accelerated passage should not be perceived as rubber-stamping that Bill or as acquiescence to all its clauses. Due consideration should be given to all pieces of legislation, and Sinn Féin will table all amendments that are relevant and necessary. Surely that is one reason for debate here. To castigate Members for proposing amendments to Bills that have been given accelerated passage is to undermine the process of accelerated passage. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hilditch: My party and I have supported the Welfare Reform Bill at each of the Stages. Last Monday, when several amendments were tabled at the Second Stage, Members had a lengthy and informed debate, with many contributors raising and supporting aspects of clauses of the Bill that affect many of our constituents on a daily basis. The issues that were dealt with included concerns for those who suffer from mental-health problems; those with lung problems; housing allowance issues; and the need for parity, which is essential.

Those matters were dealt with to the satisfaction of the majority of the House and the Committee for Social Development. Having that debate, in spite of the process of accelerated passage, was beneficial. I thank the Minister for Social Development for giving Members the opportunity to raise matters through questions and correspondence and also for coming to the Committee for Social Development to assure Members on shared concerns.

The Committee for Social Development looks forward to the next time that matters of welfare are brought forward, when Members will undertake a much more robust review.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate, and I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development. I look forward to working with the Committee on the practical implications of the workings of the Welfare Reform Bill. I want to see the good governance that can be achieved when a Minister works along with a Committee to achieve good objectives.

The Committee for Social Development and I want to achieve the implementation of financial measures that will benefit the public. I emphasise that people who suffer from certain mental-health conditions will be treated in the most sensitive and sympathetic manner. I assure the House that all Social Security Agency staff will seek to do that.

Mr Brady referred to parity and accelerated passage. I explained the reasons for parity during the debates on the Bill and during meetings with the Committee for Social Development. I expressed my earnest desire to introduce social security legislation, but we are constrained by financial implications.

I do not want anyone being without benefit or disallowed benefit as a result of the Bill not being granted accelerated passage.

I want to put on record that I have never muddled the waters about the Bill, either during Committee meetings or when the Bill was going through its various Stages in the House. I made it clear that I wanted people to be able to avail of easements to claim compensation payments for asbestos-related diseases and mesothelioma. However, I will explain the issue again.

The Bill provides for an easement of the relevant employer conditions, making it easier for a person suffering from certain dust-related diseases to claim compensation payment. It is anticipated that the corresponding provisions of the Westminster Welfare Reform Act 2007 will come into force next month. Subject to Royal Assent, my aim is to commence our provisions as close as possible to that date — hence the need for accelerated passage.

No Member wants people who have suffered from asbestosis, or their relatives, to suffer financial detriment. As the Minister, I do not want that to happen; the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Social Development do not want that to happen; and I am sure that Members do not want that to happen. I have apprised the House fully of all the measures.

I was pleased with the level of consensus that debates on the Bill enjoyed across the Floor. I look forward to working with the Committee in the coming months as we seek to deliver the opportunities that the Bill can offer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 1/07] do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Carers

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

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that all carers, formal and informal, can access services and support to maintain their own health and well-being, to recognise financially the vital role they play and ensure uptake of all benefit entitlements.

It is timely that the Assembly is having this debate just one week after Carers Week — a week when the role of carers was rightly acknowledged throughout Northern Ireland. My personal experience of the week left me feeling that more must be done to raise awareness and provide practical help, and that is why I tabled the motion.

I have represented carers in many areas. I have represented the SDLP on the Civic Forum group, where we appointed carers, and when that body is up and running again, it is hoped that carers will come and talk to us.

Last week, I listened to a lady from Dunmurry being interviewed on Radio Ulster. She had cared for her husband, Danny, for 20 years until his recent death. She has just published a poetry collection, 'Rose Petals Falling'. Those poems paint very moving pictures, and she summed up for me the unstinting care that is so often taken for granted.

There have been many debates in the Assembly on health, and rightly so. Carers provide so much health and community care, free of charge, in Northern Ireland. Other Departments are also involved with carers, especially the Department for Social Development in regard to benefits, the Department for Employment and Learning, and the Department of Education.

Just a few minutes ago, I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what support he would give when there were resource implications across several Departments, as, indeed, is the case in so many areas.

1.30 pm

Worryingly, however, the vast majority of carers say that caring requires great commitment and has a negative impact on their health and well-being. Many have had no proper training and receive no support in carrying out their role. Scores have experienced physical injury as a result of their role, and many suffer from exhaustion due to full-time caring. A third of carers, for example, look after a relative for more than

50 hours a week and rarely leave their homes. Carers' organisations work together to provide better services and support, and they have documented the shortfalls in the system. I shall touch on some of those issues.

I call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the other Ministers involved, to ensure that those who provide services make certain that formal and informal carers can access all the support that they need in order to maintain their health and well-being. I have cared for relations, but, fortunately for me, on a rota basis, with the rest of my family. Even then, with the best will and love in the world, it puts a strain on relationships.

Carers deserve a good quality of life, and it is vital that they do not become socially excluded. Support for carers' health can take various forms: practical support, such as help in the home; emotional support, such as befriending, counselling and stress management; or an occasional break.

To make matters worse, most carers have no formal training. I believe that there is a need for a regional approach to carer training to support them in their role. They need the opportunity to pursue their own lives and a break from the demanding round-the-clock work that can often lead to a sense of frustration and which can, at times, push people to uncharacteristic measures and actions when looking after a loved one. That puts a strain on the best of relationships. I understand that there was a discussion on the radio this morning during which all the issues about caring for the carers, and the people who are being cared for, were aired.

Parents and families who care for a relative with a learning disability always have the added worry of who will continue the role when they are gone, as well as the present dilemma that they face when the child finishes full-time education at 18 years of age. There is a gap in services and care, and cross-departmental work is absolutely essential to fill that void.

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

In its manifesto, the SDLP stated the need for access to suitable respite provision. That is a key priority. Respite periods are essential for children and adults with chronic illness and disability, and, at the same time, provide a break for those who help to look after them. That type of support for carers is critical; it provides a breathing space in which to maintain other relationships and to do the things that most of us take for granted. Respite provision needs to be more flexible and more creatively thought through. There is a strong case for legislation that provides a statutory right to entitlement. Perhaps carers' working needs should be considered under the EU working time directive.

Health services, however, still have a strong duty in that area, particularly in the nursing and personal care input to the respite, particularly for older people and people with a severe mental or physical illness. It must

always be remembered that the people being cared for have their own personalities and their own wants and needs and should be treated as individuals, like the rest of us, and with the same rights.

Carers save the state £1.9 billion a year, and it is important that the Government put in place effective and practical financial support for the estimated 69,000 people in Northern Ireland who face new caring responsibilities each year and for the 250,000 people who currently are carers. There must be a simpler way to access benefit entitlements. The Government must improve their information services so that people know their rights and take up the benefits to which they are entitled.

Across the UK, there is an estimated £746 million in unclaimed benefits. In Northern Ireland, approximately 3,700 carers who are over 60 years of age are not claiming the pension credit to which they are entitled. Research by Carers Northern Ireland has shown that the current benefit system does not allow carers an acceptable standard of living. It does not recognise or value carers for their contribution.

Carers struggle daily to pay their mortgage, or rent, and their bills. They find it difficult to pay for basic necessities, which is totally unacceptable for people who give so much. From this year, legislation gives employees the right to request flexible working hours if they provide unpaid care for adults who are chronically ill, disabled or frail. According to figures produced by Carers Northern Ireland, 83,000 carers are trying to balance paid working with unpaid caring. More needs to be done to ensure that they do not lose out on job prospects. Many carers have to leave the workplace — or never have the opportunity to enter the workplace — because of full-time caring for a relative.

Moneys were announced by the former Minister with responsibility for health, Mr Paul Goggins, and Big Lottery funding is now in place for young people who care for sick parents and siblings. However, there is a continuing need for funding to ensure a consistent approach to addressing the needs of young carers who are missing out on their childhood.

I hope that the debate will initiate positive and concrete action that will make a real difference to the lives of the most deserving, but often overlooked, section of our society.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson):

I welcome the Member's tabling this timely motion. Although the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has not yet had an opportunity to consider carers' issues in any formal way, its members are fully aware of the vital, and often unrecognised, role played by carers in our society. I am pleased that a member of the Health Committee has tabled the motion,

and I am sure other Committee members will want to take part in the debate.

Last week, the Health Committee had an extremely useful informal meeting with a dedicated group of carers. The group, which is entirely made up of volunteer carers and based in the former Down Lisburn Trust area, has been in existence for approximately 17 years. The group specifically highlights and campaigns on issues relating to people with learning disabilities and their carers, and provides a much-needed advocacy service. The group is not restricted to that area and was keen to point out that it works with other groups, right across the Province.

I am fully conscious that the group is just one of many dedicated and committed groups working with, and for, carers throughout Northern Ireland. The group did, however, highlight a number of serious issues that, I am sure, apply equally in other areas. I will mention two of those, specifically.

First, people with a learning disability are living much longer. It is not unusual to find people well over pension age who have a severe learning disability and who are, in turn, cared for by an elderly parent or relative. In addition, an increasing number of elderly learning disabled people have, or are in the early stages of, dementia. The group highlighted the fact that existing facility providers are either unable or reluctant to provide the type of care required. The group is calling for the development of specialist care units throughout Northern Ireland — a call that I support.

The second issue relates to people at the other end of the spectrum — children and young people with a severe learning disability. The group emphasised the fact that parents are often consumed by the constant day-to-day role that will always be required, simply to meet the physical and health needs of the child. The group underlines the need for a greater recognition of the fact that such families — not only the parents but brothers and sisters — often face additional emotional and mental pressures and may require further family support.

I am sorry that I missed the first few minutes of Carmel Hanna's speech; I do not know whether she used any of the available statistics. Approximately three million working carers in the UK deal with the stresses of what might seem like two jobs — one paid, the other unpaid — and meet the needs of both. Six in every 10 carers provide substantial amounts of care and have given up paid work in order to care for their loved ones.

Carers who work should be encouraged and supported to remain at work for as long as possible, or for as long as they choose. Every year, more than two million people across the UK become carers. Whatever the pressures, it is important for new carers to consider how their new situation is likely to affect their lives. Is it likely to affect a carer's job, or relationships with a partner, children or other family members? Will a

carer's own health be put at risk through the stress of taking on caring responsibilities such as lifting the patient?

Many of the estimated 250,000 people in Northern Ireland who look after those who are sick, frail or disabled are unaware of the help that they are entitled to from the Government and from social services. The sad reality is that people do not necessarily identify themselves as carers, and estimates suggest that 40% to 60% of the available disability benefits go unclaimed.

The subject of carers is too wide-ranging to cover in a five-minute statement or presentation, so I will leave it at that. I look forward to a healthy debate in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety as it revisits the matter in the coming weeks.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and thank Carmel Hanna for tabling the motion. I share her sentiments in wanting to see action as a result of the debate.

Carers contribute hugely to society. In 2002, the unpaid work of carers was worth £1.9 billion — the same amount that the Assembly spent on health and social care in that year. Carers must be supported so that their own health and well-being are not damaged by looking after some of the most vulnerable people in the community. We must invest in carers now.

In October 2000, my party colleague, Bairbre de Brún, the then Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the previous Executive, commissioned a strategy for carers. She identified that the key aim of the strategy was:

“to identify practical measures that make a real difference to the lives of carers”.

Subsequent consultations with carers and representatives of carers' organisations resulted in the adoption of five key principles that would underline Government support for carers, and I will take this opportunity to remind Members of those five principles.

First, carers should be seen as real and equal partners in care provision and at every level of public sector planning and service delivery. They should also have equal status with other care providers. Secondly, carers need flexible and responsive support. All carers are individuals and have their own needs. They look after people with a wide range of needs and abilities in what can be complex and emotionally charged relationships. One solution will not fit all; carers must be able to make real choices based on relevant, timely and accessible information.

Thirdly, carers have a right to a life outside their caring responsibilities and should be given the opportunity, if they so wish, to rest and relax and to have a social life outside the home. The fourth principle is that carers

should be freely chosen and should be allowed to decide what level of caring support, if any, they can give at any particular time.

Finally, Government should invest in carers as they would in statutory providers of care, and they should make resources available that would have a real impact on carers' lives. Most of the resources devoted to caring are the carer's own — their time, energy and emotional commitment — but, in order to continue, carers need help. Any support that a carer receives to enable him or her to continue caring should be seen as a legitimate right.

Those five principles should underpin the decision of any Department that would have an impact on the lives of carers. We have a job to do to encourage people to recognise themselves as carers and enable them to gain access to the benefits mentioned earlier by Mrs Hanna.

We must encourage carers to access the appropriate benefits, which are at nowhere near the level that they should be. We must provide signposting to ensure that carers protect their own health and well-being. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

1.45 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank Mrs Hanna for proposing the motion. If one group in our community needs the admiration and thanks of this House, it is carers.

As has been mentioned, caring for sick and elderly relatives takes a toll on the carers. Carers are more than twice as likely to suffer from poor health than those who do not have caring responsibilities. Some 21% of carers are in poor health, compared to 11% of the overall population.

It is perhaps symptomatic of the selflessness involved in caring for another person that more than £660 million of benefits, which could be claimed by carers, remains unclaimed across the United Kingdom. Research has shown that more than half of carers were unaware that they were entitled to an assessment. That assessment is the way to push open the door for greater support.

The value of the support given by carers has been conservatively estimated at £57 billion. In the United Kingdom, some six million people fall into the category of carer. Those figures alone — quite apart from the humanity of the situation — show that not only must we invest in carers but we must ensure that they take up the public investment available to them.

Almost three million carers, about half of all carers, are in the 45 to 65 age group, and the strain of caring puts their health in greater jeopardy. In Northern Ireland, around one in 10 carers suffers from ill health. That figure rises to one in five for those people who provide substantial levels of care for more than 50 hours a week. That ill health not only takes the form of physical strain and debility but frequently mental ill-health, ranging

from depression to loss of self-esteem, anxiety and general stress.

Caring not only interrupts an individual's career, it can destroy it. The price paid by a carer is often too personally distressing to quantify. Much can be done to alleviate, if not remove, the problems faced by carers, and we must do all in our power to make sure that that happens. Isolation, loss of self-esteem, and financial distress must be addressed.

Research shows that 77% of carers have become worse off as a result of becoming carers. Furthermore, 35% of carers struggle to pay bills. Even more worryingly, 22% of carers cut back on food bills in order to make ends meet. As I said, the value of the work that carers do has been estimated at £57 billion. That figure must be considered in our financial calculations in determining how much help and support they need.

One area where the Assembly can make an impact is in that of avoidable cost. The timely provision of information on available support, before an issue becomes a major problem, must be closely examined. That information can dramatically improve the way in which carers manage caring. It can make their tasks easier and better managed.

The state is involved in the crucial issue of facilitating carers to remain in their jobs for longer. That can alleviate the financial pressures on a family and prevent the loss of tax revenue to the state. That tax revenue, in turn, helps to fund some caring support services. However, that calls for flexibility in delivering services and support — perhaps greater flexibility than exists at present.

The timing of support is important. Sufficient support at critical times, such as when a person is discharged from hospital, could make a major difference and could prevent a problem becoming a long-term crisis. Government must focus on preventing the social exclusion and isolation of carers — they do care. Government must ensure that information is targeted and effective.

The health of the carer must form part of the assessment process as well as the health of the person who is cared for. I suggest that welfare days in GP surgeries would be an effective way to publicise —

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

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I fully support the motion, and I commend Carmel Hanna for bringing it to the Floor of the House.

As someone with 37 years' experience of caring in my family home, I feel rightly qualified to speak on this important subject. Like most other carers, our family takes the job of looking after our daughter as something that must be done. We get on with it with as little complaint as possible. We hope that our efforts contribute to the best quality of life for our daughter.

I pay tribute to all those who work in social services, general medical practice, education facilities, respite provision and to all those who have provided a first-class service for people with learning difficulties. I also wish to pay tribute to my family and, in particular, my wife for her dedication to our daughter, Judy, over the past 37 years. Only people in similar circumstances know the commitment that must be made to someone with a learning difficulty or to someone in their later years.

The Alliance Party's manifesto for the last Assembly election in March 2007 highlighted the need for carers to be better resourced and called for the eligibility criteria for financial support to be lowered. My party also called for carers to receive, at least, the equivalent of the minimum wage. Furthermore, we stated that carers should have access to the appropriate support facilities and that they should be entitled to flexible working hours. I am delighted to say that new legislation, effective from the beginning of April this year, gives rights to employees who are also carers. That is a most welcome development.

I salute all those involved in Carers Northern Ireland, Belfast Carers' Centre and other organisations for their work and commitment to inform and offer support to carers throughout Northern Ireland. Our Government must do all in their power to ensure that people who care for someone in the family are aware of their entitlements. For too long, the Exchequer has saved millions of pounds while ordinary people have struggled to care for family members. For too long, Government have ignored the enormous contribution made by so many people. That must stop. Every carer in the country must be recognised and be given the support that they need.

I understand that a carer's weekly allowance is £48.65. Although that cash is welcome, it falls far short of a sufficient reward for the work done by carers. It is estimated that £4 million in benefits is unclaimed every year in Northern Ireland. That is a staggering figure; many dedicated people are not even aware of their entitlements. I appeal to local Departments to find new ways of telling carers what is available. That plea is not only to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety but to other Departments.

For too long, carers have been taken for granted. That must stop. It is time for action; sympathy and honeyed words are no longer acceptable. It is time for the Assembly and our Ministers to put their money where their mouths are and ensure that carers of every sort are fully supported, thereby allowing those who are cared for to enjoy a much better quality of life. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and thank Mrs Hanna for proposing it.

What is a carer? The definition of a carer is so wide-ranging that it is difficult to describe adequately.

Broadly speaking, a carer is someone who looks after a person who suffers from ill health or disability. In Northern Ireland, over 185,000 people look after loved ones. That figure gives an idea of the extent of the debate. Today, there is a group of disabled visitors at Stormont. The reason that they were able to visit is that their carers have accompanied them. In Northern Ireland, over 46,000 carers work over 50 hours each week. That does not include the number of children who divide their time between caring for an elderly parent and getting the messages for an elderly friend next door. Those 46,000 people work over and above the hours of nine-to-five workers, yet have much less to show for doing so.

The age range of carers is from 16 years to 83 years. Recently, however, the carers' charity, Crossroads, said that more children per capita are carers in the Province than in any other part of the UK. The charity said that children as young as 12 years of age are taking on household responsibilities and chores for which, Members can be assured, they are not being paid.

Recently, it was discovered that over £660 million of benefits are not being claimed by carers across the UK. When one considers that massive amount of money, the question that springs to mind is: why? The Assembly must ensure that people who are entitled to those benefits access them, because that income will make their lives that little bit easier.

Lately, I researched the different benefits that are available for carers. As I did so, I was amazed by the intricate way in which they are presented. I am not surprised that many people do not claim the money to which they are entitled: to drag themselves through a quagmire of paperwork and confusing questions is difficult.

As I examined those benefits, it occurred to me that six out of 10 people who have severe learning difficulties are cared for by their parents, a third of whom are over 70 years of age. Not only do those people continue to struggle, they continue to be under pressure financially, mentally and emotionally and are socially excluded because they have little idea of the help that is available to them.

Another Member referred to the £57 billion that the NHS is saved every year by carers who take on responsibility for their loved ones. It is time that the NHS put that money back into the system for the people who need it. The fact is that 66% of carers are unable to work because of the immense pressure caused by providing full-time care for a loved one. Make no mistake: it is a full-time job, yet carers do not receive wages. It is for that reason that research that was carried out by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in 2005 found that 50% of people who are in the poverty

and social-exclusion bracket are carers. It also found that 92% of carers do not receive the proper benefits.

In my constituency, isolation increases further down the peninsula. That isolation must not be compounded because someone cannot afford to leave the house. In England, Scotland and Wales, forms can be filled out on the Internet to make access to benefits easier. Although, I accept that that does not suit everyone, it is time that a similar facility was introduced in the Province. The Assembly must ensure that, Province-wide, those who provide care are made fully aware of their entitlements.

There are carers' forums, including one in my area. Unfortunately, few people are aware of them. Those who attend have told me that the two hours that they spend talking to people who understand the pressure and who are available as a support network during hard times are invaluable; they could not manage otherwise. However, those forums are not given the focus and attention that they deserve. That has resulted in dropping numbers and has led to the closure of a carers' group in neighbouring Bangor. I have no wish to see that invaluable source of relief for carers fail in Ards as well. Such groups allow for discussion and for interesting people to come along and talk about relevant matters, which helps to reduce the pressure that carers are under.

I could say much more on the issue. However, time is against me. I shall finish by informing the House that 80% of carers are close to breaking point; 50% of them suffer from illness that has been caused by stress and workload. Those statistics must not get worse. The Minister must intervene with a strategy that is designed to achieve relief for those vital, yet often ignored, members of the community. I support the motion.

2.00 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join all Members who have already spoken in welcoming Carmel Hanna's motion, and I commend her for bringing this very important issue before the Assembly. As has been outlined, the volume of work provided by carers is immeasurable and invaluable and has been taken for granted for too long. It is estimated that there are over 200,000 carers in the North: an invisible workforce.

According to the 2001 census, as many as 8,500 children are providing substantial care for their families. Those under the age of 23 are considered young carers, and the average age of a young carer is 12 years of age. Young carers carry out substantial care in support of their families. They also provide in excess of 50 hours a week of care, helping with domestic responsibilities including the challenge of washing and dressing the person they are caring for. That is emotionally and physically challenging for those who are so young.

The health and well-being of carers are often overlooked. As the debate has borne out, there is a strong sense that all carers need support and that that support is far too scarce.

To relate the thoughts of a carer:

"You come into your room and everyone's house is lit up, but you're coming back to a dark house. You put the key in the door and you don't know what you are going to find when you go inside. There's so much stress, so many nights without sleep, and then you have to go into work next day and do a full day's work. It seems to last a lifetime."

If we were to take a straw poll in the Assembly today, most of us would know at least one full-time carer. However, there are many carers whom we are not aware of, whose daily struggle is hidden and who care for people whose needs are not obvious, such as the sufferers of mental illness.

Many carers still struggle alone and cannot access help, perhaps because they do not know where, or how, to find help, or because they feel awkward or embarrassed about asking. The emotional stress and financial pressure that they are enduring must be recognised and addressed.

We need to discuss the value of carers' work, which is currently estimated at £1.9 billion each year. The carer's allowance is a mere £45 a week, the lowest benefit, and many carers have to give up their jobs to stay at home full time to look after a loved one, and food, heating, clothes, holidays and leisure are cut back. The stress and worry over finance place additional burdens on carers and undoubtedly affect their own health.

Helen Ferguson, director of Carers Northern Ireland, stated that:

"Carers are often forced out of work because the social care system cannot give them the support they need. They give so much to society yet due to caring, they experience ill health and poverty. Carers feel short changed by the system."

Carers need financial, practical and emotional support, and to feel recognised and socially included. The Health Committee recently met the former Down Lisburn carers forum and heard first-hand of the difficulties that carers face. No one at that meeting could fail to be impressed by the level of care and commitment they displayed. They spoke of their need for support and the need for the Assembly to consider measures that would enhance quality of life for them and the people they cared for. They need, among other things, quality day care; a review of invalid care allowance; and advocacy and support for families.

I commend Mrs Hanna's worthy motion to the Assembly, and I am proud to support it.

Mr Buchanan: The motion is worthy, and I am quite sure that it will command the support of all parties. I commend the SDLP Member for bringing it before the Assembly.

It is clear that the caring role is important and that many people rely upon it: not only those who are being cared for, but the health boards and trusts who depend on family members taking on that role. If family members and friends did not do so, the boards and trusts would be in even greater need of resources and staff.

Carers should therefore have access to support so that they can strike a balance between living their own lives and providing an individual care programme for their loved ones.

Often, individuals have no choice but to step into the role of caring for a loved one. A system that encouraged collaboration between families and professional carers would be of great benefit. Ideally, training and support services would be provided at an early stage; knowledge and experience would be shared; and each case would be assessed individually.

So often, one hears of Departments, businesses and services in desperate need of further finance. The Department of Health has many factors to consider in allocating funds, as do the Executive as a whole. Members of the Assembly are in a position to put forward the best possible case for carers and ensure that the motion is implemented. As a result, those who most need support will benefit.

Members will understand the enormous demands put on families in times of illness and how much work and dedication are required to keep normal family life running. For many, the burden can be very great. Without practical and emotional assistance, and without the necessary resources, it can be a most distressing experience for families. Were it not for the many who commit so much of their time to looking after a family member or close friend, the Health Department would undoubtedly face much more pressure.

The 2001 Northern Ireland household panel survey found that nine out of 10 carers are caring for a relative, yet only 9% of carers are in receipt of carer's allowance. Individuals caring for a family member are deemed to be carers, so why are more resources and benefits not made available to them? What are the health and social services boards and health and social care trusts doing to reach family members who act as carers? Those questions must be answered.

According to Carers Northern Ireland, a survey carried out to mark carers' week and published on 11 June revealed that:

"caring hits hard in the first year, with carers struggling to cope with changes in their personal situation and their finances as they start to give up work and have the extra costs of disability. After that, there is a steady decline in their financial situation over time.

Parents of disabled children under the age of 18 and those caring for adult disabled children were worst hit, suffering greater debt and difficulty in paying bills and having to borrow from friends and family."

If a family member does the work that an employee of a health and social care trust should do, why not pay that person for doing that work? That would release more employees to help those patients who have no family support network. Benefits available to families must be easily accessed, as families have enough to do without undergoing an onslaught of interviews and paperwork. Carers should enjoy the same rights as all employees, and should be given a clear understanding of the benefits available. If they are entitled to benefits, those should be made available. If the process can be expedited and streamlined to reduce the burden on carers, it is our responsibility to raise awareness of the need for it.

Health boards and trusts should collaborate with carers, regardless of the patient's condition, and should endeavour to help the family to provide the best possible care to the individual in need. Points of contact should be established in the local health and social care trust, and practical advice should be offered on relevant sources of finance. That would benefit carers. If the trusts got that right, it would encourage carers to continue in their role. Many family carers consider it their duty to assist family members, but, if they are assured of help, it will make their decision easier.

I support the motion, as it raises awareness of the benefit entitlements of carers.

Mr Savage: I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, and I thank the proposer for bringing it to the attention of the House.

Speaking in the Assembly some weeks ago, I raised the issue of carers and the key role that they play on a day-to-day basis. The work that they do is invaluable, yet it is often forgotten or taken for granted. Members must provide immediate, imaginative and practical solutions to the problems faced by carers, which cut to the heart of the matter and meet the needs of carers.

That can be achieved only by collaboration and co-operation with all the relevant stakeholders from inside and outside the health and social services sector. That solution must in all ways, and at all times, reflect the needs of our carers. The financial burdens that carers face, and the detrimental effects that caring can have on their health, are simply not acceptable.

I am pleased to support the motion, and I trust that the Minister will do all in his power to ensure that carers have access to services and support to maintain their own health and well-being. We must recognise the vital role that carers play in today's society and ensure that they take up all the benefit entitlements that are due to them. We are all aware of the important work that carers do, but sometimes their role is taken for granted. If the people who are being cared for were not being cared for in their homes, they would have to

be cared for in hospitals, and we know the effect that that would have on our society. It is difficult to overestimate the value of the work that carers carry out, and, no matter what happens, they must be properly looked after.

Mrs M Bradley: I congratulate my colleague Carmel Hanna for proposing the motion.

Carers care, but do we care about the carer? To those who face the daily task of caring in either a formal or informal capacity, it would appear not.

Of the 185,000 carers in Northern Ireland, 8,349 are young carers under the age of 18. At an age when they are probably at their most vulnerable, young carers have to deal with the same problems that official care workers are employed and paid to deal with — although they are not very highly paid, they are, nonetheless, paid. Many young carers experience feelings of isolation and are sometimes subjected to abuse, suffer from depression, and almost always experience the general exhaustion and daily pressures that are part and parcel of being a carer.

Carers, in general, save the Government an estimated £1.9 billion, and they get very little in return. In fact, they receive the princely sum of £48.65 for approximately a 35-hour week. In real terms, that equates to £1.39 per hour. In this day and age, when equality issues are bandied about by all and sundry, informal carers are not even being awarded the minimum wage rate. The official minimum wage for 16- to 17-year-olds is £3.30, so there is a discrepancy of £1.91 an hour. All things being equal, the carer's allowance benefit pertaining to that particular age group should be about £115.50.

For the most part, carers are not respected for the work that they do, and their dedication and commitment are largely ignored. That can often lead to the deterioration of carers' health, and their suffering goes largely unreported by carers and undetected by social workers, if they have one. Their typically low income is a major worry for many carers who have no opportunity to boost their meagre income because of the long hours of care that they provide to their relatives, partners or friends.

The facts and figures speak for themselves. Some 48% of carers are in debt, or have been in debt, while 48% are worried about paying essential utility bills, or are already experiencing problems in paying them. Around 70% of carers — regardless of age — find that they no longer have the social life that they once enjoyed. Some 27% have had to reduce the amount that they spend on essential groceries, while 64% have no savings of any description. Many of our young carers have little or no help with their daily tasks, be they homework, household duties or generally running a home. Some are even unable to attend school regularly.

That is only a brief outline of some of the difficulties that carers face. I hope that those issues will be addressed in the strategy, 'Caring for Carers: Recognising, Valuing and Supporting the Caring Role', which was launched in January 2006. I apologise in advance to the Minister for my brashness, but can he tell me whether the £500,000 provided for the creation of a regional young carers' service, which was announced in March of this year, will be annual recurrent funding and not simply funding put in place for 2007-08? Can the Minister also confirm that funding for existing young carers' services will be kept in place?

2.15 pm

Many agencies do their best to alleviate the stresses and strains suffered by those who are known to be carers, no matter what age they are. However, no one can possibly understand or appreciate what life is like for someone who is responsible for caring for another human being who is living with an illness — no matter what type it is.

That is why the Assembly must act now to create the appropriate centre stage to allow us to deliver, through the correct statutory bodies, a less worrisome existence for carers and, in particular, provide lifeblood for young carers, some of whom are already on their knees in desperation. However, many more carers are afraid to ask for help in case they are viewed as being weak or unfit to carry out their caring duties.

I was a carer for some years, and, at times, I felt helpless, incapable and just plain desperate, even though I could rely on my husband and daughter to share my workload. Many carers are not lucky enough to have a solid support network that they can call upon for help in times of dire need, particularly if they care for people who suffer from both physical and mental illnesses.

I have nothing but admiration and respect for carers. However, respect and admiration will not put food on the table, provide an education or give respite when the carer feels that he or she has nothing more to give.

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

Mr Moutray: Like other Members, I commend Mrs Carmel Hanna for bringing the motion before the House.

In Northern Ireland alone, the support given by carers is worth an estimated £1.9 billion a year, and it has been calculated that about 11% of households contain a carer. Thankfully, some progress has been made in this area. Carers now have a legal right to an assessment of their needs, the purpose of which is to identify what help they require with caring, as well as identifying help that would maintain their own health and balance caring with other aspects of life, such as work and family commitments.

The Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 requires health trusts to inform carers of

their right to a carer's assessment, and it gives trusts the powers to supply services directly to carers. The Act also permits trusts to make direct payments to carers, who are listed as:

- "a) a person with parental responsibility for a disabled child;
- (b) a disabled person with parental responsibility for a child; or
- (c) a disabled child aged 16 or 17".

A report on the long-term financial impact of caring, which was launched by Carers Northern Ireland two weeks ago, found that carers face severe financial penalties as soon as they start caring. The survey found that carers had to cut back on such important items as food, heating and clothes and had to give up their jobs and sacrifice their pensions, which left many worried about their financial futures.

Caring hits hard, particularly in the first year, with carers struggling to cope with the changes in their personal situations and finances as they start to give up work and face extra costs associated with disability. Three out of every five people will be carers at some point in their lives.

Another positive step is that, since early April, carers in Northern Ireland have a statutory right to request flexible working hours. Statistics from Carers UK indicate that there is an enormous turnover of carers, with almost 69,000 people in the Province facing a new caring responsibility each year.

Carers miss out on a massive amount of potential income. In 2005, it was estimated that carers in Northern Ireland were missing out on £4 million of unclaimed benefits and not getting the support and information that they needed. Missing out on a year's carer's allowance alone, at £46.95 a week, amounts to losing £2,441 a year.

Caring can also mean missing out on pension contributions. Every year, many older carers become entitled to pension credit, but they do not know that it is available. Last year, it was estimated that 3,700 carers over the age of 60 in Northern Ireland missed out on pension credits to which they were entitled.

Too many people simply accept the role of carer as being part and parcel of family life. They do not take the crucial step of recognising themselves as carers and finding out what is available to them.

Members must seek to ensure that carers receive what they deserve and what they are entitled to. I support the motion.

Mr Ross: I congratulate the Member for tabling the motion. She can rely on the DUP's support.

As my colleague Mr Moutray mentioned, new legislation was introduced on 6 April 2007 that gives employees in Northern Ireland the statutory right to request flexible working hours if they provide unpaid

care for frail, chronically ill or disabled adults. Helen Ferguson of Carers Northern Ireland described the legislation as:

"another milestone in our campaign to secure a better deal for carers and a step forward for everyone in promoting a modern, flexible and multiskilled workforce."

That signifies another step for carers who, since being officially recognised in the 1990 policy document 'People First' as needing appropriate support packages, have sought to ensure that carers in Northern Ireland are given the help that they need. Six million people throughout the United Kingdom provide unpaid help and support to relatives, friends or partners who otherwise cannot manage because of their frailty, illness or disability. Many of the 83,000 carers in Northern Ireland, however, remain unknown to statutory agencies. It is important that the Assembly recognises the enormous contribution that carers make to society and that carers receive the support and help required to enable them to live a full life.

One should never underestimate the role of carers, who, more often than not, take on responsibilities, worries and stress as they look after others, often at the expense of their own health and quality of life. Reports suggest that carers often give up their own food, heating, clothes, pensions, education and career development in order to help others. As Members debate the motion, they must recognise that at some stage in their lives, they may need to be cared for, or they may need to care for a parent, child, sibling, grandparent or friend.

One in 10 people in Northern Ireland provides help and support to a family member or friend without seeking payment. When Members consider what support is needed, it is important to remember that carers can come from a range of backgrounds and ages, and they will provide care for a range of needs. There is, therefore, a range of carers' needs, and very often, individuals will require different mechanisms of support.

The population in Northern Ireland is ageing; new challenges and concerns face us, and more people than ever will require care. As I have said previously in the House, it is estimated that 11% of people aged over 65 will have dementia by 2015. It is imperative that that problem is tackled, and we must ensure that the needs of those who suffer, or care for those who have dementia, are promoted. I recently attended an event in Carrickfergus, where the east Antrim branch of the Alzheimer's Society was meeting to celebrate an anniversary. That group provides support and help for people who are experiencing the same issues and difficulties as they care for loved ones who suffer from the disease.

It is significant that respite care is not available for carers who are desperate for a break from their responsibilities to their loved ones. There have been newspaper reports about families that have reached breaking point as they wait for up to a year before

respite care is available. That is unacceptable and must be addressed urgently.

A United Kingdom survey of 3,000 carers found that they faced severe financial problems as soon as they began to care. Some carers neglect their own health needs because they have become preoccupied with the provision of care for others. As Mrs Hanna said in her opening remarks, it is amazing to learn that almost 3,700 carers over the age of 60 in Northern Ireland are missing out on the pension credit to which they are entitled. It is also estimated that the extra benefit of carers' addition is going unclaimed by over 2,500 carers. Those statistics are extracted from a recent report that indicates that, UK-wide, carers are missing out on an incredible £746 million in unclaimed benefits.

A major issue for carers in Northern Ireland is their ability to get better access to information on benefits, rights and support services as well as tailored advice on financial decisions. It is important that carers receive support from their employers and that they are given flexibility when possible. Furthermore, it is important that financial support is provided for those who are not in employment. Young carers should have access to education and have a quality of life that allows them to socialise with their peers. The unfortunate reality for many young carers is that they must give up work. They are unable to build up rights to pensions, which means that they may not receive their entitlements when they reach retirement age.

People often become carers out of duty, and they, therefore, do not concern themselves with their rights and entitlements when they begin the caring process. That is why it is important that they are made fully aware of the available help.

The recently published Carers Northern Ireland report reveals that people who care for their elderly, sick or disabled relatives are being let down because public authorities are failing to implement the Human Rights Act 1998. That can be serious, potentially life-threatening and have major consequences.

Adequate resources must be made available to carers, which is not the case at present. Carers can be a vulnerable and excluded group, who experience different life chances from the rest of the population, even when their caring role ends. I support the motion and hope that all Members will do likewise.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members may take their ease for a few moments. Question Time must start at 2.30 pm, after which the debate will continue.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Appointment of Young People

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what proposals it has to increase the number of young people appointed to the public bodies within its remit. (AQO 164/07)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I thank the Member for her question. Our 10-year strategy for children and young people pledges that we will be proactive in obtaining the views of children on matters that are of significance to them. That strategy, of course, includes public appointment processes and public decision-making processes. That approach accords with the spirit of articles 3 and 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which encourages public institutions to make the best interests of children and young people a primary consideration in all actions that affect them.

We are aware that sections in our society are under-represented on the boards of public bodies, and a number of measures have been put into place to address that. Appointments are advertised in the press and on websites; we maintain a mailing list of individuals and organisations that are interested in public appointments; information on forthcoming vacancies is circulated to those on the mailing list, including under-represented groups; we have published a practical guide to public appointments to help people to engage with the process to the best of their abilities; and we maintain a best-practice guide to assist Departments with their appointment processes.

It is desirable that boards should, as far as practicable, reflect the communities that they serve. Therefore we encourage — and welcome — applications from all sections of society. Ultimately, appointments will depend on the range and calibre of the people who are willing to put themselves forward.

Ms Lo: Given that lengthy experience is almost always necessary for appointment to public bodies, thereby precluding young people, would the Deputy First Minister consider abolishing that requirement for some such appointments in order to give young people a chance of qualifying and having their say?

The Deputy First Minister: People need to understand that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister appointed the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments. That person is responsible for regulating and monitoring Departments' compliance with the commissioner's code of practice. The current commissioner is Mrs Felicity Huston, and she was appointed on 1 August 2005 for a three-year term.

The procedures that are set out in the commissioner's code of practice are underpinned by the principles of selection based on merit, independent scrutiny in the selection process, equality of opportunity, and a process that is open and transparent. The code of practice requires Departments to comply with their statutory duty under section 75 of the NI Act 1998 when making ministerial appointments to public bodies and to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity.

Existing legislation prohibits the selection of candidates other than on the basis of merit, for example, on religion, gender or race. Decisions about who to appoint must be based solely on skills and abilities and not on factors that could be construed as discriminatory. The overriding principle of the public appointment process is that selection is based on merit in order to ensure that board members are fit for purpose. We are committed to encouraging greater diversity among board members. However, diversity should not be at the expense of the principle of selection on merit. The key point remains that appointments must be made on merit.

Mr Donaldson: Young people in Northern Ireland want a better future, and they do not want that future damaged by the horrors of the past. The national stadium is one of the visionary projects that we want to develop in Northern Ireland. Will the Deputy First Minister assure me — and my constituents — that there will be no shrine associated with any stadium in Northern Ireland commemorating any cause or seeking to bring the past into the future?

The Deputy First Minister: We confirm that there are no proposals to establish a shrine at the Maze/Long Kesh: that is not part of our intention. The master-plan proposals for the regeneration of the site envisage a wide range of uses, including a multi-sports stadium, an international centre for conflict transformation, as well as provision for employment, leisure and housing in addition to key transport and other infrastructure.

The master-plan proposals for the international centre for conflict transformation reflected the unanimous recommendations of a multi-party consultation panel.

The panel recommended that the centre should provide a facility for research and education, and create the opportunity to contribute to the management, resolution and transformation of conflicts internationally.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr John O'Dowd to ask a supplementary question.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. To assist with the quick progress of questions, I advise that the points that I wanted to raise have already been adequately covered by the Deputy First Minister.

Interim Programme for Government

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when the interim Programme for Government will be published. (AQO 159/07)

The Deputy First Minister: The short answer is that I do not have a response to that question because I was informed beforehand that the Member would not be present. *[Laughter.]* I am being honest about that. However, my quick-witted civil servants have just presented me with the response.

As Members will be aware, the Budget and the Programme for Government for this year were decided by direct rule Ministers prior to restoration, and their overcommitment of £150 million limits our opportunities to commit to new programmes. Since restoration of the Assembly several weeks ago on 8 May, the Executive have given careful consideration to the priorities that should underpin our Programme for Government. The timing of restoration has meant that we have not had the opportunity to work through a full Programme for Government for this year, but we are working towards the publication of a full draft Programme for Government by the autumn. That will cover the year 2008 and beyond, in line with the comprehensive spending review settlement.

As part of that work, we are in the process of defining our priorities and intend to make an early announcement on our emerging priorities. We must build a better future. The Executive's aim is to design and take forward a process that is clearly focused on addressing the key challenges that all our communities face.

Mr Burns: Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that housing will be a priority in the next Programme for Government and that the programme will reflect the recommendations of the Semple Report?

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive will have many priorities as we move forward, not least the issue of housing. We are all conscious of how the huge increase in house prices has affected our economy not just here in the North, but in the South as well. There is a powerful argument that we should prioritise housing and recognise the difficulties that many people face — particularly the need for social and affordable housing. That issue will most definitely come under grave consideration by the Executive as we move forward and develop our Programme for Government.

Mr Burnside: Does the Deputy First Minister expect that the new Programme for Government will include a fully costed proposal for the national stadium at whatever site in Northern Ireland is chosen? If so, does

he expect the Executive to adhere to collective responsibility — a practice to which he did not adhere as Minister of Education in the previous Executive?

The Deputy First Minister: Obviously, that issue has exercised people over the course of recent times and, as we move forward, we will certainly need to give great consideration to the financial implications. The decision on the siting of the stadium resides with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will have responsibility for developing the site and taking the work forward. Undoubtedly, financial considerations will need to be taken into account as we move forward. All those decisions will need to be taken in consultation with all of the Executive, not least the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What engagement will there be with the Assembly in developing the Programme for Government?

The Deputy First Minister: We are conscious of our responsibilities to ensure ongoing engagement between OFMDFM and the Assembly. Since taking office only seven weeks ago, the Executive have worked to develop an approach to the Programme for Government that focuses on, and facilitates, an effective response to the key challenges that we face.

Work is under way to identify emerging priorities and key spending issues. The Executive fully respect the role of the Assembly, and we will engage with the Assembly and Committees at the earliest opportunity to take forward the Programme for Government. The initial focus of that engagement is likely to be on the emerging strategic priorities. There will also be an opportunity, later in the year, for the Assembly and Committees to consider the detailed actions and spending allocations that arise from those priorities.

Mr Campbell: Is it likely that the emerging priorities will contain proposals to resolve finally the issue of innocent victims and the bodies of the disappeared, given the Deputy First Minister's role in the organisation that was responsible for the vast majority of those affected?

The Deputy First Minister: Victims are a key priority for the Executive. The First Minister and I have been on record in appealing to anybody with any information whatsoever on any of those who are missing to give up that information so that the terrible trauma that those families have gone through — and they have been wronged — can be resolved.

Mr Speaker: Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Child Poverty

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what statistical basis will be used in Northern Ireland to measure progress towards the eradication of child poverty; and to comment upon

the relative merits of an income-only measure or a mixed measure to include wider issues of deprivation. (AQO 177/07)

The Deputy First Minister: Ministers will agree on how to measure progress towards the eradication of child poverty as part of the Executive's consideration of the Lifetime Opportunities, Government's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy. Of the three proposed measures of poverty in the strategy, two are income-based and take account respectively of a person's income relative to others or relative to a fixed level. The third proposed measure takes account of both income and material deprivation. There are strengths and weaknesses associated with any measure of poverty. On that basis, a comprehensive picture of child poverty and change over time is achieved by including both income-only measures, together with a measure that combines income poverty with broader measures of deprivation. Tackling poverty — and child poverty in particular — must be a priority of the Administration.

Mr Ford: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his response. I welcome, as I know many voluntary organisations will, his commitment to ensuring mixed measures and not solely income-based measures in measuring deprivation and child poverty.

However, he said very little about progress on the eradication of child poverty. Targets aimed at eradicating child poverty by 2020 were set for the whole of the UK in 1999, but by 2005 the first target had been missed badly. What assurance can the Deputy First Minister give that there will be, over the next few years in Northern Ireland, a real, active comprehensive strategy to ensure that there is a better chance of meeting those targets?

The Deputy First Minister: We are determined to address those issues. British direct rule Ministers made their own commitments, but it is important to remember that there is now a new Executive and a new Government: we live here; we know the extent of child poverty in our society and in our communities.

The First Minister and I are determined, as is every Member of the Executive, to address our unacceptably high levels of child poverty. We will set targets, and we will, we hope, in our stewardship of the process reduce the numbers of children living in poverty.

However, given that a date of 2020 has been set to accomplish the reductions that are sought, it is evident how huge a task it is. That suggests that there must be a short-term, medium-term and long-term strategy to ensure that our targets are met.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Deputy First Minister undertake to raise with the Chancellor the issue of how the present system of tax credits favours single-parent families over low-paid two-parent families because of its social impacts in Northern Ireland?

2.45 pm

The Deputy First Minister: Our ongoing discussions with the Chancellor, who will soon be the new Prime Minister, have been wide-ranging. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has raised the issue of tax credits in the course of our discussions. The matter will continue to figure in those discussions, which are undoubtedly a work in progress.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Deputy First Minister act on recommendations made during previous consultations on Lifetime Opportunities and adopt the EU definition of poverty as being less than 60% of median income?

The Deputy First Minister: We will certainly take into consideration the Member's question and the pertinent point that she has made. The anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy is an absolute priority for us.

Legal Restrictions

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what legal restrictions are placed upon their office. (AQO 156/07)

The Deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is a Department that is in the charge of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister acting jointly. As such, it is subject to The Departments Order 1999 and the NI Act 1998, and to general statutory, constitutional and administrative law, as appropriate.

Mr Storey: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his answer. However, does he agree that one of the requirements that was placed on him on entering his current office was to take a Pledge of Office that obligated him to uphold the rule of law, including support for policing and the courts, as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement?

When he appeared at the Saville Inquiry, he placed loyalty to an oath to the IRA above truth and justice. Now that he is Deputy First Minister, which takes priority — his ministerial Pledge of Office or his oath to the army council?

The Deputy First Minister: I do not think that the words "oath" or "army council" were mentioned at any stage during the Saville tribunal. I have many allegiances: to my family; to my religious beliefs; to Ireland; to the party that I represent; and to this Executive.
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What legal obligations are placed on Ministers and junior Ministers by virtue of the ministerial code?

The Deputy First Minister: The ministerial code sets out the standards of behaviour that are expected

from Ministers and junior Ministers by virtue, for example, of the Pledge of Office, the ministerial code of conduct and the seven principles of public life. It also contains provisions on Ministers' duties to the Executive Committee, the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

Mr Speaker: Question 7, standing in the name of Mr Willie Clarke, has been withdrawn.

Civic Forum

8. **Mr Moutray** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the desirability of constituting a new Civic Forum.

(AQO 194/07)

The Deputy First Minister: As Members will recall, the Civic Forum was established in October 2000 as a mechanism to consult civic society on social, economic and cultural issues. Civic society, as we all know, has changed enormously since then, not least as a result of the increased number of people from other parts of the world who now live and work here.

The Assembly's Committee on the Preparation for Government, on which the five largest parties were represented, discussed the Civic Forum in August 2006. Importantly, there was cross-party support for a review of the mechanisms for civic society to promote its views. It is in that context that we are embarking on a fundamental review of the arrangements. That review will provide an important opportunity for us to consider the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with, and obtaining, the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

We shall shortly be consulting the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the proposed terms of reference, the review process and time frame for that review, which we plan to begin without delay.

Mr Moutray: Given that, from its inception, the Civic Forum suffered from severe absenteeism and that, for its entire existence, its deliberations have never produced a solitary original suggestion that the Executive have taken up, does the Deputy First Minister not agree that the Civic Forum has been an utter waste of time, money and resources, and that its existence can no longer be justified?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Deputy First Minister: No, I do not agree with the Member. The Civic Forum was useful for giving a voice to people who previously had not had an opportunity to engage with others on important discussions about issues vital to the community. We are now in a different situation. Things have changed

over the last number of years, and in the course of our review we will take all the views that have been expressed into consideration, including the Member's.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Deputy First Minister give an undertaking that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will consult fully with its Committee on all matters relating to the Civic Forum, including those groups that may or could be considered eligible for participation in any new civic forum?

The Deputy First Minister: Yes, without hesitation. OFMDFM will co-operate fully with the Committee on this important matter.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Deputy First Minister reaffirm his total commitment to the re-establishment of the Civic Forum? When answering Mr Moutray's question on the desirability of the Civic Forum, the Deputy First Minister did not seem to reject it out of hand. The Civic Forum is a constituent element of the Good Friday Agreement to which the Deputy First Minister should be committed, and I ask him to reaffirm his total commitment to the re-establishment of the Civic Forum as soon as possible.

The Deputy First Minister: We have written to Civic Forum members to ascertain their views on reconvening the forum while the review is being carried out, and we will decide whether to recall the forum when we get the responses. Given that this body has been effectively in a state of limbo over recent years, it would be very foolish of the Executive not to review its whole concept and decide in the aftermath of that review how it should proceed. At this stage it is very foolish of the Member who has just spoken to draw the type of conclusion that he drew from my response to the Member's question.

National Development Plan

9. **Dr Farry** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what role it had in the Republic of Ireland's current National Development Plan.

(AQO 186/07)

The Deputy First Minister: The national development plan was drawn up by the Irish Government prior to restoration, and so the Executive had no role in its formation. In March 2007, the Irish Government confirmed their willingness to agree with the new Executive substantial investment in North/South co-operation through the opening up, on an all-island basis, of development funding for a range of areas as set out in its national development plan, 2007-13. They also confirmed partial funding of £36 million targeted specifically at collaborative research and development.

The Irish Government have also made £400 million available for a major new roads programme to provide

dual carriageway standard on the A5 and A8 routes serving the north-west gateway of Letterkenny to Derry and on the eastern seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne. The First Minister and I look forward to engaging with the new Irish Government on these projects and on other initiatives that can promote economic growth and prosperity for the entire community here and indeed throughout the island of Ireland.

Dr Farry: Looking to the future, I ask the Deputy First Minister what plans our Executive have to draw up a plan similar to the Republic's national development plan and how we can ensure, as two separate jurisdictions, that the actions we take on investment, whether it be on roads, rail, schools, hospitals or other health facilities, are of maximum benefit to the people of both jurisdictions?

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive are very concerned to see the outcome of the comprehensive spending review that will dictate the Programme for Government for us for the years 2008-11.

We will have emerging priorities. The whole issue of infrastructure is of critical importance, and strategic investment is a critical aspect as we move towards putting in place a Programme for Government that will meet the needs of all our people.

Given the Irish Government's award of a very substantial sum of money for important infrastructure projects, and other projects, in the North, we must be in a position to contribute to those projects.

That will be the Executive's responsibility primarily, but individual Ministers, not least the Minister for Regional Development, must work in consort with the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Deputy First Minister confirm to the House that any project to which the Republic of Ireland may contribute would have to meet with our own Departments' various, rigorous priority processes, and that any investment must benefit all parts of Northern Ireland and all communities?

The Deputy First Minister: I agree absolutely. As we move forward, it is vital that every section of our community benefit from whatever important infrastructure developments there will be.

I give an absolute commitment that the Executive will be very conscious of our requirement to meet the needs of all the people that we represent, no matter who or where they are.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the Deputy First Minister to, and compliment him on, his first Question Time.

Does he agree that perhaps the best way in which to make the most of the funding that is available to the North through the national development plan would be to create some all-Ireland funding mechanisms? They

could be our own version of European structural funds. The best way in which to ensure that Departments, North and South, are not second-guessing each other, and to prevent people engaging in different bids on either side of the border, is to have clear, united spending mechanisms — under the authority of the North/South Ministerial Council — for that money. I speak particularly about the social-inclusion pillar. It is such an important part of the national development plan, yet it does not appear to be replicated in the North.

The Deputy First Minister: We are conscious of our responsibilities, not least of the need to ensure that we co-operate with the new Irish Government. The First Minister and I are determined to do that.

We are also conscious that we need to work together to achieve economic progress. There is recent clear evidence of Ministers of all descriptions extolling the virtues of our working together, whether that be on the need for a joined-up approach to the electricity link-up, the gas pipeline or, indeed, the entire energy process.

The Member's question is pertinent, and the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister, and the entire Executive, must consider it further.

Hate Crime

10. **Mr McKay** asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it intends to formulate a strategy to deal with continued occurrences of hate crime, such as sectarian, racist or homophobic attacks.
(AQO 136/07)

The Deputy First Minister: I want to make it clear that the Executive unequivocally condemn all hate crime and will do all in their power to eradicate it, wherever, and however, it arises.

Intolerance, prejudice and bigotry must be confronted, and the Executive are already working to tackle them through the actions set out in 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009' and in the racial equality unit's first annual implementation action plan.

The forthcoming strategy and action plan on sexual orientation will address homophobia. The PSNI and criminal justice agencies are, of course, the front line in tackling hate crime. While those matters remain reserved, we will continue to work closely with the Police Service and criminal justice agencies to ensure that we have an effective, and joined-up, approach.

3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

All-island Waste Management Strategy

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the potential for an all-island waste management strategy.
(AQO 165/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I have no plans to develop an all-Ireland waste management strategy.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Foster: A new waste management strategy for Northern Ireland was launched in March 2006. It addresses Northern Ireland's specific needs and circumstances until 2020 and contributes to the UK's meeting its European Union obligations.

My Department has developed good working relations with its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, particularly on market development initiatives and in tackling the problem — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Could we have some order in the House, please? The Minister is speaking.

Mrs Foster: — of illegal cross-border waste.

Ms Lo: Given the cross-border dumping of waste, particularly in the Minister's constituency, will she initiate proposals, with a timescale, for the introduction of a strategy that recognises the cross-border aspect of waste management?

Mrs Foster: My officials have been working with their counterparts in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to develop such a structured plan to deal with waste from the Republic of Ireland that has been dumped in Northern Ireland. To prevent such illegal waste movement continuing, the plan — or roadmap, as it is known — includes stepping up liaison between enforcement authorities in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The roadmap provides a mechanism to remove waste that originated in the Republic of Ireland.

One of the practical difficulties with the repatriation of waste is that, simply, although we can identify that some waste comes from the Republic of Ireland, it is often mixed up with illegal waste from this country. However, we are trying to work through those issues.

Mrs D Kelly: It is regrettable that the Minister has decided not to consider an all-Ireland waste management strategy. Will she assure the Assembly that she will, without fear or favour, ensure that her Department prosecutes those who are responsible for illegally

dumping waste and for burning toxic substances, which is a common activity at this time of year?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, my priority is to ensure that the Northern Ireland waste management strategy is implemented to allow Northern Ireland to contribute to the United Kingdom's overall effort in meeting its European Union obligations. We do that, first and foremost, because we are part of the United Kingdom.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr S Wilson: We need more of that.

Mrs Foster: I am very grateful to the Member for that.

The Northern Ireland waste management strategy is designed to meet our circumstances and targets in that wider context.

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has limited powers to deal with bonfires. Indeed, no one agency has overall responsibility for the control of bonfires. However, in 2004, EHS led an inter-agency working group on bonfires. That group's guidelines were produced as an advisory leaflet and distributed across Northern Ireland. The leaflet covers best practice at each stage of bonfire development and management. I am sure that the Member is aware that local authorities have a great deal of responsibility for dealing with bonfires and that they will take those responsibilities seriously in the coming months.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that the Minister shares my disgust at the illegal dumping in Northern Ireland, between 2002 and 2004, of 250,000 tons of waste that originated in the Republic of Ireland. The estimated cost of that dumping to the local taxpayer was up to £50 million. What steps will her Department take to stop that waste at source and to repatriate that which is already blighting our countryside?

Mrs Foster: I largely answered that question when I responded to the supplementary question from the Member for South Belfast. However, the Member is right to say that up to 250,000 tons of household waste from the Republic of Ireland was illegally deposited on land in Northern Ireland between October 2002 and the end of 2004, which is the latest period for which figures are available. The cost of removing that illegal waste and depositing it elsewhere is estimated at between £37.5 million and £50 million. A total of 57 illegal landfill sites that contain waste from the Republic of Ireland have been identified in Northern Ireland. Although we continue to work with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on the roadmap to deal with illegal waste, such dumping is an ongoing problem, and it is one that I intend to tackle.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Planning Regulations: Renewable Energy

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of the Environment whether she will make changes to the planning regulations, to encourage the provision of small-scale renewable energy. (AQO 178/07)

Mrs Foster: I anticipate bringing forward proposals in the autumn for a simplified regulatory regime of permitted development rights that will facilitate small-scale renewable energy development by householders. That followed the public consultation by the Department of the Environment on micro-generation permitted development rights earlier in the year.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister of the Environment for her response, which will be welcomed by many people. If permitted development rights are to be limited, will the Minister also take action on the issue of the fees that apply to building control and planning matters for small-scale alternative energy projects to ensure that those who receive a grant for installing such systems do not end up spending half the grant on administrative costs?

Mrs Foster: I take Mr Ford's point on board. The Department is looking at that matter, particularly in relation to bodies that have their grants held up until planning permission is followed through. The strategic board deals with large applications, and I will consider ways to develop a process at divisional level for applications that need planning permission in order to avail of grant aid.

Mr Burns: In my constituency of South Antrim, the Planning Service is blocking renewable-energy developments, particularly substantial developments that would bring significant revenue to Northern Ireland. As there are provisions in several planning policy statements, will the Minister provide assurances that developments such as those will be looked upon favourably in the future by the Planning Service?

Mrs Foster: I believe that I am aware of the application to which Mr Burns refers. In my original answer I said that the Department will consult on micro-generation by householders. It will also review micro-generation permitted development rights in non-domestic situations. That work has not yet been scheduled; however, it may form part of a wider programme of work to simplify the planning system.

Members may be aware of the White Paper published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in May 2007 called 'Planning for a Sustainable Future'. It recommends changes not only to domestic micro-generation permitted development rights but a review of commercial and other non-residential rights. The Department will be keeping a close eye on progress.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister agree that a review of the permitted development rights would expedite planning applications and help to clear the backlog in the planning system?

Mrs Foster: A public consultation on the review of permitted development rights was carried out in 2003. Since then, the Department has extended permitted development rights for satellite dishes and other antennae, in order to facilitate the roll-out of digital television and the take-up of wireless broadband technology. The Department has also extended permitted development rights for agricultural buildings, to help farmers to comply with the EC nitrates directive.

The Department has introduced new permitted development rights for Crown bodies following the removal of Crown immunity in law from planning controls, and it has also amended the permitted development rights for water and sewerage undertakings in the light of a transfer of responsibility for water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water.

The work on the review will continue with a longer-term objective to consult on a new general permitted development Order that will take account of the review that took place in 2003, and of other calls for changes to permitted development rights in the intervening period.

The permitted development rights for electricity service lines allow the installation of service lines of up to 100 metres for individual consumers. The consultation that took place in 2003 proposed that that should be extended to 200 metres. That issue has been raised several times since I became Minister, and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) has asked the Department to look at the possibility of extending the permitted development rights to 300 or 500 metres. The Department proposes to include consultation on extending the length of the service lines with work on the new general permitted development Order.

That is important. A lot of people have complained to me about having to make two applications to the planning process: one in relation to one's house, and the other in relation to electricity. I hope that that answer is of some help.

Demolition of Family Home

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of the Environment to explain why a family home at 22 Old Cavehill Road, Belfast, was demolished while still the subject of a planning application. (AQO 190/07)

Mrs Foster: Planning permission was not required for the demolition of the dwelling at 22 Old Cavehill Road because the dwelling was not a listed building, nor was it located in a conservation area or an area of townscape character. If it had been located in such a

designated area, planning permission would have been required from the Department for the demolition.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reply and for her correspondence on the matter, which came after I had posed the question.

The demolition caused widespread outrage in the area. Residents were upset about the demolition of an attractive building that dated from 1878. It was a great shock for people to be confronted with bulldozers at 6.00 am knocking down the building.

Is the Minister concerned about the fact that, while what the developer did was perfectly legal, it caused great distress and the disappearance of a fine building? Further to that, will she look at ways to freeze demolition during the course of a planning application?

Mrs Foster: I acknowledge that there has been increasing public concern about such issues. I have received a number of letters from Members relating to the case in question. The public are increasingly concerned about town cramming and the loss of garden areas, and my Department will give the matter further consideration.

Mr Maginness said that no building should be demolished while it is the subject of a planning application. While I will look at additional controls in relation to that issue, introducing controls to prevent the demolition of a building that is the subject of a pending planning application would not, in itself, be effective because there would be nothing to stop developers, and others, demolishing a building prior to an application coming to the Department. That, in itself, does not deal with the issue, but I am looking at other controls to deal with the issue.

Mr McCausland: The demolition of 22 Old Cavehill Road highlights the problem of fine, old houses being demolished and replaced by large numbers of apartments. Does the Minister accept that there is a need to review and revisit planning policy statement (PPS) 12, which deals with town cramming, and to do so as a matter of urgency? Will she also undertake to visit the North Belfast constituency to see some of the worst examples of overdevelopment?

Mrs Foster: If I accepted an invitation to see town cramming in North Belfast, I think that I would be on a countrywide tour for the next couple of months.

Mr Wells: Good idea.

Mrs Foster: Notwithstanding South Down, and the North Coast — I am getting all sorts of bids, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

I am aware of the increasing public concern on the issue of apartment development and its effect on the character of long-established residential areas. The demand for apartment living reflects an ongoing change in society towards a trend for smaller households, and

that must be catered for. My Department published PPS 7 and planning guidance under development control advice note 8 to control that type of development. However, given our ageing and limited infrastructure, I will continue to discuss and reflect on the issue with colleagues and departmental officials.

Mr A Maskey: I welcome the Minister's commitment to have her Department look at those issues as a matter of urgency.

Given the uncertainty about the future of planning and what measures may be transferred to local government, will the Minister accept that there are matters of serious public concern, particularly cases of developers building when they do not have planning permission or even when planning permission has been refused?

In my constituency of South Belfast, there has been a disgraceful lack of enforcement by the Planning Service. Will the Minister give particular attention to the question of enforcement where buildings are constructed, in some cases, against the express wishes of the Planning Service?

3.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I accept that there is a need for the Department to revisit and examine cases where developers have started to build and submitted retrospective planning applications, thereby stopping enforcement proceedings. I reiterate — and the Member will be able to voice his opinion when I discuss the issue with the Committee for the Environment — that I wish to consider options, short of total control, to prevent the demolition of buildings that local communities consider important. Quite clearly, that was the case in this instance. There was a public outcry. I am aware of that, and it is something that I want to investigate.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment whether she is satisfied with the current rate of progress towards the designation of Areas of Special Scientific Interest. (AQO 155/07)

13. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to expand the list of Areas of Special Scientific Interest in Northern Ireland. (AQO 132/07)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer questions 5 and 13 together.

I am very aware that there is a need to improve on the rate of designation of ASSIs and to ensure that they are properly managed and protected to secure their special scientific interest. Officials in the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) have put in place measures that will increase the rate of designation in order to meet statutory obligations.

A priority risk-based list of 200 sites for designation over the next 10 years has been established. To achieve that, a substantial improvement in the designation rate of recent years will be required. In 2006-07, 15 ASSIs were designated; 20 are scheduled for designation this year; and that number will increase to 25 in successive years.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. Does the Minister have sufficient resources to make speedier progress on the designation of ASSIs before irreparable damage is caused? Will the Department of the Environment conduct early consultations with all landowners in order to get agreement with all concerned?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know from his interest in the issue that the Department had to designate special areas of conservation (SAC) and special protection areas (SPAs) in order to comply with EU directives. That took up some of the resources that would have otherwise have been put into the designation of ASSIs. It also resulted in the reprioritisation of work away from the designation programme.

On the resources required for the management of ASSIs, an important point that is sometimes forgotten is that once a designation takes place, it is only the beginning of the journey. Approximately 340 management agreements are in place, covering 5.6% of the total area of ASSIs. Of those, almost 100 have been negotiated under the management of sensitive sites (MOSS) scheme, which is administered by EHS.

It is recognised that the present budget for the MOSS agreement of £500,000 is insufficient to meet all ASSI management requirements. My officials have therefore sought agreement with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to secure the appropriate management of ASSI lands through the application of agrienvironment schemes.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister undertake to set a target date by which the 6% of Northern Ireland's land area set aside under the ASSI scheme will be raised so that it compares to that of Scotland, which is 13%?

Mrs Foster: I am aware that Northern Ireland is behind in ASSI designation. As I have said, the reason is that some resources had to be redirected to deal with European Union directives, otherwise the Department would have been subject to infraction proceedings.

The Member asked about the timescale for designation. As I said earlier, there are 200 sites to be designated. We are hoping to proceed at a rate of 25 redesignations this year and 25 next year — that figure will increase year on year. That is the way in which the Department of the Environment wants to take the matter forward.

Mr Wells: The House will welcome the announcement that there will be an increase in the rate of areas of special scientific interest designations. I understand that, in one year, only one ASSI has been designated,

that being the Roe Valley in east Londonderry. I am pleased that the Minister has been able to expedite that designation.

In my constituency of South Down, there is a great deal of public concern about the future protection of the Sheeplands area near Ardglass. I know that the Minister is aware of that matter. Will the Minister give the House an indication as to when the Sheeplands ASSI designation will take place?

Mrs Foster: Although the Member said that only one designation was made in one year, 15 ASSI designations were made last year. I recognise that the Sheeplands coast in County Down is an important site because of its coastal habitats and earth science features. I acknowledge that the site needs to be protected as a matter of priority. Efforts have been made in recent weeks to identify and contact all owners and occupiers. That process is now largely complete and the site is on course to be declared an ASSI by the end of this month — June 2007.

The Department, through the Environmental Heritage Service, wants to work with landowners — that is our priority. Many people see ASSI designations as a method of enforcement and regulation. The EHS wants to work with landowners and that is what we have been trying to do at the Sheeplands coast ASSI.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate the Minister on her first Question Time. She is doing well in getting through it. *[Interruption.]*

I will always be generous to someone who is doing a good job. However, I will be less generous to those who are faking it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker, I suggest that one of the Members for East Antrim be thrown out of the Chamber. *[Laughter.]* However, I will not push that suggestion too far.

The Minister is fully aware of the controversy that has been created by the proposal to increase limestone quarrying at Glenarm. Can she assure the House that the full environmental impact of that proposal will be given due consideration? Furthermore, is the Minister willing to meet the local community and residents' group, which is objecting strongly to the proposal and which feels that the aforementioned Member for East Antrim is not doing very much for them? *[Interruption.]*

Mrs Foster: This is a row that could be continued in another place. It is hoped that a submission that makes a recommendation on the application will be with the Planning Service management board within the next two weeks. I assure the Member that I, as the final decision-maker on that proposal, will take all matters into consideration when making a decision. Since I am the person who will make that decision, I have resisted calls to meet the parties involved in the application, and the residents. Therefore, unfortunately,

I have to decline the Member's invitation to meet the local community and residents' group. However, I assure the Member that I will take all relevant matters into consideration, including environmental concerns.

Mr S Wilson: I am glad to see that the Member for South Belfast takes such an interest in East Antrim. If he took more interest in South Belfast, his constituents who are looking for him might be able to find him. I assure the Member that the application for Glenarm has been in for two years and has only recently generated some limited objection.

Will the Minister give an assurance — and would she agree — that ASSIs cannot be used to ensure that areas become some type of environmentalist theme park, and that ordinary business that must continue in many of those areas, such as quarrying, manufacturing, tourist facilities, etc, can continue and can be allowed to flourish alongside the designation?

Mrs Foster: I assure the Member that I will weigh up the environmental and the economic arguments. The Member mentioned theme parks, but ASSIs are important to Northern Ireland for more than their environmental value. I recently attended — and was pleased to be there — the launch of a publication that pointed out the economic benefits of Northern Ireland's environment. The Member should read that publication; the protection of the countryside, as well as the environment, brings economic benefits. My Department works with landowners, and I can tell the Member that ASSIs are not theme parks; they are working pieces of land that people can use.

Mr Elliott: I note the figures that the Minister mentioned, and I note her views on the management of sensitive sites agreements. Given that the Department of the Environment has designated — and continues to designate — large numbers of ASSIs in Northern Ireland, does the Minister believe that, in many instances, her Department has been right to discontinue the provision of management of sensitive sites schemes to several landowners who, as a result of ASSI designation, operate under strenuous land management controls? Is that the case, given that many environmental schemes that are sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are not currently available?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure that everyone would agree that ASSIs are being designated in large numbers. In fact, some people, including many Members, have said that more ASSIs should be designated.

As I have already said, 340 management agreements are in place, almost 100 of which were negotiated under the management of sensitive sites scheme.

I recognise that the budget for MOSS is insufficient to meet all the requirements of ASSI management. That is why it is imperative that my officials work with the landowners. Mr Elliott will welcome that, given his

recent involvement in a particular case. My officials are working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to secure the appropriate management of ASSI lands through the application of the agrienvironmental schemes that Mr Elliott mentioned.

Northern Ireland Climate Scoping Study

6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details on the areas of expertise being examined in the formulation of the Northern Ireland climate scoping study commissioned by her predecessor; and what specific issues of climate change are covered in its remit. (AQO 144/07)

Mrs Foster: The purpose of the scoping study is to prepare for climate change in Northern Ireland. The study was published on 30 January 2007 and is available on my Department's website. It was commissioned by my Department and facilitated by the Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research.

The impacts of climate change were identified by the Hadley Centre — the United Kingdom authority on the issue — in its climate change scenarios, which were published in 2002. Scenarios for Northern Ireland included: wetter winters; drier summers; and increased frequency of extreme weather events. The report considered the threats posed by and opportunities arising from the impacts of climate changes in natural and built environments, economic infrastructure and social well-being. Overall, the report concluded that Northern Ireland must take action if the excesses of climate change impacts are to be avoided.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister will be aware that new evidence on annual variations suggests that the slowdown effect of the Gulf Stream pump is now reckoned to be at 10% rather than 30%. Will she consider the creation of a climate watch unit in her Department that would adopt climate change assessments as new information becomes available?

Mrs Foster: Research on the predicted slowing of the Gulf Stream, which is the flow of warm water from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom, is incorporated into United Kingdom modelling, and, hence, into the Northern Ireland study that I have just mentioned. It is thought, however, that weakening is not a realistic possibility in this century. However, we all know that climate change will not affect us in the next couple of years; it will happen over hundreds of years. The purpose of the studies and reports that have been mentioned is to plan for the future.

3.30 pm

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Legal Services Report

1. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has any plans to implement the recommendations contained in the report 'Legal Services in Northern Ireland: Complaints, Regulation, Competition'. (AQO 192/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I am giving careful consideration to the recommendations in the report by the Legal Services Review Group, and I am examining the options for reform with a view to announcing the way forward shortly.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he agree that the approach taken in England, following the Clementi Report, would not be appropriate for Northern Ireland at this stage?

Mr P Robinson: I know that the Member will have read the report led by Professor Sir George Bain, and he will have seen that Professor Bain had a very high regard for the principles in the Clementi report. However, Sir George's view was that it was an English solution to an English problem, and we want to devise a Northern Ireland solution to our problems. Although many of the report's principles can be applied — perhaps differently — in Northern Ireland, we will not copy the Clementi Report's approach.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's view that the Clementi approach is not appropriate for Northern Ireland and that there should be a Northern Ireland solution to Northern Ireland problems. Whatever may be implemented, it is important that there be a strong lay element, particularly in dealing with complaints about legal services that are rendered by the professions. Lay persons should be in a majority on all complaints committees, and those committees should be chaired by lay persons. Furthermore, there should be an oversight commissioner for legal services. That should guarantee a proper external and independent scrutiny of legal services.

Mr P Robinson: I appreciate the Member's interest in the issue; he was one of those who made a submission — ours were the only two political parties to do so. As I said, I am considering the matter and, therefore, do not wish to reach any judgements at this stage.

However, as a constituency Member, I say that we must look closely at complaints. There is some force behind the review proposed in the Bain Report: a clear majority of those investigating or listening to complaints should be from the lay sector.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister may be aware of the recent controversy surrounding the appointment of the interim

chairperson of the Legal Services Commission. Will the Minister inform the House whether that appointment and the future permanent appointment will be subject to the full rigours of the independent Commissioner of Public Appointments? Will the Minister agree with me that all such appointments should go through that rigorous examination?

Mr P Robinson: In any appointments made by my Department under my authority there will be the most thorough application of the proper procedures to ensure that we choose the best candidates for the job. I have every confidence, however, in the person who was given the post and I am sure that the House will want to wish him well in it.

Corporation Tax

2. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to progress the issue of a lower rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 183/07)

9. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to how the short-term loss in revenue arising from a differential rate of corporation tax would be addressed.

(AQO 173/07)

Mr P Robinson: With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer question 2 and question 9 together.

Following my initial meeting with Sir David Varney on 24 May, I shall take forward a formal response to his call for evidence. That will detail why the Executive believe it imperative that Northern Ireland receive a fiscal dispensation to allow it to stimulate economic growth. With regard to any possible short-term loss of revenue, the Executive must then consider the wider implications for economic development policy and its resourcing. Some existing programmes may no longer be necessary — or allowable — in the new environment.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister accept that, for many companies in Northern Ireland, corporation tax reductions may be of limited value, given that only lower rates of interest apply to them or that they are manufacturing-only concerns and do not pay tax? Can he confirm that the corporation tax for Northern Ireland is in the region of £300 million per annum, and that the banks pay £100 million of it and would therefore be the major beneficiaries of any reduction in tax? Does the Minister agree that the international context of foreign direct investment has changed significantly since the start of the Celtic tiger economy and that some European states now offer 0% corporation tax? Does he agree that carefully targeted incentives are needed to encourage investment from abroad and from indigenous companies?

Mr P Robinson: The Member's questions highlight the key issue that is often forgotten when the issue of lowering corporation tax levels is considered. The lowering of corporation tax is not the goal in itself; the goal is to stimulate and grow the economy, and lowering corporation tax is only a means to an end. The Member has outlined the impact that it would have on existing business in Northern Ireland. However, the purpose of lowering the rate of corporation tax is not as a handout for existing business; it is to encourage more business to come to Northern Ireland. Obviously, lowering corporation tax would be an attraction, but there are other ways of encouraging businesses that the Member may consider to be less blunt an instrument than lowering corporation tax.

Mr B Wilson: As the Minister pointed out, a problem is that tax reduction results in a loss of revenue. When the overall Budget is considered, a reduction in corporation tax may not be the most effective way of running the economy. The fact that Northern Ireland has no tax-varying powers has implications for the regional rate, and this must be taken into account when considering the issue of lowering corporation tax. Can the Minister say what might be the impact of the loss of revenue from freezing the industrial rates at 25%?

Mr P Robinson: I do not want to comment on the industrial rate now as a review is being carried out on that topic; in due course I will report on that review. The Member is correct that there are advantages in encouraging businesses to come to Northern Ireland if the rate of corporation tax were lowered but that there are also consequences in doing that. The regime of incentives currently available cannot exist alongside the lowering of corporation tax. As the Member for Lagan Valley Mr McCrea pointed out, around £300 million a year is currently raised from corporation tax. If interpretation of the Azores ruling should mean that that must be ruled out, the money would have to be found by the reduction of other elements of incentives in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr O'Loan: In the light of the stated policy positions of political parties on the rate of corporation tax, can the Minister assure the Assembly that he, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are all equally committed to pursuing a rate of 12.5% corporation tax?

Mr P Robinson: I seem to recall that we wanted a 10% rate, but if we got it to 12.5% we would be reasonably content. I have not discerned any difference in the Executive on the emphasis that has been placed on trying to reduce the rate of corporation tax. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister discussed that issue with the First Minister of Scotland, and there was a general view that we should work together at least to reduce the level of corporation tax for the United Kingdom as a whole. That would help, as it would reduce the differential between Northern Ireland

and the Republic of Ireland. I have not discerned that there is any difference between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in the approach to those issues.

The Member's party was present in Downing Street with the three other main parties when they discussed those issues with the Chancellor.

Mr Newton: I agree with the Minister about the potential for corporation tax to help to grow Northern Ireland's economy. To what extent do the decisions that were made in the Azores and Rioja cases inhibit Northern Ireland from having a differential corporation tax rate from the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr P Robinson: The Azores case set out three conditions that would apply to Northern Ireland if it were to have a differential rate of corporation tax. I have always recognised that there are three issues that we must overcome if the Chancellor and the Treasury are to be convinced. First, the financial issue: the Executive can put forward a case that deals with the financial arguments — issues such as brass-plating, and so forth.

Secondly, there are legal arguments, which were referred to by the Member for East Belfast. Contrary to what has been suggested by some, European law does not prohibit there being a differential rate of corporation tax. It is permissible under European law, but would require change to United Kingdom law. There are, however, implications from the Azores ruling as to what such a change would mean, such as having to forgo some current funding, which was referred to earlier.

Thirdly, the prevailing issue that must be overcome is whether there is the political will to introduce such a change. The financial and legal arguments can be answered, but do the United Kingdom Government have the political will to take that step? I hope that Sir David Varney's review will be able to answer that. If there is no answer with regard to corporation tax, I will want to know how the Government propose to make Northern Ireland competitive vis-à-vis the Irish Republic on industry, commerce and foreign direct investment.

Mr Kennedy: Is it still the view of the Minister and his party that an inadequate financial deal and a lack of significant progress on corporation tax will be a deal-breaker?

Mr P Robinson: I have already stated in the House that, even in its present terms, the Chancellor's deal can be regarded as satisfactory. I do not consider it to be generous: however, it is satisfactory. The Member would do well to remember that the Assembly will receive funding of around £17 billion for its total managed expenditure from the Exchequer. That is a considerable amount of money.

I am sure that the Member treasures the link with the United Kingdom and, like me, is prepared to enjoy the benefits of being part of it. Northern Ireland enjoys the financial package that it gets from the United Kingdom. Of course, the package could be better and there is more that the Executive could secure from the United Kingdom Treasury. Indeed, they are attempting to do so. I hope that the Varney review will assist in that and that further consultations with the Treasury on the comprehensive spending review and end-year flexibility will also bring improvements.

Decentralisation of Public Service Jobs

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his plans for the decentralisation of public service jobs to areas affected by the transfer of government services to England and Wales.

(AQO 163/07)

Mr P Robinson: I assume that the Member refers to proposals with respect to jobs in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and in the local HM Revenue and Customs offices in Coleraine.

With regard to the changes that affect the DVLA, officials in my Department and in the Department of the Environment are considering action to minimise the impact of the Department for Transport's decision to realign its services in Northern Ireland with the loss of some 260 Civil Service jobs in Coleraine. In her recent response to a question for written answer from the Member, the Minister of the Environment stated that as part of the efforts to redeploy surplus civil servants in the agency to other Civil Service jobs, work was also under way to explore whether there were any functions in DOE or other Northern Ireland Departments that could be transferred to Coleraine in order to mitigate the effect. In addition, the Department for Transport has agreed to transfer a block of UK-wide work to Coleraine, which will safeguard 93 jobs.

I understand that HM Revenue and Customs has made no final decisions on staffing requirements for any of its offices in Northern Ireland and will not do so until it has completed a review of each location.

3.45 pm

The review of its offices in Coleraine is not planned to start until April 2008, and, once made, decisions could take some years to implement. In the wider context of public sector jobs, the consultation on guiding principles regarding their location in Northern Ireland, which closed on 30 April 2007, is the first step in developing a framework to facilitate future decision-making on the issue. The full analysis and summary of the consultation responses will be completed shortly. Thereafter, I intend to take a paper to the Executive to be considered in July. There are advantages in providing

work in areas outside Belfast rather than requiring staff who live in those areas to travel to Belfast to work. I am not unsympathetic to having more public sector jobs located outside the greater Belfast area, but we should not ignore the capital city as a key location.

Mr Dallat: The Minister is quite right; I received a written reply from his colleague Mrs Arlene Foster. I showed it to some of the workers in County Hall, and they said that it was about as useful as a handbrake on a canoe. I understand their reaction. Surely the Minister accepts that in areas such as Coleraine — and the north-west in general — there has been serious social and economic deprivation, and that the Assembly should have a proper policy to ensure that Civil Service jobs are directed to those areas.

Mr P Robinson: If I were not aware of it of my own volition, the Member for East Londonderry would tell me very quickly. He has been a strong supporter of getting more jobs into the north-west and into his own constituency in particular. Of course we recognise his arguments; that is why consultation has taken place, and I have indicated clearly that I am not unsympathetic to his points. I see little advantage in getting people to travel to Belfast to do a job if time can be saved and road congestion stopped by locating jobs further out. We will consider that issue and come back to it.

Mr Armstrong: Would the Minister accept that a significant stretching of the private sector's strategy is imperative for Northern Ireland and that the development of vibrant business service sectors is dependent on investment in buildings, infrastructure and the development of clusters?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure who can give me an interpretation of that. The answer appears to be yes, no or maybe.

Mr Weir: Does the Minister accept that in any decentralisation of public sector jobs, consideration should be given not only to the west of the Province but to constituencies that are outside Belfast, such as North Down? Will the Minister undertake to ensure that there will continue to be a significant Civil Service presence at Rathgael?

Mr P Robinson: Rather than put it up for bids at this stage, I can tell the Member that I visited the Rathgael area with the then mayor, Councillor Alan Leslie. He raised the issue, as did the chief executive of the council. Of course, plans were developed under Workplace 2010, but those may not have been exactly what the Member for North Down had in mind for the future of Rathgael. I have asked my Department to revisit those issues, and I hope that we will be able to improve the situation somewhat.

Chancellor's Financial Package

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to advise how the additional £100 million in the Chancellor's package had been allocated; and what amount remained to be allocated. (AQO 182/07)

13. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much new money, in addition to what was expected from the block grant, is contained in the Chancellor's financial package. (AQO 188/07)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, by your leave I will take question 4 together with question 13.

Discussions on the content of the financial package are ongoing; thus, at this stage it is not possible to make comparisons with what might have been anticipated in normal circumstances. To cover the costs of not introducing water charges, on 10 May the Executive decided to allocate up to £75 million of the additional £100 million that the Chancellor allocated for this year. That leaves a balance of £25 million still to be allocated by the Executive, with funding for innovation a priority area.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he is aware of the rumblings of discontent outside the Executive, if not from within it. As he pulls the purse strings of the Departments, some Ministers are anxious that he does not exceed his authority by attempting to pull their ministerial strings as well.

Does he accept that, because he has not succeeded in securing an adequate financial package, he is, therefore, imposing undesirable financial restrictions on all Departments, reducing some to selling off the family silver?

If he is in the mood for accepting the truth, will he accept my word that, contrary to the charge that he levelled at me in the House two weeks ago, I did not plagiarise a speech given by his wife?

Mr P Robinson: The Member must not have been listening to an earlier answer that I gave. The financial package is satisfactory, but further steps could be taken to improve it. He should know that it is satisfactory: it is a whole lot better than the package that his party produced when it went into Government. Indeed, part of the package undoes the damage that his party's negotiations caused, particularly with the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI).

As far as plagiarism is concerned, I thought that I would be helpful to the House by placing copies of the two speeches, along with an analysis, in the Assembly Library. It appears that that has not got through to the Member. Therefore, I will instruct my staff to put copies of the speeches into each Member's pigeonhole. With the opportunity to compare the two speeches, Members can make up their own minds. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr McCallister: Although the Minister may consider the financial package to be satisfactory, he and his party have over-egged the pudding. The public have huge expectations of the peace dividend. Does the Minister accept that he will have to reduce those expectations?

Mr P Robinson: All Members are in the business of managing public expectations; the community has high expectations of the Executive. Northern Ireland has suffered a period of direct rule, the nature of which was that no local people were in a position to take major decisions. People expect the Executive to produce a Programme for Government that sets priorities for Northern Ireland in a way that their expectations can be met. It is always the task of Government to attempt to meet public expectations and to assess the priorities in the community.

I repeat: the financial package may be satisfactory, but I do not consider it to be generous. It requires further work.

Mr Ross: In addition to the £35 billion that the UK Government have guaranteed Northern Ireland over the next four years, can the Minister tell Members when final decisions will be taken on the £400 million that the Irish Government have promised for roads programmes?

Mr P Robinson: Consideration of the investment proposals for the next 10 years, including the welcome allocation of £400 million from the Irish Government, will be undertaken over the next few months. As I said earlier, during September and October, the Executive will consider the Programme for Government and their spending plans. The investment strategy will be published for consultation alongside the Programme for Government and the Budget in the autumn, ahead of final decisions in December.

Dr Farry: Can the Minister guarantee that any additional funds from HM Treasury will be linked to a programme of public service reform that might include a greater investment in shared facilities, rather than simply being applied to the existing way in which services are provided?

Mr P Robinson: The only guarantee that I can give is that any further funds that are received will be spent in accordance with the priorities set by the Executive.

2011 Census

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on preparations for the 2011 Census. (AQO 197/07)

Mr P Robinson: Planning is proceeding on the basis that the next census will take place in 2011. Consultation has already taken place on the topic content. Users are being kept informed of current thinking: for example,

an open information morning was held on 20 June. Last month, a census test was conducted to assess possible new questions, as well as census processes and procedures. The test will be evaluated, and it is planned that formal proposals for the 2011 census will be published in 2008.

Those will be followed by a census Order and census regulations in 2010, which will provide the opportunity for legislative scrutiny.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his reply. However, I understand that those conducting the 2001 census assigned a community identity to around 250,000 people in Northern Ireland against their will. Will the Minister ensure that that unwelcome feature will not be repeated in the 2011 census?

Mr P Robinson: There are a number of reasons why it is helpful to have a question based on people's religion. Historically, the Northern Ireland census has included a question on religion. In order to provide robust information on community background for a variety of monitoring purposes, the 2001 census introduced a question on "religion brought up in". The introduction of that question was proposed in the 1997 census test, and no objections were raised at that time or during the subsequent legislative process — not even by the Member. As I said, legislation on the 2011 census will be brought before the House, and it will be up to Mr McCarthy and other Members to propose changes at that stage.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What provision will be made in the census for Irish-language speakers?

Mr P Robinson: The contents of the 2011 census will depend on what is passed by the Assembly. The census test included a question on the Irish language, and it is therefore expected that the 2011 census will also include such a question, unless the House decides otherwise.

Mr McCausland: A question on the Irish language was included in the last census, but there was no corresponding question on the Ulster-Scots language. When the questions for the 2011 census are being set next year, will the Minister consider treating the Ulster-Scots language on the same basis as the Irish language?

Mr P Robinson: What emerges from the process will be determined at a much later stage, and will be determined by the Assembly. The census test held in May included a question on Ulster Scots, not just a question on the Irish language. Although we will evaluate the responses to the test, it will be up to the House to determine whether it wishes to include questions on the Irish language and Ulster Scots in the 2011 census.

Staff Absences: Northern Ireland Civil Service

6. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on the level of staff absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.
(AQO 129/07)

Mr P Robinson: In 2005-06, the latest full year for which information is available, the headline absence figure for the Northern Ireland Civil Service was an average of 13·4 days lost per staff year. That equates to approximately 1,450 full-time staff being absent from work for an entire year. Put another way, it is broadly comparable to all the staff in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of Education and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister being absent from work for an entire year. If that absence rate were extrapolated to the whole of the public sector in Northern Ireland, it would equate to approximately 10,700 full-time staff being absent from work for an entire year.

I regard the sick absence levels as totally unacceptable, and I am making the issue of absence management in the Northern Ireland Civil Service a high priority. The final figures for 2006-07 will be available in September, but I am alarmed that provisional estimates indicate that the overall absence level in 2006-07 has increased on the published figure for 2005-06. We are heading in the wrong direction and need to take urgent and immediate action to redress the situation.

I will bring forward a paper on this matter to the Executive in July to explore with ministerial colleagues what actions must be taken to address the problem. Those actions will include robust and consistent application of absence management policies, the need for strong leadership and early intervention by management and consideration of what changes are needed to the existing policies to deliver the radical shift required. I want to examine how the practice in private and wider public sectors can best be applied to the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Mr Speaker: Question Time is up for the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Members may take their ease for a few minutes until we resume business.

4.00 pm

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Carers

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that all carers, formal and informal, can access services and support to maintain their own health and well-being, to recognise financially the vital role they play and ensure uptake of all benefit entitlements. — *[Mrs Hanna.]*

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the proposer for tabling this important motion.

By this stage in the debate, Members will have heard all the statistics and all the recommendations. However, one section of the community needs help. Few people will be aware that, in Northern Ireland, over 1,000 people with severe learning disabilities have carers who are over 65 years of age. Furthermore, 500 people with severe learning disabilities have primary carers who are over 75 years of age. Given the general problems, one can only imagine the difficulties with which those carers must deal.

Some time ago, people decided to use the term “learning disability” because they felt that it was more politically correct. However, the term is used to describe people who have severe mental handicaps, which is not an expression to be ashamed of. These are not people who suffer from dyslexia; they are vulnerable from the day that they are born and continue to be so for the rest of their lives.

Carers of such individuals have to accept that those people will never get better because the condition is a lifelong one.

I want to bring two such people to the attention of the House. One is Eileen Bell, who is aged 61 and lives in Lagan Valley. Not only does Eileen have severe learning disabilities, she has Down's syndrome and was recently diagnosed with dementia. The problem is that when we tried to get Eileen moved after being in for a bit of respite care, nobody would take her. There is no place where she can go. The only place that she has left is with her mother, who is aged 86. Her mother will need to try to cope with someone who needs 24-hour care. That is ridiculous. It is not even as if Eileen's case has been a surprise. She has been in the system for 61 years, but we do not know where to put her.

Another case that I bring to the Minister's attention is that of Mr Robert Kane. Robert is 51. Again, he has Down's syndrome and severe learning difficulties. He was placed in a residential home, but it could not handle

him because he was difficult. He will now be sent home. Mrs Kane is aged 83. How is she to cope in such a situation?

How much money do people get for looking after those who need 24-hour attention? They get £48 a week, or 25p an hour. However, in the cases that I have mentioned, that carer's allowance is taken off a carer's pension.

Another case that I will mention is that of a lady of 53 who has a 21-year-old child with learning disabilities. Unfortunately for that lady, her husband took a stroke and had to leave work, so she went on to benefits. Again, her carer's allowance was taken off her. Not only does she have to look after two people, she has less money.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that the examples that he has given represent the tip of the iceberg, given the numbers of such people across the Province? We all know such people — I could replicate similar cases — so the Member has made an important point. I support what he has said.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. I accept that this is but the tip of the iceberg. Sometimes individual cases act as an exemplar. Really, we are talking about the most vulnerable people in society.

Another issue — I heard this on the radio today, and it stuck with me — is that, because people are living longer, many parents who never expected to outlive their children are now having to deal with such situations.

I commend the motion to the House. I hope that the Minister will take note of what has been said. We can deal with this issue, and I am sure that the House will unite on the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome Carmel Hanna's motion, and I acknowledge her contribution over many years to highlighting the anomaly in the carers' system and her determination to see the issue through.

Caring for friends and relatives is a natural thing to do — human beings have always cared for one another — but every generation of carers faces a different set of challenges. For the present and future generations, specific challenges arise from the fact that we are an ageing society. A greater proportion of people are reaching old age, but we are experiencing lower birth rates. The age at which people became carers, whether of elderly parents or relatives or of sick children, was nearly always the same as that in which they were raising families of their own. However, in today's world of high house prices, not only do both partners often need to work and to juggle many responsibilities, people are living longer so that those in their 50s and 60s may still be looking after their very elderly parents. In fact, at the present time in Northern Ireland, a quarter

of our carers are over 60 years of age, and that proportion is rising.

Plans for future health services include a much reduced bed capacity for chronically ill elderly people because, quite frankly, hospital is not the best place for people unless they are acutely ill.

Naturally, most elderly people do not want to be in hospital if they can be at home. Consequently, more chronically ill elderly people need to be cared for at home. In some cases, because of the demands of caring, paid employment is not an option, and that causes tremendous financial hardship.

While preparing for the debate, I was struck by some of the briefing papers that we received, particularly from Barnardo's Northern Ireland. There are about 8,500 unpaid carers in Northern Ireland who are under 17 years of age. Those carers have to grow up quickly. They may be unable to attend, or concentrate at, school; be unable to go out with their friends, or because of peer pressure, be unable to tell people that they are caring for someone; feel different to their friends; or feel worried and lonely. The Assembly can only but acknowledge the tremendous work of Barnardo's Northern Ireland, which gets Big Lottery funding to counsel, guide and mentor some of those young people.

The number of suicides recently in Northern Ireland is alarming. My constituency is no different, with two more young people committing suicide in the past week. I am not suggesting that suicide is directly related to caring. However, the pressures of modern society are taking their toll.

Young carers often experience loneliness, a sense of isolation and a sense that their expectations of life will not be realised due to the burden that is placed on them. Barnardo's Northern Ireland offers local support on a range of issues, such as health, mental and emotional well-being, education and achievement.

In addition to the stresses already mentioned, smaller families and the fragmentation of society mean that carers are often isolated and vulnerable. Carers, who perform such important work for their loved ones and for our society, should not be neglected, feel isolated or suffer financial hardship. They should be better supported financially and practically, and be properly remunerated for the work that they do.

The SDLP wants the Minister to outline how the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will fully implement the Caring for Carers strategy as soon as possible, so that people can get the help that they deserve and need. I urge Members to support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mrs Hanna for bringing such an important issue to the House and apologise to her for missing the first two or three minutes

of her speech. I thank Members who have spoken on the subject. It is important that awareness is improved and that politicians maintain a focus on the contribution that carers make. It is clear that Members hold strong views about the importance of supporting carers and about the vital role that they play. I have sympathy with the view that not enough is being done to help carers.

The Ulster Unionist Party made a manifesto commitment to increase recognition of the work that carers do, and to ensure that they get better support. I am happy to have been given the opportunity to begin that process today.

Carers are people who give up their time — without receiving payment — to provide help and support to a relative, child or friend who may not be able to manage without that help because of frailty, illness or disability. Caring is an issue that can affect us all at some time in our lives. The 2001 census of population for Northern Ireland estimated that there were 185,000 carers. When Members consider that our population is 1.7 million, 185,000 carers is getting on for close to 20% of the population.

The contribution that carers make to the health and well-being of our population is immeasurable. The Assembly, and I as Minister, must take steps to ensure that the valuable role that carers play in our society be fully recognised. Carers are at the core of the concept of providing support for people so that they may live independently. One of the Department's key strategies is that of independent living, which allows people to live in their own homes for as long as possible rather than go down the more traditional route of going into institutional care.

4.15 pm

I listened carefully to Mr Basil McCrea's points, which he made strongly, that there are roles for everyone in the spectrum of care provision. He also said that there is need for a form of care provision in residential or nursing homes. Indeed, that point was made to me by him and people from his constituency, and it was one of the first discussions I had as a Minister. Therefore, I understand what he is saying.

There are dilemmas to be faced in that parents are now clearly not going to outlive children who are suffering from severe learning disabilities or severe disabilities. Such parents have a major concern about what will happen to their children when they are no longer available to care for them.

The issue is about supporting the role of carers and their health and quality of life. They need support and they need access to the same opportunities that are enjoyed by the rest of us. Historically, supporting carers has been one of the thrusts of the Department, and there has been an ongoing process — some might

say that it has gone on too long — of consultation, reporting and strategy development.

In January 2006, the Caring for Carers strategy was launched. It sets out 19 recommendations under six key themes in an implementation plan. The strategy is about supporting carers to enable them to have a better quality of life, and giving them the sort of support that they require in order to do their job — a job that if they were not doing, society would have to do, at a huge increase in cost to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety budget.

The strategy outlines what has been done, and more importantly, what still needs to be done. As far as I am concerned, the strategy is by no means the definitive end of the story. I asked for an outline of what has happened as regards implementing the 19 recommendations, and I am pleased that most of them have been completed and some remain as work in progress.

The strategy reiterated the importance of identifying carers in order to direct them towards appropriate services. Carers have also raised the issue of access to information — a point that has been made today — because carers' organisations and voluntary groups played a key role in devising the strategy and the implementation plan. Information about where to access the support that carers need is important. It is also important to put their interests at the heart of decision-making by requiring, for example, health and social care bodies to nominate a specific board member to have responsibility for carers; to appoint a carers co-ordinator; and to establish a local carers' reference group. I want to be sure that those important safeguards are put in place across Northern Ireland, and my officials are following that up as a priority.

There is also the key document — the 'Complete A-Z For Carers'. Carers told us that access to relevant information was crucial to them. The guide points carers to where they can access that information. Demand for the guide, since publication, has been overwhelming.

As I have said, there has been a shift away from the more traditional forms of respite care. Therefore, the thrust of the Department is, and has been over the past few years, towards giving support to carers. However, none of us is satisfied that that is doing all that is required.

It is important to make some references in tandem with 'Caring for Carers: Recognising, Valuing and Supporting the Caring Role', which was published in 2006. Recurrent funding of £400,000 was allocated to support carers, and that funding is being used by health and social care bodies to develop innovative and responsive support services for carers, including flexible respite provision.

There is also £0.5 million per year for young carers; that was not allocated on a recurrent basis, but I can

assure Members that I will be looking for it to be made recurrent as a priority in the spending review. A further £4 million has been allocated for 2007-08, aimed at supporting people by helping them to live independent lives in their own homes. This funding will also be used by trusts to support carers through the provision of services.

Direct payments — cash payments in lieu of service provision — can play an important role in increasing choice and independence for carers. It is important to bear in mind that they often need financial support. The Social Security Agency provides a range of services to ensure that people are advised of their potential entitlement to benefits. However, as Mr McCrea pointed out, knowing that there is a clear defect or a clear deficit in the approach to funding is only one point. It is about looking to see how we change the system, and that must also be a priority for us.

In 2006-07, 1,483 people in Northern Ireland were specifically targeted with the carers' allowance and offered full benefit assessment. Assessment is one of the important things — assessment by right for the carer. The agency has also commenced a mailshot exercise targeting a further 66,000 people to advise them of the availability of carers' allowance.

In March 2003, a significant step was taken when the Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 came into force. For the first time, carers received a statutory right to an assessment of their needs. The 2002 Act also required health trusts to inform carers of the right to an assessment, so the responsibility was very much placed on the trust to be proactive with carers.

That said, we must still do more to raise the profile of assessments and, in so doing, provide a route for carers to access the support that they need. The way that they access this support is through assessment, and the way to assessment is for the trusts to be proactive in demonstrating need, and then take the opportunity to address that need.

My Department, through the Social Services Inspectorate, has carried out an inspection of the social care support services for carers of older people. The findings of this report will be published shortly, but I can disclose that it is likely to make further recommendations about the consistency of carer assessments and services being offered to carers across Northern Ireland. I have asked that any recommendations from this inspection be implemented as quickly as possible.

I believe that supporting carers and developing services for them is an ongoing campaign of action, and I am determined to continue to deliver on the commitments made to carers in the caring for carers strategy. I am also determined to review the support measures in place for carers, and with this in mind I will be ensuring that my comprehensive spending

review bid does not overlook carers and that their importance and value to families, communities and the Health Service are properly reflected in my priorities.

For the present, the benefits of carer assessments —

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to hear of the Minister's determination to make sure that carers' needs are included in the comprehensive spending review. He might like also to consider those carers who are looking after people on the higher rate of disability living allowance. Perhaps we might do something specifically using a two-tier approach, looking at how we might address the issue of carers who are looking after people with greater needs, particularly those with 24-hour cover.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr McCrea; he makes an important and valuable point, which I will look to follow up on.

For the present, the benefits of carer assessments have to be communicated clearly to all health professionals and carers.

Carers must be fully aware of their rights. It is important that all of society, not least our local Administration, must ensure that we regularly support and consult carers on their needs. The debate today has been valuable in achieving that. I do not doubt that, in due course, we will discuss the matter on several occasions, not least because it has repeatedly been brought forward. Simple demographics in our society mean that it is a growing issue and need; therefore, there is a growing requirement to address it.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank all the contributors to the debate for their support.

This is a very sensitive issue, and all Members have treated it as such. When we speak about carers, we must not forget those for whom they care, many of whom are already stressed and do not want to be a burden to their families and their loved ones.

On the way here this morning, I heard on the radio — as, I am sure, did other Members — some very emotional stories from people who were sharing their experiences of caring, and the impact it had on them. Older callers — some in their 80s — although currently enjoying good health, did not want to be a burden to their families in the future. People should be able to look forward to old age with a level of enjoyment and anticipation, and we owe them that.

There is a wide range of carers, and some young callers spoke eloquently about the impact that caring has had on them, with the loss of their childhood, and their inability to have social and recreational outlets. We heard from Carmel Hanna, and others, about the stress and strain that caring places on relationships in the family.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to continuing consultation with the Carers Forum. He made reference to the previous legislation concerning carers. When I worked in the caring profession, I was loath to say that I worked in the services, because, once a carer gets a statement of their needs, there is little in the way of resources to meet those needs.

Members across the Chamber spoke about the financial implications of caring and how, on the one hand, people receive a carer's allowance, but that is taken from their income support. Some people had to give up their jobs, and that then impacted upon their pensions.

All Members recognise that many carers live in poverty; however, it is not even a poverty that allows them a level of independence. For some, caring is a 24/7 job. As a society, we owe a great debt to those people who provide care so unselfishly.

However, the demographic changes did not happen overnight; they were a long time coming. We have been failed miserably in planning for care that is fit for purpose. The resources have not been made available.

I worked in the Health Service in the 1980s and 1990s, and I remember the Thatcher years, when long-stay hospitals and old residential statutory homes were closed, and caring for people became a business. Caring for people cannot be a business. It requires dedication, and it is not something that many people do for the money. The loss of those respite homes, and statutory homes in particular — three of which were lost in my own constituency of Upper Bann — means that there is a lack of respite-care provision overall. For some, respite is a real lifeline. Some trusts do make available two weeks in care, which is followed by six weeks at home.

I hope that the Minister will reflect on the need for respite care, particularly for young, chronically ill adolescents. Last week, we heard that many young people with mental-health problems are placed in adult wards. The same applies to many young chronically disabled people, who have to go into respite or residential care homes for the elderly because of the inadequate number of places.

4.30 pm

In his speech, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made a commitment to review the caring strategy, saying that several of the issues have been considered. He also said that care in Northern Ireland is a postcode lottery. Many people hope that a reduction in the number of trusts will make care more consistent, but that is a long way off. There is a job of work to do to ensure that care provision is the same no matter where one lives. Members referred to benefit entitlement take-up — people may not be aware of

many benefits — and the importance of timely and effective information.

Society owes a debt to the community and voluntary sectors, which have taken the lead in meeting the needs of carers and in putting them at the top of the political agenda. Care in the community did not have the resources or the ability to work beyond "fire-fighting" or to develop long-term strategic planning.

Members may recall the closure of long-stay hospitals, after which care and resources were to follow into the community; that did not happen. I urge the Minister to reflect that primary care needs an urgent injection of cash. It is as simple as that.

Mr McCarthy: I am delighted to see that we have another member of the Executive in our midst: the Minister for Social Development, Ms Margaret Ritchie, is in the Chamber. Would Mrs Kelly agree that Ms Ritchie could contribute in conjunction with the Health Minister and any other Minister?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for that point. In her motion Mrs Hanna referred to the fact that carers are not the concern of just one Department; there must be an holistic approach. I know that Ms Ritchie has a long-term commitment to the care of older people and has fought hard in recent battles for the health and social care needs of people in her constituency. That will be at the top of her agenda — although she is well able to speak for herself.

The debate is timely, as carers make up a hidden part of our society. All Members can relate to the issue, because most, if not all, of us have had to provide care for someone that we love. Unless one has done that, it is difficult to appreciate how having to care for someone can consume and restrict one's life.

Sometimes the desire to help is replaced by anger and resentment. That is demonstrated by recent statistics that show that many older people have been abused by those who ought to care for them most. Part of the underlying reason is sheer frustration and a lack of support mechanisms for our carers.

I welcome the comments of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the contributions of all Members and the unanimous support of the House for the motion. The answers are not easy, but the Executive can take several easy steps to make provision for our carers. I hope that the Minister will urge cross-departmental working to meet the need in our community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that all carers, formal and informal, can access services and support to maintain their own health and well-being, to recognise financially the vital role they play and ensure uptake of all benefit entitlements.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, for the Minister for Social Development.

Ms Ní Chuilín: asked the Minister for Social Development when she will make a decision on continuation funding after 30 June 2007 in relation to the crisis associated with the neighbourhood renewal strategy to allow essential services to be sustained prior to full implementation of the strategy in Derry/Londonderry.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome the opportunity to set the record straight. Since becoming Minister for Social Development, my priority has been to improve people's quality of life and their life chances through social or affordable housing; benefit up-take to ensure that the elderly and those who are disabled obtain the benefits to which they are entitled; and urban regeneration to drive economic opportunity and neighbourhood renewal.

I was disappointed to hear about the concerns that arose last week in Derry about neighbourhood renewal funding. At no time have I, or my officials, suggested that neighbourhood renewal funding to community groups in Derry would cease. Indeed, I have been looking at approving extension funding for those community groups whose current contracts with the Department for Social Development will expire on 30 June. I can confirm that my Department will extend existing contracts for funding up to 31 March 2008 for all those community groups in Derry that are providing services that link to the new neighbourhood action plans.

It has been unhelpful to have some people put out rumours that heighten concerns. I have been told that if we fund some citywide groups in Derry, that will result in other groups losing their funding. However, that is not the case. As I have made clear in earlier statements, all community groups — citywide or otherwise — currently funded by the Department and providing key services in neighbourhood renewal areas, will be eligible to seek extension funding. The key criteria will be that the community groups address priority needs in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

We must not lose sight of the fact that neighbourhood renewal is about tackling disadvantage in areas in greatest need. That means that the needs of the community and the people must come first. The community sector will, undoubtedly, play a role in delivering some of those services, but my Department will not be in a position to provide financial support to all community groups. All Departments and public bodies will have a role to play in implementing neighbourhood action plans, and

it will be for those bodies to decide how, and through whom, they wish to deliver services.

Of course, there are wider issues about sustainability and the funding of the voluntary and community sector, which fall to all Departments and require a co-ordinated approach. I hope to take that matter forward in the Executive.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to hear some clarification on the situation in Derry city. As someone who represents constituents living in areas of multiple deprivation, I, too, am concerned about the future of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. My Foyle colleague, Martina Anderson, also shares those concerns. Today, along with other communities living in neighbourhood renewal areas, Martina participated in a protest to protect funds for the most deprived areas in Derry city.

Neighbourhood renewal funding, as the Minister has outlined, was designed to respond to long-term funding to address multiple deprivation. However, neighbourhood renewal funds are calculated on the basis of objective need, which has been clearly identified in this case. Areas, albeit at different levels of development, have undergone the arduous process of planning development days and bringing together action plans, which are now sitting with the Minister's Department ready to be funded.

However, I understand that the Minister for Social Development has instructed a funding review. If that is the case, it is alarming for people who are, at this late stage, waiting for their contracts to be renewed. That uncertainty has added to the overall uncertainty surrounding the long-term future of neighbourhood renewal, which, instead of long-term, has been piecemeal, going from one year, to six months, to 18 months. That is hardly addressing the social deprivation experienced by certain areas over the years.

Clarification was given, but further clarification is needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I do.

Will the Minister outline to all neighbourhood renewal groups, particularly those in Derry, her response to the extension of contracts on 30 June 2007? Will she further outline her plans for full funding for neighbourhood renewal?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Ms Ní Chuilín for her question. As I said, my priorities are to help people, to address their concerns and to help communities. I shall address the specific issue that the Member raised. I thought that I had made it clear — and I confirm it yet again — that my Department will extend funding for existing contracts until 31 March 2008 for all those community

groups in Derry that provide services that link to the new neighbourhood action plans.

Regarding Ms Ní Chuilín's reference to an instruction for a funding review, neighbourhood renewal works across Departments to tackle the root causes of deprivation by ensuring that the needs of the community come first. For me, community and the needs of the people come first. There are no plans to review that policy. The six neighbourhood action plans in the north-west have been agreed by the neighbourhood partnerships. In order to implement those plans, extensive discussions with Departments and agencies are under way.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I thank the Minister for her statement in response to the issue. She will recall that I raised the issue with her last week in an adjoining room in the Assembly. Can the Minister elaborate on her statement that the funding to neighbourhood renewal groups will be extended to March 2008?

According to the Mayor of Londonderry, people who are employed under the neighbourhood renewal scheme were to have their employment terminated at the end of this week. Does the Minister's announcement mean that those people who, until last week, were at risk of unemployment on 30 June 2007 will no longer be at such risk and that that will not be the case until March 2008, by which time — we hope — permanent funding will be in place?

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Campbell for his question. As I said, my Department will extend funding for existing contracts until 31 March 2008 for all community groups in Derry that provide services linked to the new neighbourhood action plans. I confirm that the jobs in those community groups are guaranteed — if that is a suitable word — until 31 March 2008. At that stage, I will reconsider the issue. In fact, I shall be considering the matter in the longer term over the next few months.

I want to be completely assured that neighbourhood renewal is doing the job that it is intended to do: tackling deprivation and disadvantage in the communities that most need help; reducing the gap between levels of deprivation in Derry and in other areas of Northern Ireland that do not have a noticeable degree of deprivation; that it is effecting change and bringing improvement. That is my earnest desire.

Mr Durkan: The Minister is aware that I, like Mr Campbell, have made representations on the issue. Two types of groups are involved in the issue. One comprises the so-called citywide groups, which have not yet been configured into the neighbourhood renewal partnerships. The other consists of those groups that have worked long and hard in preparing and going through the plans and evaluations for neighbourhood renewal. The Minister's statement makes it clear that

citywide groups are now funded until March 2008. However, a longer-term funding arrangement is guaranteed for the other neighbourhood renewal groups.

4.45 pm

The Minister's clarification is welcome in the short term. Will the Minister address the long-term worry that while the neighbourhood renewal strategy is an important, and, indeed, primary instrument of her Department, it should not be the sole instrument for funding the good work of the community and voluntary sectors? We should rightly take account, as the Minister said, of the role of other Departments, whose funding could well be drying up because of the drop-off in EU funds and the implications of the review of public administration.

One of the key elements of the national development plan in the Irish Republic is its social-inclusion pillar. If we want to tie in to that in the North, we need more than the neighbourhood renewal strategy alone, because its focus in the North would not match that of the social-inclusion pillar in the South. That is what we must do if North/South development is to take place in this area of concern.

Ms Ritchie: In the past few weeks both Mr Durkan and Mr Campbell have raised concerns with me about the problems facing the partnerships established under the neighbourhood renewal strategy in Derry. Mr Durkan should know that I have made it clear that all community groups in Derry, citywide or otherwise, currently funded by my Department and providing key services in areas covered by the neighbourhood renewal strategy, will be eligible to seek extension funding.

I agree with Mr Durkan on the other issues. I accept that there are groups doing good work in deprived areas that do not necessarily fit the template of the neighbourhood renewal strategy. I fully recognise that those groups are working to address social and economic disadvantage. These concerns are not solely a matter for my Department; they are the collective responsibility of all Departments, because the work of such groups is wide-ranging and varied and is concerned with tackling disadvantage. The Executive must consider those matters collectively, and I hope to present a paper on the subject to the Executive after discussion with the Committee for Social Development.

The national development plan in the South of Ireland contains several social-inclusion pillars that address social and regional development issues on an all-island basis. I hope to meet my ministerial colleagues in the South of Ireland soon to discuss various issues that impinge on our Departments, such as neighbourhood renewal, urban regeneration, the need to address social deprivation and disadvantage and building communities in a much wider context.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm that the agreed per capita budget of £70 intended to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor and ensure that people have a better chance will be guaranteed? Will she also assure Members that none of the areas covered by the neighbourhood renewal strategy will lose funding? The Minister's funding review was the cause of massive uncertainty and was akin to a review of the pot of the poor.

Many groups have been plunged into a crisis, and today they have called for a protest. Has the Minister set a target date for solving this problem? It is not good enough to say that one will be found at some time in the future. A target date for the full implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy is required through the action plan that was signed off earlier this year.

Ms Ritchie: In case there are any misconceptions about this, I never instructed a review. There have been many rumours over the past few weeks about what I did or did not do in Derry on this. At no stage did I say that a review should take place; nor did I say that any funding should be withdrawn. Those who have been spreading those rumours in Derry should stop now.

I have made the case clearly, and I will repeat it: my Department will extend existing contracts for funding up to 31 March 2008 for all community groups in Derry providing services linked to the new neighbourhood action plans. The rumours that have been put about by some people have heightened concerns, which has been unhelpful. I have also been told that if my Department funds some citywide groups in Derry, other groups will lose their funding.

As I have made clear in earlier statements, all community groups — citywide or otherwise — that are currently funded by the Department for Social Development and that provide key services in neighbourhood renewal areas will be eligible to seek extension funding. I further emphasise to Ms Anderson that my first and last concerns are for all members of the community in Derry. I want to ensure that neighbourhood renewal addresses their concerns. Neighbourhood renewal is not there simply to allocate jobs; it must effect change and improvement in the wider community. It must reduce deprivation and be seen to address disadvantage in order to improve the health and well-being of the community and provide opportunity for all. As Minister, I will seek to do that.

Mr B McCrea: I hesitate to intrude into a debate on the north-west. However, one of my forebears, Basil McCrea, made a large donation to what was then McCrea Magee Presbyterian College to train Presbyterian ministers. Obviously, the money has run out because the McCrea element of the name has disappeared. However, I have a real interest in tackling social deprivation. In previous debates, I was struck —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question?

Mr B McCrea: Of course I do, but I thought that I should set the scene to show why I am intruding on the debate. Does the Minister agree that tackling social deprivation requires partnership and that people must work together without rancour? Rancour militates against investment and useful work with other parties. If everyone worked together for the benefit of the people of Londonderry, perhaps it would be a happier place.

Ms Ritchie: I fully agree that the only way to achieve success in Government and have a forward-looking process that will reduce deprivation and disadvantage is through partnership and working together. I hope that the Assembly can provide that as an example through the new political dispensation. I hope that all Members have fully subscribed to the principles of partnership and working together.

Mr P Ramsey: I am delighted that the Minister clarified that there was no political interference from her Department in the neighbourhood renewal strategy in Derry. Over the weekend and last week, there have been whispers from people in the community who want to do a bit of mixing. There must be a full appraisal of how those programmes are being addressed. How are social need targets, healthier living, low educational esteem and social inclusion being addressed? How is that managed to ensure best practice? There must be tendering exercises, and service level agreements must be entered into to ensure that the best is achieved from those practices. There is no point —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question for the Minister?

Mr P Ramsey: I was not aware of a protest in my constituency of Foyle, but it is funny that other people know and that various parties have been excluded from those protests. One can imagine where the carry-on is happening and where the whispers have come from.

Ms Ritchie: It is possible that certain Members and others are trying to push a political agenda in order to undermine the Minister for Social Development, the SDLP and the ethos in which everyone believes, especially my Department: the need to tackle disadvantage and deprivation and to build communities.

I would like to think that we have all engineered ourselves to deliver on that agenda, not to try to obfuscate and undermine it. I absolutely and unequivocally refute the allegation that I have pursued a political agenda. My only concerns are for the requirements of the local population and the tackling of deprivation —

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. None of us is accusing the Minister of pursuing a political agenda. It was a member of the Minister's party who suggested that.

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

Ms Ritchie: I fail to recognise where there was a point of order. If I may continue: in recent weeks I have read various articles in various Derry newspapers, and taken note of various questions tabled in the Assembly by certain members of a political party, that can only be based on a political agenda. As I have already said, my only concerns, and those of my Department and its officials, are for the requirements of the local population, the tackling of deprivation, and the lessening of the gap between those —

Mrs D Kelly: I know that the question is very much about Derry, but does the Minister acknowledge that many people — and elected representatives — throughout the North have concerns about how neighbourhood renewal partnerships have been taken over?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Member for her point of information. I will continue, and then come back to that issue.

As I said, my only concerns, and those of my Department, are for the requirements of the local population, the tackling of deprivation, and the lessening of the gap between those who have and those who have not. The wider needs of the community and the people should be the only issue to concern Members. It is people who count in politics and in communities.

I thank Mrs Kelly for her intervention and Mr Ramsey for his comments. I will investigate those issues, because I wish to ensure that fairness and equality are the benchmarks by which neighbourhood renewal is assessed. Suffice it to say that the concerns of the local population come first — in this instance, that is the population in Derry. That is why I have extended funding until the end of the financial year. I want to do the best for people and to bring social priorities to the fore.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the questions to the Minister, the interventions, and all the rest.

Adjourned at 4.58 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 26 June 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Taxis Bill

Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill [NIA 4/07] be agreed.

The Taxis Bill is enabling legislation that provides for the creation of a comprehensive new framework for the regulation of taxis. Its overriding purpose is to make taxi services in Northern Ireland safer and better for customers. The pressing need for the legislation was established following an extensive review of taxi regulation, which was carried out by the Department of the Environment (DOE) in response to concerns about the numbers of illegal taxis in operation.

Northern Ireland has a relatively vibrant and growing taxi sector, which involves at least 800 businesses of varying sizes and creates self-employment for more than 12,000 working taxi drivers. However, most taxi legislation dates back to the early 1980s; in fact, in Belfast, taxis are regulated by by-laws that were devised in the early 1950s. The problem is that if all the legislation were combined, it would not add up to effective taxi regulation for the twenty-first century. Most importantly, the lack of enforcement powers and penalties means that the DOE cannot properly address the needs of a taxi industry that is currently plagued by illegal competition.

Current legislation is also seriously deficient in that taxi businesses cannot be licensed or easily be held accountable if they use unlicensed drivers or vehicles or if they provide poor services. Fare control and taximeter requirements are minimal, and complaints of overcharging are impossible to address when fares are not regulated.

It is not enough to just ensure that there are enough immediate-hire taxis available at peak times and accessible taxis at any time.

Lastly, customers in Belfast are frustrated and very often ignore the fact that, unlike everywhere else in Northern Ireland, most of the available taxis there cannot be hired immediately in the street.

Clearly, we need new legislation that supports the development of a highly professional, customer-focused, economically sustainable taxi services industry. Implementing the proposals of the taxi review through the Taxis Bill will allow my Department to develop new policies designed to address the problems, using measures tailored to meet Northern Ireland's particular circumstances.

The Taxis Bill will make it possible, for example, to promote road safety and the personal safety of taxi users by requiring all taxi operators to be licensed; reintroducing a taxi driving test; making all drivers get relevant training; and improving the identification that drivers must wear and display. It will also enable the availability, range and standard of services to be improved by giving powers to the DOE to operate a single licensing system throughout Northern Ireland that will allow all taxis to pick up passengers without a booking. It will also allow the Department to set compulsory maximum fare rates; require all taxis to have taximeters and display their fares clearly; and require taxi operators to provide more accessible taxis. That is why I am proposing that the Bill be given its Second Stage.

Taxis are a small but integral part of our transport system. They often provide the key link at the start or end of a longer journey. Many people use them regularly to get to and from airports, bus and train stations or just to get home after a night out with friends or family. Taxis also provide vital community support, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas. Taxis often provide a lifeline for people who do not have access to a car or to good public transport.

People with disabilities rely heavily on taxis to get around, and, every day during term time, taxis allow the education and library boards to provide excellent home-to-school transport services for over 3,000 children with special needs. Last but not least, taxis make a very important contribution to the economy and have a key role to play in promoting a positive image of Northern Ireland to our increasing numbers of tourists and business visitors.

Clearly, there are times when most of us, for one reason or another, need to rely on the convenience of getting a taxi. When we do so, we want to be sure that we can get one when we need it, that we can travel safely and in comfort, and that the fare that we will be asked to pay will be reasonable, given the circumstances. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

I want to acknowledge that there is a great deal in the industry to be positive about. It is important to

acknowledge that many people work very hard, often during unsociable hours, to provide safe, attentive, high-quality taxi services to their customers. Many taxi businesses across Northern Ireland invest heavily to provide excellent innovative taxi services, using the latest booking, dispatch and vehicle-tracking technology. Others are keen to develop new niche services in the growing wedding- and party-car sectors.

However, there is a darker and less positive side to the taxi industry — where the personal safety of young people is put at risk when there are too few taxis to get them home quickly and safely late at night; where too many taxis look and feel as if they have seen better days; and where too many taxi drivers have poor customer-care skills. It is also one in which the only way that some people can get a taxi home at night is to agree to pay an extortionate fare. Most worryingly of all, it is one in which, because there is no local system of operator licensing, taxi businesses can get away with providing unsafe, uninsured, unlicensed cars and drivers, with relative impunity.

All that must stop. That is why, starting with the Taxis Bill, I want to introduce a programme of reform and modernisation to transform the provision of taxi services in Northern Ireland. I want to build on existing best practice and eliminate the worst practices. In particular, I am determined to clamp down on the menace of illegal taxiing, which does so much harm to the image of the industry and stops it from realising its full economic potential. My vision is simply this: I want to see that every taxi on the road is safe, driven by an insured, licensed taxi driver, and operated through a reputable business.

The people of Northern Ireland, our tourists and our visitors deserve nothing less. For that reason, the Taxis Bill will allow me to introduce regulations to improve road safety by requiring new taxi drivers to be tested and all taxi drivers to be trained. Furthermore, the Bill will enable me to deter illegal taxiing and improve service standards by introducing operator licensing, and to protect consumers from overcharging by requiring all taxis to work to new maximum fares and to have taximeters. It will give the police and DOE enforcement officers new powers to tackle illegal taxiing, and it will introduce new offences against taxi regulations, with tough penalties. Those penalties will be directed at taxi businesses that provide a taxi service without a taxi-operator's licence or that use unlicensed vehicles or drivers.

Mr S Wilson: I note what the Minister has said about new powers and the ability for inspectors to ensure that taxi companies live up to the Bill's requirements. It has been alleged that the legislation will lead to a vast bureaucracy of inspectors and paperwork, and so on. How would the Minister respond to that allegation?

Mrs Foster: Compliance costs will be associated with the new regulations. The Department aims to increase its staffing significantly and to establish several new taxi enforcement teams throughout Northern Ireland to deal with the workload. That strategy will ensure that all areas have effective and proportional levels of enforcement.

I accept what Mr Wilson has said about over-regulation, and I hope to touch on that point later in my speech.

The Bill will allow my Department to introduce measures to improve the supply and range of taxi services provided. For example, measures will permit all taxis in Belfast to be hailed if they are available for hire. Furthermore, operators will be required to supply more disabled-accessible taxis, and taxis will be allowed to charge separate fares to passengers who wish to share.

It is important to point out that, although the Taxis Bill is a necessary first step, not all its proposed changes will happen overnight. The Bill's provisions are, in most cases, enabling. For example, full implementation of the taxi-reform programme, which the Bill makes possible, will require further subordinate legislation.

As individual sets of regulations are introduced, they will be subject to policy scrutiny by the Committee for the Environment and to negative resolution before the Assembly. My Department will want to continue close consultation on those changes with taxi-service providers and users.

I shall look briefly at the Bill's main provisions. It contains six parts and three schedules. Part 1 introduces a requirement for a taxi operator to apply for, and obtain, a taxi-operator's licence and imposes duties on licensed operators. It also introduces new requirements and duties for operating a taxi service at separate fares.

Part 2 provides for the regulation of vehicles that are used to provide taxi services. It includes more flexible and extensive powers than those currently available to the Department to set appropriate suitability requirements for vehicles, including their type, size and design. Moreover, it gives the Department powers to set the maximum rates and fares that can be charged for the hire of a taxi, and powers to require all taxis to have a taximeter and a receipt printer.

Part 3 contains provisions to regulate taxi drivers. In particular, it amends the existing legislation by reducing the length of time for which a driver's licence is valid from five years to three. That measure brings the legislation into line with existing taxi-driver repute checks, which are repeated every three years.

Part 4 contains several general provisions to do with licences. Those relate to the different forms of licence

available under the Bill, and deal primarily with fees, applications, suspensions, revocations, curtailments and appeals.

Part 5 makes provision for enforcement. It gives the police and the DOE powers to stop, search and seize vehicles that are believed to be taxiing illegally, and powers to inspect premises, under warrant, for which reasonable grounds exist to suspect that a person is operating an unlicensed taxi service.

Part 6 outlines miscellaneous and general issues that apply to the operation of the Bill, including the sharing of information, making grants and providing training.

The Bill has three schedules. Schedules 2 and 3, respectively, deal with minor and consequential amendments and repeals.

Schedule 1 lists all the separate offences under the Bill and the penalties for each of those. The most serious licensing offences — all of which, on conviction, will attract a maximum fine of £5,000 — include driving a taxi without a taxi-driver's licence; operating a taxi service without an operator's licence, or using unlicensed vehicles or drivers; and using a taxi, or permitting a taxi to be used, without a taxi licence.

10.45 am

I am happy to report that when the Department consulted on this legislation as an Order in Council in 2006, taxi businesses and customers broadly welcomed it. They want these changes to be brought in, especially in relation to operator licensing. I know, too, that the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) are particularly supportive.

I acknowledge, however, that not everyone is happy with everything that is in the Bill. I appreciate, in particular, that, although they support the vast majority of the measures that it will enable, many Belfast public-hire drivers are against proposals for all taxis to be allowed to pick up in the street. They want the existing two-tier public-hire and private-hire taxi-licensing system to be kept, but people who use taxis in Belfast appear to take a very different view. As I mentioned earlier, there are insufficient taxis in the city to meet demand at peak times, and the public are understandably frustrated that most of the available taxis cannot be hired immediately, simply because of this outdated two-tier system.

Mr S Wilson: One of the criticisms that has been made of the Taxis Bill is that it will lead to redundancies in the taxi industry. This morning, in an interview on Radio Ulster, it was claimed that up to 450 taxi drivers could lose their jobs. Has any assessment been made of the impact that the legislation will have on employment in the taxi industry? If there were to be redundancies, which provision in the Bill would be the source of those?

Mrs Foster: Frankly, I cannot see how the legislation will lead to redundancies, especially as there is an increased demand for taxis in the city of Belfast. In fact, it will free up more taxis to deal with the demand. My Department does not believe that the proposals for a single-tier system will result in the loss of taxi drivers' jobs in Belfast. Accessible taxis, such as those operated by Belfast public hire, will continue to play an important role in operating immediate-hire services from taxi ranks at popular locations in the city and at places such as Belfast City Airport, railway stations, bus stations and ferry terminals. Accessible taxis will continue to serve as school- and health-transport contract vehicles and will have the opportunity to participate in taxi-sharing and other schemes that are envisaged under the provisions in the Bill. Measures will be put in place to safeguard the business of accessible taxis operating from taxi ranks in order to discourage casual picking up by non-accessible taxis in the vicinity of those locations.

Another source of concern for taxi operators and drivers is enforcement. The matter was raised earlier by my hon Friend the Member for East Antrim. Any regulatory regime is only as good as its enforcement. I agree with the taxi industry and other stakeholders that effective enforcement is vital if standards are to be raised and illegality driven out. The Taxis Bill provides the powers, with details of offences and penalties, that my Department and the police need to deter illegal taxiing. It is now beholden to us to do our part to ensure that we have the right strategies and resources in place to make the new licensing system work.

I appreciate also that many taxi businesses are worried that their costs may rise as a result of the regulatory charges that I propose. The Bill, in itself, will not affect business costs, and I want to reassure any taxi drivers and operators who are concerned about compliance costs that may flow from the reform programme that the Department will carefully assess all the costs and benefits of the changes and consult fully with them about any potential regulatory impacts.

Measures in the Bill are expected to have a positive impact on the equality of opportunity of both taxi-service providers and users. That is particularly so in the case of people with disabilities and older people, who can expect to benefit from the provision of more services, using vehicles suited to their needs.

It is also judged that implementing the Bill will have a positive impact in rural areas, as people living and working there should benefit from the wider provision of high-quality and more accessible taxi services, including, potentially, access to more shared taxi services.

Finally, I want to comment on the commencement of the Taxis Bill.

Clause 39 addresses a deficiency in existing legislation by giving the police and the Department of the Environment's enforcement officers specific powers to stop private cars that are believed to be taxiing illegally. That clause can come into operation shortly after the Bill becomes law. As initiatives are developed, regulations that flow from other provisions will be implemented over a number of years. Early priorities will include the introduction of taxi-operator licensing, and new training and testing requirements for drivers. Moreover, the standards that taxi vehicles must meet will be revised, new maximum-fare rates will be set and taximeters will be made compulsory.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I must remind Members that, as this is the Second Stage of the Bill, they should speak only to the principles of the Bill and not to its substance. Moreover, there is no time limit on this debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): I thank the Minister for giving the Bill its Second Stage. As Chairman of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the opportunity to initiate discussion on the Taxis Bill. This comprehensive Bill consists of 58 clauses that will make provisions to regulate taxi operators, taxis and taxi drivers.

I pay tribute to those taxi drivers who provide such a vital service in our community. At present, four different types of taxi licence are in operation: vehicles licensed as private hire; taxis licensed as Belfast public hire; taxis licensed as restricted public hire; and taxibuses. Many people may not know that or know the type of work that each can and cannot do, but the Bill will address that. It will also ensure that taxi operators become regulated, which they are not at present. The Bill is a response to dissatisfaction among consumer organisations, the industry itself and the general public over the provision of taxi services under existing legislation.

It is clear from the Department-commissioned 'Quantitative Survey of Northern Ireland Taxi Operators 2004' that taxiing is a major industry. There are currently about 17,000 licensed taxi drivers, 10,500 licensed taxis and 850 taxi operators in Northern Ireland. The industry itself has an approximate turnover of £70 million per annum.

Overcharging is one current problem for the taxi industry. My colleague Alasdair McDonnell has informed me that one of his constituents complained to him that, because he uses an electric wheelchair, he must pay a premium of £8 minimum to get a wheelchair taxi in Belfast. In Lisburn, however, his constituent said that the equivalent fare was £2, or the normal standard rate. For there to be such a large disparity is

wrong, and the issue must be addressed at both departmental and Committee level.

There are also concerns about low standards of customer service, a lack of taxis at peak times and, of course, illegal taxiing. The Department anticipates that the Bill will tackle those problems by making the industry more professional, by introducing tougher enforcement powers and by providing better standards for taxi users.

The Taxis Bill will lead to the regulation of taxi operators. As I mentioned earlier, they are not subject to any specific regulation. The Bill will require that anyone who operates any type of taxi must hold a taxi-operator licence. That is a positive step, which should help to combat illegal taxiing. Good repute is an important element for the Department to consider when granting operator licences.

It is also notable that the Bill will impose a maximum fine of £5,000 on any operator who does not use licensed taxis and drivers. The Committee will scrutinise proposals in the Bill as to how that will be done.

The Bill will also address the taxi-licensing structure. The Department will be given flexibility to introduce a one-tier system, to which the Minister referred earlier. The current two-tier system is not working, as is demonstrated by the number of people who can be seen attempting to flag down taxis in Belfast city centre after a night out. The legislation will ensure that all taxis can do both public- and private-hire work, while remaining flexible enough to allow the Department to make other arrangements if particular systems are found to suit particular areas better. The Committee will examine the legislative proposals very closely.

The Bill will address taxi-driver licensing. A taxi driver must still have a taxi-driver's licence, but power will be available to ensure that some, or all, taxi drivers undergo testing and training. That can only help to improve customer-service standards. However, Committee members are concerned that that could lead to an influx of people applying for licences before the legislation comes into effect. The Committee will be exploring that matter further during its deliberations at Committee Stage.

The Bill provides for extensive enforcement powers. Police and enforcement officers will be permitted to enter and inspect operating centres; to stop and examine licensed taxis; and to seize and remove a vehicle that they suspect is being used without a proper licence. Although the Committee welcomes the introduction of such stringent powers, its members are concerned that the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has such a small staff — 21 people — to call on to enforce those powers. That is another issue that the Committee must explore further.

It is to be welcomed that the Department consulted substantially on the Bill with key stakeholders. Two rounds of consultation were held, in 2005 and 2006, and those drew almost 400 written responses, the majority of which were in favour of the proposals. However, a few areas of concern were raised. Those concerns included the standards for accessible taxis; the requirement for taxi drivers to wear seatbelts; lack of financial support for training; and lack of detail in the Bill. The Committee is soon to place a public notice in the main morning newspapers calling for written submissions from interested organisations and individuals. We will be extremely interested to hear their views on the Bill.

Like Mr Sammy Wilson, I listened to the radio this morning, and I hope that people with genuine concerns about the Bill will avail themselves of the opportunity to present their concerns to the Committee. As Committee Chairman, I assure them that they will be given a genuine hearing.

In Committee, we will be studying the Bill clause by clause. After we have taken into account stakeholders' views, the Committee will produce a report that outlines its views on the Bill.

In general terms, the Bill seeks to increase regulation of the taxi industry, and, on behalf of the Committee, I support its principles.

Mr Weir: I welcome the proposals. Like other members of the Committee for the Environment, I look forward to getting my teeth into the Bill. Two of the first three Bills that were introduced this session — the Budget Bill and the Welfare Reform Bill — required accelerated passage, but the Committee welcomes the opportunity to look in detail at the Taxis Bill.

As the Minister and the Committee Chairman have indicated, the Bill covers a wide range of issues and contains many clauses. The Committee will want to ensure that the very good objectives that are set out in the Bill will be mirrored in the detail of the legislation.

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

It is appropriate to remind ourselves of the Bill's aims. The explanatory and financial memorandum states that the legislation came about as a result of the review of taxi regulation that was carried out in 2002. The objective of that review, which is also the underlying objective of the Taxis Bill, was to:

“make recommendations aimed at creating a more effective and equitable regulatory framework that would promote road and personal safety, improve accessibility and facilitate fair competition in the taxi industry.”

It is important to put that on the record at the start, because I am concerned that some Members will seek to misrepresent the Bill. The Minister and others have acknowledged that the legislation is not an attack on

the taxi industry. Everyone would acknowledge that the taxi industry provides a valuable service. It provides mobility for people in the countryside who do not have the same access to public transport as some of the rest of us do. It also helps those who are vulnerable because of physical or financial problems and who do not have access to a car or, in many cases, cannot afford a car. It is also the case that the taxi industry provides a vital service for road safety. Many worthy campaigns have been launched, particularly by the DOE, to encourage people not to drink and drive. However, those campaigns can only be effective if an alternative method is available for people to get home after a night out. Taxis provide that alternative and a greater level of road safety by playing an important role in cutting road deaths.

11.00 am

It is recognised that the majority of taxi businesses and taxi drivers operate in a responsible, efficient and effective manner. However, the aim of the Bill is to ensure that all of the industry is operating to the same high standards that are evident in many parts of Northern Ireland, and it is worthy that we are seeking to ensure that the same level of excellence is being provided across the system. Unfortunately, the majority of taxi drivers face major problems because of the actions of a small number of illegal drivers who create problems for other drivers and for consumers.

Consumers want to be assured that certain standards will be met. They want to be sure that drivers and operators are licensed; that taxis will be clean and of an appropriate standard; and that drivers will have been trained to provide good service. It is particularly important to ensure that consumers are protected. The provision in the Bill to allow regulations to be made to set maximum fares will be a useful device to ensure that the small number of taxi drivers who seek to exploit people will face the proper sanctions.

It is important that people feel safe when they get into a taxi. A properly regulated industry is vital in order to provide people with peace of mind — not just for the taxi user but for the parents of young people who use taxis. It will assure them that when their son or daughter goes out for an evening, there is a guarantee of their protection on the way home.

The Committee will be going through the Bill in more detail; therefore, I do not wish to do so at present. It is sufficient to say that the provisions in the Bill relating to the regulation of taxi operators, taxis and licensing arrangements will provide the three legs of the stool that will form the sound base for the industry.

I welcome provisions that will ensure that more taxis will be designed to meet the needs of older people and disabled people. It is important that the Taxis Bill is not considered to be a one-off piece of legislation. As

the Minister said, subsequent regulations will put the meat on the bones of some of the issues. There will be much focus on consumer protection and on ensuring that people have adequate opportunities to use taxis. At present, the concern, particularly in certain parts of Belfast, is that customers must wait too long for a taxi because there are too few available.

It is important to have a level playing field in the industry — that would ensure that legal taxi drivers would not be disadvantaged by those who are operating illegally. It is important that there is one system and set of standards across Northern Ireland in order to prevent the situation in which some taxi drivers have an unfair advantage while others are unfairly disadvantaged. In the long run, the Bill's provisions will lead to an expansion of the taxi market, which is a relatively rare outcome in the regulation of any industry. If the taxi industry is regulated properly, it will lead to more people being employed in it.

That is something to be strongly welcomed. As well as providing protection for the consumer — obviously, the number-one aim — the legislation will be of benefit to the taxi industry: it will provide a level of protection to those taxi drivers who provide a first-class service. I look forward to the detailed scrutiny of the Bill, so that Members can ensure that the policy objectives that have been welcomed across the Chamber are matched in the detail of the legislation. I believe that they will. I urge the House to support the Bill's Second Stage.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister, and I thank my fellow Committee members for their comments. I also look forward to the rest of the debate.

Sinn Féin welcomes the Bill. The regulation of owners and drivers is long overdue — as the industry will admit — and the general principle of the Bill is welcomed. There has been widespread consultation dating back to 2002; however, some issues need to be clarified, and I welcome the opportunity to do so at the Bill's Committee Stage.

It is imperative that the Assembly encourage engagement with the major stakeholders in the taxi industry — taxi drivers, taxi owners and their representatives — to listen to their views and concerns. They will be the people most affected by the legislation, and it is important that their voices be heard. I am also concerned about the enforcement of the regulations, which must be implemented more thoroughly than at present. More resources must be put into that area or the new regulations will die on their feet. It will be a case of everything changing yet remaining the same if the new rules are implemented but the old problems are not eradicated.

Members must give great consideration to the proposed change, in certain circumstances, from a two-tier to a one-tier system. Wider consultation on

that area is required with all interested parties, because it raises many questions that Members alone cannot answer. One must remember that, as well as the benefits that it will bring to road and personal safety and the contribution that it will make to a more efficient and modern taxi service, the Bill touches on the livelihoods of thousands of people. They must be permitted to have a meaningful input, and Members must be prepared to listen.

Sinn Féin welcomes the Bill, and the next step must be to allow stakeholders to put their case to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Armstrong: I support the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill and its general principles. It is designed to help with regulation of the taxi industry in Northern Ireland and to ensure public confidence in its safety. The taxi industry affects a large number of people across Northern Ireland, and it is represented in urban and rural districts. I was encouraged to learn from the Department that the majority of the taxi industry is supportive of the proposals and wants the legislation to be in place sooner rather than later.

I do not propose to engage in a detailed examination of the Bill — I am sure that others will have that opportunity and will raise their concerns at a later date. Rather, I will comment on two areas that are of concern to me. First, I am keen to ensure that there is a greater taxi-rank provision, especially in rural towns. I am aware that the provision of taxi ranks is a traffic-management matter, which falls under the remit of the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service, so I am pleased to hear that the Department of the Environment taxi review team has already made strong representation to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) about the provision of taxi ranks, and I encourage DRD to take those concerns on board.

As a representative of a rural constituency — Mid Ulster — I am particularly aware that the subregional transport plan has recognised that planners of rural towns must look critically at the provision of taxi ranks. I encourage them to do so as a matter of urgency.

Secondly, I want to ensure that members of the travelling public are able to identify legitimate taxis. Under the current system, taxi plates are not that visible.

Mr Weir: Mr Armstrong said that the public must be able to identify legitimate taxis — and I am sure that all Members would welcome that. Is he aware of any instances of people getting into cars, believing them to be taxis, when, in fact, they were not?

Mr Armstrong: I missed the Member's last words, but I am sure that he had good reason for his intervention. *[Laughter.]*

I want to ensure that members of the public are able to identify legitimate taxis. The current taxi plates are

not sufficiently visible, and one must focus below eye level to read them. I would support any moves by the Department to integrate taxi plates into roof signs to ensure that that information is readily identifiable. That would advantage the public in safety and ease of use.

We need a taxi service that is safe and efficient, not only for local people but for prospective tourists.

Mr Ford: Perhaps Members can reach unanimity on this matter. I would like to congratulate the Minister on the Second Stage of the Bill. It is clear that legislation is required. The reputation of good taxi operators is currently suffering from the activities of those who operate on the margins or, in some cases, downright illegally. It is time to deal with that.

The Minister and others have referred to the fact that a review began in November 2002. However, in fact, there was ongoing activity before that. I was a member of the Environment Committee during the Assembly's first mandate and I remember having received delegations from those who were concerned about this matter, even before suspension in October 2002.

It is, to some extent, regrettable that the legislation was almost ready for an Order in Council to be made last year, yet we are still waiting for legislation to pass. Indeed, the Minister has told us that we must wait for further subordinate legislation in a number of detailed areas. How long can we afford to delay if we are to ensure the proper level of consumer protection, which is undoubtedly deserved?

Mr Weir and Mr Boylan said that they were looking forward to the detailed consideration of the Bill in Committee. I am reminded of the fact that Mr Weir was not a member of the previous Environment Committee. Indeed, neither the Minister nor Mr Boylan were Members of the Assembly when we last discussed taxis. I suspect that, after a few weeks of consideration of the details of taxi matters, Mr Weir and Mr Boylan may be marginally less enthusiastic than they are today. We shall wait and see. I look forward to hearing about the details that they will wish to raise when the Bill reaches Consideration Stage. I look forward to their showing how they have applied themselves to the Committee's work. They clearly have an interesting example to set for all of us.

The key point must be that the people of Northern Ireland and, as the Minister said, our visitors can depend on safe, roadworthy vehicles that are driven by qualified licensed drivers and operated by registered companies with regulated fares. It will take some time before that comes about, but that must be the ambition towards which we all work.

I have some concerns, which we will doubtless have the opportunity to address as Mr Weir guides us through the Committee Stage. Those concerns include: provisions for people with disabilities, and the speed with which

those provisions will be introduced; the requirements for regulation and inspection, and the numbers of staff who will be made available to do that; and the timescale for the provision of taximeters and receipt printers. Those issues must be resolved as we consider the Bill in detail and as we deal with the ensuing subordinate legislation, which will doubtless provide the Committee's excitement for many weeks and months ahead.

However, the fundamental principles of the Bill are sound. There must be licensing of operators — that is a key provision to ensure that good operators and good drivers are protected from the rogues. We must ensure better training and regulation of drivers; we must ensure action on enforcement; and we must ensure control of fares.

It is clear from the consultation that most people in the industry support every part of the Bill, or, if not every part, the great majority of it. It is clear that, as we work through the enabling subordinate legislation, we will be able to deal with the outstanding matters. The Committee has been threatened with much of that work. Despite that, I welcome the Bill.

11.15 am

Mr I McCrea: I support the Second Stage of the Bill, and I thank the Minister for her introductory comments.

As the Minister stated earlier, the Bill will bring taxi legislation — and the taxi industry — into the twenty-first century. It gives the Department the ability and authority to bring much-needed changes to that industry. Importantly, the introduction of the one-tier system will make for greater availability of taxis, especially in Belfast. The Bill will also ensure that taxi drivers will be better trained: all new drivers will be required to pass taxi-driving tests, thus improving the safety of passengers.

Recently, it was suggested that the Bill will create a new confidence in the taxi industry that will lead to further investment and create jobs, placing the industry firmly in the mainstream economy. That is the intention of the Bill and of the Department.

Earlier in the debate, taxi drivers' overcharging of disabled people was mentioned. The requirement for all taxis to have a taximeter will ensure that such overcharging will no longer occur. Disability access is important. I ask the Minister to advise the House on how the Bill will improve disabled people's access to taxis.

As has already been said, everyone's views will be taken into account when the Bill reaches its Committee Stage. I am unsure whether I will be as enthusiastic a contributor as some other Members at that Stage, given that scrutiny of the Bill will be a long and rigorous process. Nevertheless, I look forward to it.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest in proceedings: a member of my family works in the taxi industry.

Tugann Sinn Féin tacaíocht do Bhille na dTacsaithe.

As Cathal Boylan stated, Sinn Féin broadly supports the Taxis Bill. I acknowledge the work that has been carried out by the Minister's officials, and I thank the Minister for introducing the Bill in the manner in which she did.

The rationale behind the Bill is the creation of efficient and effective regulation of the taxi industry in the interests of drivers, owners and — most importantly — the travelling public. It is widely accepted that the legislation that currently governs the industry is inefficient and ineffective. The industry has been a prime mover in calling for, and co-operating in, the framing of the Bill.

Coming as I do from Derry, I have been in contact with the North-West Taxi Forum, which believes that the Bill, if passed, will go a long way to improving regulation of the industry and to creating a level playing field.

Too many of those who are involved in the industry work for the minimum wage or work in excess of 60 hours a week. They accept that there may be an increase in the fare structure but that a proper, professional and efficient service and, indeed, greater public confidence, will compensate for that. Therefore with those broad themes in mind, Sinn Féin supports the Bill at Second Stage.

Some aspects of the Bill require greater explanation and scrutiny, and that can be done at Committee Stage. Some areas of concern have already been mentioned, such as existing taxi-service provision in rural areas, current provision in Belfast city centre, and the introduction of a licence for taxi drivers.

Committee Stage will allow time for greater clarity and definition and will allow those working in the industry to have further input before the Bill is enacted. I welcome the fact that Patsy McGlone has invited stakeholders to give evidence to the Committee for the Environment.

I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to its Second Stage, and once more I acknowledge the work of her officials.

Táimid ag dúil leis an Bhille a theacht os comhair an Choiste.

Lord Browne: I support this timely Bill, and I thank my hon Friend the Minister for bringing it to its Second Stage. The Bill should help to revitalise the experience that people have when using a taxi service.

All too often, we hear — especially on the biggest radio show in the country — of the horror stories

experienced by some who use taxi services. We hear repeatedly of the frustration of taxi drivers who provide a decent professional service, but who are constantly let down by their few, but if encountered, memorable and less-than-reputable colleagues.

In fact, I probably would not have spoken on the Bill had it not been for a concerned constituent whom I met while canvassing in March who yearned for a level playing field, or at least a decent mechanism to deal appropriately with the small band of drivers who, in his view, give the rest of his profession a bad name.

We have all heard about taxi drivers who agree extremely inflated fixed prices with their passengers. That normally occurs late at night, and often when the passengers are tired and —

Mr S Wilson: Emotional. *[Laughter.]*

Lord Browne: Yes, emotional. Indeed, they have little or no alternative but to accept such charges. In some cases, people going in the same general directions are often taken together in the same taxi, but all separately pay the same full price. Therefore, I welcome the provision in clause 16 that will allow for a maximum fare to be set. Although I note that, at this stage, the provision simply allows regulations to be introduced, I trust that the Minister will move quickly to introduce such protection for consumers when the Bill is enacted.

Similarly, I note that clause 16(2) provides for the ability to charge passengers who are travelling in the same direction separate fares. It is crucial that the Department introduce stringent guidelines to ensure that value-for-money service is paramount and that passengers' interests remain a high priority. For example, charging four people travelling in the same direction a fare of £10 each would not provide value for money if a group of four could travel the same distance for £10 between them. The ability to carry separate paying passengers must be accompanied by a comparable reduction in individual charges.

Although I welcome the introduction of taximeters for all taxis, there must be continual enforcement by departmental staff. There would be no point in adopting a metered service if, during the hours of darkness, drivers prey on the vulnerable and those who simply want to get home safely and quickly by charging whatever they like, regardless of what the meter shows — or what it might have shown had it been switched on. I have been told that there are only five enforcement officers, and that figure may be wrong, and that they tend to focus on taxis in and around Belfast. If that is the case, that number is patently not enough to ensure that passengers are receiving the highest possible service across the Province.

The Bill provides for regulation of the taxi industry, not for regulation's sake, but in order to create a reliable,

professional and safe service in which the public can have confidence.

Taxi drivers provide a vital service to tourists and the tourism economy. They act as guides and information centres to those who are unfamiliar with our towns and cities. As far as the PSNI is concerned, taxis quickly ferry people away from hot spots after closing time. Taxis often provide a much-needed social service for the elderly or infirm. Often, taxi drivers go far beyond the call of duty. They collect groceries, and are especially helpful to the elderly. They help passengers to their destinations, and often wait until they return. Despite the headlines surrounding the Bill, it is an important step forward. Honest, hard-working, professional drivers will have nothing to fear from its implementation. I support the Bill.

Mr O’Loan: I fully support the principle of the Bill and welcome its Second Stage.

I want to make two small points about the explanatory and financial memorandum that accompanies the Bill. First, in commenting on the consultation responses, the memorandum says that, taken as a whole, the proposals were welcomed.

Some consultation responses expressed a level of dissent with the Bill’s intention. Therefore, during their consideration of the Bill, it would be helpful to Members if some reference could be made to consultees’ opinions.

Paragraph 13 of the explanatory and financial memorandum states:

“Enacting this enabling legislation will have no financial implications other than in relation to the enforcement and prosecution of offences.”

The Minister referred to that provision in her opening statement. The Bill will create a regulatory regime that will cost money to run. That sentence from the explanatory and financial memorandum surprises me, so I seek clarification from the Minister. In particular, will she confirm that the Bill will create a self-financing regulatory regime, meaning that the charges that operators pay will cover the regime’s costs?

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Taxis Bill. It is important to have appropriate and effective legislation, and the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill is a step in the right direction to achieving that. In my constituency, there are approximately 100 full-time and part-time taxi drivers, who deliver an effective service to the community.

I wish to make three points on passenger safety. First, it is critical that passengers feel safe in taxis. Therefore it is important that the legislation ensures that rogue taxi drivers cannot let on to be legitimate taxi drivers. In the past few months, we have seen some changes that have improved that situation.

Secondly, it is good that the Taxis Bill requires that all taxi operators, drivers and vehicles be insured. My third point relates to taxi fares, which some Members have mentioned. Contrary to the political programme that we see on TV each week, in which the taxi driver always says at the end, “That’ll be £12·50, please”, we must take fare regulation a wee bit further. Regardless of whether a journey is to the end of a driveway, to east Belfast or down to Newtownards, the fare will not always be £12·50. Therefore we must ensure that a fare structure is in place and that everything is correct.

The Minister stated that, during the far-reaching consultation process, a large number of people was contacted and a fair number of responses was received. Although I welcome the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill, will the Minister state whether the replies that were received from taxi associations showed that they are satisfied that the new legislation is correct, and, rather than inhibiting their businesses, will strengthen and enhance them?

Mrs Foster: I am grateful for Members’ contributions to the debate. It has been a valuable discussion, and it has been useful for me to hear Members’ views. I will respond to some of the issues that have been raised, and I will read Hansard to ensure that I have not missed any points. If I find that I have, I will write to those Members concerned.

The Chairman of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Patsy McGlone, started the debate by referring to several issues, including overcharging. He mentioned his colleague from South Belfast, who is concerned about wheelchair users who are expected to pay a premium when hiring taxis. Regulations will allow the Department to introduce a scheme whereby operators will be required to charge the same fares to all users, so premiums for disabled users will not be permitted. That is an important point to make, because we have heard much anecdotal evidence about overcharging.

Mr McGlone mentioned concerns about the possible rise in applications for taxi-driver licences before the Taxis Bill becomes law. In most years since 2004-05, applications for taxi-driver licences have increased by approximately 20%. I have no doubt that that trend is influenced partly by applicants who want to enter the industry before the rules change.

However, the Taxis Bill contains powers relating to taxi-driver training and testing that could be applied to both new and existing drivers. If appropriate, the Department could require more recent entrants to meet the same requirements as new drivers. The Member and the Committee might wish to discuss that with me and with my officials.

11.30 am

My colleague Peter Weir welcomed the opportunity to examine the issues in detail in Committee — raising

some scepticism among Members who have been here for some time about the enjoyability of that. However, he also mentioned the role that taxi services can play in road safety, particularly in the campaign against drinking and driving. That was a good, and timely, point, given that, unfortunately, our road-death figures are creeping up again. As he said, the Bill is about driving up standards and, rather than being one piece of legislation, is part of a continuing reform package and betterment programme.

Mr Boylan, the Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee, broadly welcomed the proposals in the Bill on behalf of his party, Sinn Féin. He said that taxi drivers would be most affected by the changes. Although I acknowledge that the Bill will have a significant impact on taxi drivers, I hope that it will be those consumers who use taxis who will notice most what it tries to achieve.

Mr Boylan also said that he hoped that the Committee would have a wider consultation and discussion on the change from a two-tier to a single-tier system of regulation. That change is a fundamental tenet of the Bill. I note that Sinn Féin did not respond to that point during the initial consultation and, to date, has not raised the issue in Committee. However, if the Member feels the need to raise it in Committee, it will be discussed further. However, as I said, the proposed change is fundamental to the Bill, and the Department is keen to proceed with it.

Mr Armstrong from Mid Ulster made two points. He acknowledged that his first on greater taxi-rank provision in rural areas, is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development. I look forward to the publication, in due course, of that Department's subregional transport plan, which, I understand, will address the issue of taxi ranks in provincial towns.

Secondly, he mentioned the importance of being able to identify licensed taxis quickly. The use of taxi licence plates will continue to identify taxis, and the Bill contains powers that will enable the Department to prescribe the format and display of the plates relating to the class of taxi and the type of service that it can provide. Roof signs will continue to be used on all taxis, and the Department is looking at the possibility of integrating taxi plates into the roof signs to improve identification and to protect the safety of taxi users. That is an important point.

David Ford, on behalf of the Alliance Party, said that legislation was needed. He was concerned about the delay in the introduction of regulations, particularly for consumers and those with disabilities.

I acknowledge that the provisions of the Bill will be commenced at different times. However, many of the provisions require detailed regulation, and the Environment Committee will need time to consider them. The

industry and taxi users must also be consulted, and, unfortunately, that takes time. However, it is only right that the legislation go through that process. The introduction of operator licensing, together with enforcement powers, will be the Department's priority as soon as the Bill is passed.

Ian McCrea hoped that one of the spin-offs from this legislation would be renewed confidence in the taxi system. I hope that that will be the case.

He also asked how the Bill would improve the accessibility of taxis to people with disabilities. We hope that the Bill will increase the number of accessible taxis and improve their availability and suitability. We aim to do that by requiring taxi operators to ensure that accessible vehicles account for a certain percentage of their fleet; by allowing only accessible taxis to stand for hire at taxi ranks at designated places such as airports, rail stations and bus stations; and by prescribing revised vehicle standards for accessible taxis.

The Member for Foyle Mr McCartney acknowledged the work that has been carried out by officials in my Department. I, too, put on record my appreciation of the work that the taxi review team has done in introducing such a comprehensive Bill. Mentioning his consultation with the North-West Taxi Forum, Mr McCartney asked about the impact of the legislation on taxi services in rural areas. I believe that the impact will be positive; as he will understand, I am keen to ensure that that is the case. People who live and work in rural areas will benefit from the wider, higher-quality provision. It is important to ensure that more accessible taxi services are provided in rural areas. Although people sometimes get the mistaken idea that taxis are a city phenomenon, people in rural areas also avail themselves of them a great deal.

Lord Browne of Belmont said that the Bill was timely and would tackle those less-than-reputable taxi drivers who take advantage of people who are very tired on nights out and who want to get home. He also mentioned his concern that it was important that the issue of separate fares be properly regulated. I thank him for being the only Member to refer to a provision in the Bill — as a legal person, I always like to hear that. He mentioned clause 16(2). That took me back, Wallace. Separate fares will be regulated at lower than the maximum fare, and it is important that those fares will be monitored under the Bill.

Wallace Browne also mentioned the concern about people being charged inflated fares off the meter. We share that concern. We hope that the penalty for failure to start the meter or for charging more than the regulated fare — it will attract a maximum fine on conviction of £1,000 — will bring such practices to an end.

Declan O'Loan asked for an assurance that the Department had had regard to objections that were

received during the consultation period. The Department very much took into account all the consultation responses — indeed, officials went out of their way to visit some of the provincial towns to hear what people on the ground had to say about taxi services — and some proposals were modified to reflect the objections that were received. For example, the need to retain roof signs was brought to our attention, and that is why the requirement for roof signs will continue.

On the issue of costing, Mr O’Loan asked why the explanatory and financial memorandum states that the Bill will not involve any costs. As a piece of enabling legislation, the Bill will not, in and of itself, attract any costs; the costs will be attracted by the regulatory regime. Each piece of subordinate legislation and each set of regulations will go before the Environment Committee and will also be subject to a regulatory impact assessment. It is important to bear that in mind.

Finally, Jim Shannon mentioned the cost of fares and said that he would be concerned — or perhaps unconcerned — that the taxi driver on ‘Hearts and Minds’ could not charge £12.50. We might see a change there, but I do not think that we will be too sorry about that. However, I am confident that the Bill will address the issues that were raised in the consultation responses, and I am happy that we have taken those issues on board.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and for the questions that they have raised. I am confident that the Taxis Bill will enable Northern Ireland to develop the necessary taxi policies to tackle illegal taxiing, to improve road safety and to provide better-quality services for all taxi users. My officials and I look forward to working closely with the Committee for the Environment as it scrutinises the Bill. Although some Members have been sceptical about that scrutiny, I have no doubt that it will be valuable. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill [NIA 4/07] be agreed.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Marshalled List of Amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move to private Members’ business, I wish to inform Members that it has been necessary to issue a corrigendum to the Marshalled List of Amendments. Copies of the corrigendum have been placed in the Rotunda and in Members’ pigeonholes. The amendment affected is that selected for the motion on the transformation fund. Members should, therefore, have ample time to consider the new information before that debate begins.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Pay Parity for Further Education Lecturers

Mr Deputy Speaker: This item was postponed at the sitting on Monday 18 June 2007, because we ran out of time. 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and has been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr Butler: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the campaign of further education lecturers for pay parity with teachers in schools; and calls for an end to further education lecturers' pay levels being decided by the Government's public sector pay policy.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Maidir leis an rún seo, tá súil agam go dtacóidh an Tionól le feachtas léachtóirí breisoideachais i ndiaidh na díospóireachta.

This motion concerns our supporting further education lecturers in their campaign for pay parity with school-teachers. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I hope that today's debate will help to resolve the issue.

Despite many negotiations with unions and employers, this lecturers' dispute over pay has lasted several years, and it has still not been resolved. Unless the dispute is resolved quickly, industrial action could escalate, and the running of our further education colleges could be disrupted. There have been significant and far-reaching changes in the further education sector. However, if this dispute is not resolved, it will have an impact on lecturers' morale and on the delivery of a first-class education system.

I recently attended an event at Belfast City Hall to celebrate a century of further education here. In that time, tens of thousands of people have left classrooms and examination halls the length and breadth of this country and have gone on to make important contributions to economic growth here. None of that would have been possible without the dedication and professionalism of the teaching staff in local further education colleges.

The further education sector is now recognised by Government as being key to the delivery of a thriving, first-class, buoyant economy. From 1 August 2007, the 16 existing further education colleges will merge to form six new area-based colleges. Those colleges will play an important role in supporting economic and social

life here. They will have multimillion-pound budgets and cutting-edge facilities in order to accommodate the skills and training that are necessary to deliver a first-class economy.

Further education colleges are at the heart of lifelong learning. They play a vital role in strengthening economic development, enhancing social cohesion and advancing individual skills and learning.

11.45 am

Further education colleges also provide a second opportunity for education for many citizens. They encourage those who are unemployed, socially excluded or disadvantaged back into the education system.

The continual excellence and achievements by further education colleges cannot be sustained against the backdrop of the ongoing industrial dispute. The continuation of the dispute will damage our important education sector. Good lecturing staff are already leaving the sector, while more highly-experienced teachers may not join it. Staff from the industrial and business sectors, who are well qualified and traditionally go into the further education sector, will be dissuaded to do so in future if it is characterised by poor industrial relations.

In considering the history and record of the further education sector, I hope that all Members will support the demand for pay parity by college lecturers and that the Executive will take action to settle the dispute. Central to the dispute is the fact that the British Treasury and its public-sector pay policy control pay increases for college lecturers. That policy prevents lecturers from being paid on a similar pay scale to teachers. Lecturers are becoming increasingly alienated because of the dispute, and this is happening at the very time that the further education sector faces massive restructuring and needs the goodwill of lecturers.

I am sure that all Members want college lecturers to secure their due entitlements, career structure and financial remuneration. Lecturers want more than sympathy from Ministers and the Assembly. They want a fair and just settlement to the pay dispute.

There is increasing recognition of the important role that further education performs in delivering a broad and balanced education curriculum. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) does appreciate the lecturers and teachers who deliver that education. However, there must be an effort, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), to come up with a solution to the long-running dispute. We need to move decisively to find a lasting settlement.

It is important to state the background to the dispute and how college lecturers are being unfairly treated in comparison with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. The Welsh Assembly has already agreed pay

parity for further education lecturers and schoolteachers in Wales. Lecturers in England and Scotland are outside the Treasury's public-sector pay policy. Only lecturers here have their pay arrangements subject to the public-sector pay policy.

The Department for Employment and Learning made a submission in support of pay parity to the public-sector pay committee at Westminster in February 2007, which was supported by Peter Hain, Maria Eagle and David Hanson. However, the committee rejected the submission and suggested that teachers here take a cut in their wages that would bring everyone down to the same level.

An independent inquiry into the pay of lecturers compared with that of teachers in other sectors was carried out in 2000 and produced the Horisk Report. It found that the earnings potential for lecturers was significantly below that of teachers in the schools sector and that teachers had a significantly greater opportunity for promotion, management roles and allowances. The Horisk Report recommended action to address those differentials.

The current situation in which all salary costs are governed by the Treasury's public-sector pay policy should be ended. The Executive should push for that and for the Department for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, to decide pay scales for the further education lecturers.

The dispute is not about a lack of finances, which the Minister for Employment and Learning has already made clear. The obstacle to a settlement is securing a political decision that justifies pay for further education lecturers here being outside Treasury guidelines.

The needs of the Treasury in London are dictating how this group of workers is treated — indeed, mistreated. Lecturers are being punished for no reason other than that their reasonable demands are not suited to the needs of the British Treasury. The Assembly and the Executive must assert their independence from policies set by the Treasury in this case. It is another example in which the needs of the people who live here are being filtered through the needs of the British Treasury.

A few weeks ago, there was a demand for lower corporation tax to bring it in line with corporation tax in the South. The Treasury rejected —

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Go ahead.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree with me that the salary of lecturers has dropped below the wage of other teachers? Is the Member also aware that some lecturers are actually getting lower wages than the three-year apprentices who attend the classes in which they lecture?

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for that information, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. Lecturers should be treated with equality and should be given the highest pay available in the sector — that is at the heart of this debate.

The Assembly and the Executive must resolve this matter to the satisfaction of our college lecturers. Economic dependence and the ability of the Assembly and the Executive to raise their own money and decide their own financial and fiscal policies in the interests of our citizens and not to the dictates of the Treasury in London are at the very heart of this dispute. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "schools" and insert

"; notes that Further Education lecturers' pay is currently restricted by HM Treasury's public sector pay policy; and urges the Executive, in light of this constraint, to secure urgently a mechanism to achieve pay parity."

I am happy to support the motion and to propose the amendment. It is important to stress from the outset that all Members fully support the excellent work of further education lecturers, and we support their claims.

It is strange, and no doubt the Minister will elaborate, that there appears to be no difficulty: the employees have accepted a settlement; the employers are happy with that settlement; and the money is available. One wonders what the problem is. Unfortunately, the problem has to do with a technical matter in how the Assembly deals with such issues and other pay processes. I realise that that is not a satisfactory answer for those who feel that their cries for help have gone unheeded.

Members realise that those who work in further education are the forgotten heroes in any debate on education. Members will be aware that I have long been involved in the manufacturing sector, which was trying to deal with issues such as industrial rating and corporation tax. However, we also recognised that an adequate skills base, particularly in the vocational area, is the most important factor needed to enable our society and economy to progress. That is why I was at the centenary celebration where we saw the effects of further education colleges through the years and also why I have been engaged with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) over the past year and a half, trying to develop the links that are needed between industry and those establishments.

However, buildings and links are of no consequence if those who are charged with looking after them are disillusioned and disenchanted, and we have already heard about the numbers of lecturers who are considering careers elsewhere. If those who are responsible for teaching our young people — and those who are not so young — leave the profession, it will have serious

consequences for our future well-being and will leave little hope for the rest of us.

I want to mention the amendment. I am aware that some people were concerned that the amendment that we originally suggested might have weakened what the motion intended. I assure Members that that was not our intention. Our intention was to strengthen the motion and to try to find something that could be done. In the spirit of co-operation — I realise that that does not always happen — we have sought agreement with all parties in the Chamber, and that is why we were happy to accommodate Sinn Féin's sentiments.

We now have an amendment that we believe is satisfactory, and I hope that Members from other parties will support us. It took quite a lot of work to ensure that everybody who agreed got a form of words with which they could also agree. It was not that we did not agree; it was the technicalities involved in getting everyone together.

The Ulster Unionist Party and others, I am quite sure, are totally committed to resolving this matter. One can have fine words and sentiments — we have all had many of those in the past — but this matter must be resolved urgently. One hesitates to say this, but it needs to be resolved now.

However, this Chamber cannot do that. The negotiation must be taken elsewhere. I urge lecturers and others involved in the further education sector to accept that we understand their frustration. When we were going into that debate, I saw the Minister standing for a long time outside Belfast City Hall talking to people to reassure them that we are genuinely sympathetic to their concerns and to their seeking to resolve them.

We are aware, of course, that when people get frustrated, when they feel that their voices are not being listened to, there is a temptation that can lead to some form of industrial action. Although I understand that frustration, I hope that we can get the matter resolved before it escalates. It is not only the lecturers whom we have to consider, but those in their charge, and the education of our people is fundamental to that as well.

I do not intend to labour the point, because there is general agreement, but I do hope that when we come to the winding-up speeches, we will be able to pick up on the points that Members will raise. It would be useful if we could send a message of solidarity to all further education lecturers.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Spratt): I support the amendment, because it is something that everyone on the Committee can support.

This matter has been a priority for the Committee, and we have had a series of meetings to enable us to understand the problem and work towards a resolution.

Before the return of devolution, the Chairperson and I, in designate roles, met with the trade union side on 1 May. At that meeting, the union put the case for a swift resolution to the problem forcibly and comprehensively. Indeed, since the return of devolution, the matter has arisen at most Committee meetings.

The Committee, like the parties involved, supports the principle of pay parity. What makes this issue unique, and somewhat bizarre, is that both management and employee sides are in complete agreement. The Committee is aware that the financing of any prospective pay settlement is not a stumbling block to resolution. Rather, the problem is that the Treasury's public-sector pay committee is blocking the settlement. That is the crux of the problem that we are facing.

The Committee has raised this issue with the Minister, Sir Reg Empey, and his officials on a regular basis and has asked to be kept fully informed of the situation so that it can advise and aid a resolution in any way possible.

The Committee also met with a senior delegation from ANIC on 6 June in a further attempt to gain an in-depth knowledge of the topic.

12.00 noon

We sympathise with the situation in which ANIC finds itself, especially at a time when colleges in Northern Ireland are facing radical overhaul. A resolution to the issue is therefore a matter of urgency, as any continuing dispute would get the process of change off to a very difficult start.

I have great sympathy for further education lecturers. The findings of the Horisk Report outlined the issues clearly. On average, college lecturers earn £3,400 a year less than schoolteachers doing similar work. Around 13,000 schoolteachers have reached point 3 on the upper pay scale for schoolteachers, some £2,600 per annum beyond the top of the lecturers' pay scale. There is a six-point incremental scale for teachers, compared with a 10-point scale for further education lecturers. There is no justification for such a disparity, and I reiterate my support for parity.

The pay disparity is having a major impact on the morale of further education lecturers, which will not be conducive to an effective and smooth transition from 16 further education colleges to the six super-colleges that are due to open on 1 August 2007. We cannot allow a situation that has resulted in ongoing industrial action to continue to disrupt the further education sector indefinitely, and to disrupt the education of students as a result.

In recent years, there has been a drift away from employment in further education towards employment in schools, universities or industry. Indeed, 14 key staff have left the sector in the last year. We should address the need for high-quality teaching staff rather

than watch them drift away from the sector. Conditions should be established to benefit those in the further education sector and to attract young professionals into it. The contribution made by further education lecturers to economic development in Northern Ireland should not be underestimated. That value should be reflected through remuneration and earning potential.

At a time when Northern Ireland is suffering from a shortfall in its skills base, the invaluable role of further education should be promoted, not demoralised. We therefore need to move forward, and the motion is helpful in that regard. I urge all those involved in the dispute to consider innovative ways to address the problem. I support the motion as amended.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú atá leagtha amach ar Riar na hOibre.

I am pleased to support the motion, as amended. Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Members who have brought the motion to the House.

As some Members will know, my former colleague Marietta Farrell — a college lecturer herself — first raised the issue of pay parity in the Transitional Assembly, and I was happy to support her. My colleagues and I have supported college lecturers on picket lines and have spoken at a rally in Belfast city centre.

Education reform in Northern Ireland will require greater sharing and collaboration between schools and further education colleges in order to deliver the entitlement framework. Further education colleges will be at the hub, if not the heart, of that collaboration, as colleges have the expertise and the range of courses and resources to complement what is available in schools. Indeed, schools would often otherwise struggle to provide such a range of subjects for their pupils.

Following the Government's acceptance of the recommendations of the Costello Report, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning launched a pilot vocational enhancement programme (VEP). That programme involves all further education colleges working with approximately 190 schools, providing professional and technical courses for more than 14,000 pupils.

That pilot is entering its fourth year, and, to date, the available evidence shows positive outcomes from that collaboration. Further education lecturers teach pupils from the schools involved, but they do so for considerably less remuneration. The Bain Report makes it abundantly clear that collaboration between schools and further education colleges will be a key component in arrangements for 14-year-olds to 19-year-olds. That collaboration will involve the movement of staff, a common and coherent education and training strategy for 14-year-olds to 19-year-olds, and teacher education arrangements that include a common set of standards

for qualified-teacher status across that age group, with staff development across schools and FE sectors. That should be done in a co-operative rather than competitive manner.

In order to prepare for future co-operation and collaboration, the discrepancy in salaries between schoolteachers and further-education lecturers should be removed. Although the Bain Report calls for collaboration, co-operation and the sharing of resources, one of the best resources that we have — our FE teachers — is treated differently to teachers in schools.

Lecturers in further education are currently loaned from their institution to local grammar schools to teach A-level subjects that it would not otherwise be financially viable for schools to offer. Those lecturers often come from industrial backgrounds, and in their own institutions teach their subjects to higher national diploma or degree level. They bring their experience and knowledge of their subjects and professional working lives to the classroom. That can only be of benefit to pupils.

Nevertheless, on average — I stress “on average” — they receive £3,000 a year less than the grammar-school teachers in the classrooms next door and the secondary-school teachers whose pupils they teach under the VEP.

If that anomaly is allowed to continue, it will be extremely difficult to achieve the levels of co-operation and collaboration that the Bain Report and education reform demand. It is unjust and unfair, and if that discrepancy is not removed, education reform will be much more difficult to achieve.

Many FE lecturers perform similar work to teachers. They teach the same range of academic and vocational courses that are taught in schools. They teach similar groups of students to teachers in secondary and grammar schools, and they are required to hold higher-level qualifications and to be teacher-trained.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party has no problem with supporting the original motion, or the proposed amended motion, in so far as it goes. However, we feel that it does not go far enough. I do not remember being consulted about the wording. Basil McCrea said that he spoke to all parties, but the Alliance Party is not aware of any such discussion.

Mr B McCrea: I meant to say, “attempted to talk”. I have just spoken to Mr Ford outside the Chamber, and I understand that the Alliance Party attempted to talk to both Mr Butler and me but that communications broke down.

The point that I was attempting to make was that there is no disagreement on the general sentiment but that we need to get ourselves in order. We did not know in advance that the Alliance Party had proposed an amendment. I offer my apologies for that misunderstanding.

Mr Lunn: No apology is required.

Mr McCarthy: Do not do it again. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: Further education lecturers are crucial to our education system, yet they do not get the recognition that they deserve. They are being short-changed by a situation that has been allowed to develop unnecessarily, to the extent that, on average, their salary lags £3,400 behind their schoolteacher counterparts.

Lecturers promote a crucial link between schools, skills and the workplace. To secure the sector's long-term future, it is absolutely essential that the best talent is attracted to it — lecturers as well as students. The pay differential and the deteriorating industrial relations that encourage lecturers and teachers away from the sector clearly affect that aim.

Lecturers have a right to feel frustrated; they have similar qualifications to, and undertake the same duties as, schoolteachers, and they operate in a sector that is crucial to the future of our economy, as evidenced by the success of the Republic's institutes of technology.

The Alliance Party wants the Minister and the Executive to rectify the situation and not push it further down the pipeline. Only last week, at a graduation ceremony at Lisburn Institute, I heard the Minister expressing his sympathy for, and some frustration with, the situation. I agree with the comments that he made that day: uniquely, the employers, the unions, his Department and every party in this House are all in agreement about the need for pay parity.

It appears that the Department has the funds to address pay disparity but feels bound by the UK public-sector pay policy. As Mr Butler said, the same obligations did not appear to stop the Welsh Assembly from dealing with the problem in May last year. That legislature went ahead and adjusted lecturers' pay. Are the powers of the Welsh Assembly any different or any more extensive than those of this Assembly? Perhaps the Minister can tell us.

One issue being discussed as part of the wider education debate is the need to make the vocational route just as attractive to pupils as the academic path, and to remove any perception that a particular school or college is of a lesser standard than another. The pay anomaly sends out a wrong message that must be corrected. My party calls on the Executive to address the pay problem, because an unintended incongruity has been created. Our Welsh cousins have shown the way to correct the pay disparity, if the Department for Employment and Learning can come up with the funds.

My party acknowledges the problems caused by making unplanned financial decisions, but, in this case, the funds are in the Department's budget. I encourage the Minister to take the action that he clearly wants to take and resolve the inequality. The Alliance Party

supports the motion as amended, but wishes that it went further and prompted the Minister to deal with the situation, notwithstanding the Treasury's public-sector pay policy.

Mr Ross: I am in total agreement with the general thrust of the debate, although I would have been unable to support the original text of the motion. I therefore welcome the fact that the Member opposite has amended his motion, in conjunction with the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Basil McCrea. I will be able to support the motion as amended.

Several Members have mentioned that college lecturers currently receive, on average, £3,400 less than schoolteachers for doing essentially the same job. That is particularly frustrating when college lecturers have seen teachers' salaries rise in recent years while theirs have remained virtually static. There has recently been a drift away from college lecturing in favour of teaching in schools and universities. Indeed, it is proving increasingly difficult to attract people into the further education sector — and why would people go there, if the pay is lower than in similar sectors?

There should be pay parity, and the fact that there is not is detrimental to the attitudes of many lecturers, which clearly impacts on students. Indeed, the chief executive of the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges, Mr John D'Arcy, commented that the ongoing industrial action:

“is having a significant impact on students, on service provision and on the longer term financial viability of colleges.”

Poor morale undoubtedly has a negative effect on teaching conditions, which, after all, is the most important factor for students attending further education institutions.

There is a wider need to address the relatively low status of further education lecturers, and a need to recognise their importance as Northern Ireland moves towards a skills-based economy. Indeed, from briefings received at meetings of the Committee for Employment and Learning in recent weeks, it has become abundantly clear that further education colleges and lecturers have a significant role to play in ensuring that jobseekers have the skills required for when they enter the workforce.

Today we are in a rather bizarre situation where employers and staff agree on pay structures and the money is available, yet because of a pay cap imposed by central Government at Westminster, the new pay structure cannot be applied.

I reiterate that I have the greatest sympathy for the plight of further education lecturers. However, there would be massive implications from any move to break away from the pay policy implemented by Westminster. The precedent that that would set would cause chaos, as other public-sector employees such as nurses and doctors would also seek pay reviews, resulting in the situation continuing on and on.

As Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, we must recognise that Her Majesty's Treasury has the final say on public-sector pay policy. We must, therefore, work within those limits. If we do not, there will be major implications for the Northern Ireland block grant. We must be sensible and recognise that our hands are tied on this issue; because of that, we have some sympathy for the Minister.

12.15 pm

In conclusion, I support the amendment to the motion in calling for the Executive to examine how pay parity can be achieved within the existing constraints, and I hope that the Minister and the Department will be able to find a resolution.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate, and the contributions made to it, and I commend my Sinn Féin colleagues for bringing the motion to the House. In particular, I welcome the following words in the amendment:

“to secure urgently a mechanism to achieve pay parity.”

According to Jim McKeown of the University and College Union (UCU), there are hundreds of FE lecturers teaching vocational courses in schools. Mr McKeown says that a teacher and lecturer may do exactly the same job, but the former will nevertheless earn £3,500 more than the latter.

Taking £3,500 as the differential for one year, that sum amounts to £14,000 over four years, which is a substantial sum of money. That means that for two people doing the same job over the short term of four years, one will earn £14,000 more than the other, which is not acceptable.

In 2000, the Horisk Report, to which my colleague Paul Butler referred, said that the earning potential of lecturers was significantly below that of schoolteachers and that lecturers had fewer opportunities for various allowances and promotions. In 2005, following agreement on many of the provisions in the Horisk Report, the employers and unions found that the Government had placed a cap on public-sector pay. In January 2007, the Secretary of State, Peter Hain, appeared to accept and approve pay parity — not for Northern Ireland, but for Wales. By March 2007, the FE colleges were involved in their seventh strike of that year. One can only imagine how low morale would be in those circumstances: seven strikes in less than a year, and still no resolution on pay disparity.

It is important to point out that the VEP means that FE staff will teach approximately 14,000 pupils annually. I have spoken to teachers who work as part of the Limavady Learning Partnership, which is an example of schools working together in a new education climate where collaboration is key. In Limavady, FE teachers teach the same pupils as

secondary-school teachers, but get paid £2,500 or £3,000 less than the teaching colleagues whom they work with in that partnership. The UCU argues that FE colleges have huge financial reserves; around £56 million in 2004-05. The UCU says that a mere fraction of that sum would be enough to settle the dispute.

Is there a willingness from governing bodies and the Department for Employment and Learning to settle the dispute? It may be appropriate that I declare an interest as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. DEL is reported not to oppose pay parity in principle, and ANIC is in favour of scrapping the pay cap. Taken at face value, those positions are positive, and there should be a genuine effort from all involved to sort out the inequality. We all want the new era for the FE sector to begin in harmony. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Newton: I support the amendment. It must be recognised that the further education lecturers' pay-parity dispute needs to be settled.

That dispute dates back to 2001, at which stage the trade unions felt that they had an agreement in principle with the employers. However, that perceived agreement was not honoured, and the pay cap was imposed.

The issue is festering, and, in the longer run, it will have a major impact on the morale of all those involved in the education and training of future key employees, who, as has already been said, will make a significant contribution to the well-being of the Northern Ireland economy. We are talking about those who are engaged in the vocational skills areas; the importance of apprentices for the future of Northern Ireland; the technical skills that will underpin the Northern Ireland economy; and the technologists that will deliver, develop and take forward future high-value-added products for the Northern Ireland economy. Where do those people come from? To a large extent, they come from the further education sector, where the lecturers are in dispute over pay parity.

I am sure that all Members, and those in the wider political establishment, have been lobbied by lecturers who live in their constituencies or who work in colleges in their constituencies. Indeed, anyone who has been lobbied has witnessed the high levels of frustration that lecturers are suffering.

It has been said that action has been taken in other parts of the UK — rightly or wrongly — to deliver pay parity. Reference has been made to the situation in Wales, where the importance of the matter and the need to deliver a settlement have been recognised.

I have already referred to the need to underpin our economy with vocational, technical and technological skills. Northern Ireland has no natural resources except its people, and we must recognise that it is vital for them to acquire skills to take part in, and make a future

contribution to, the Northern Ireland economy as it grows in intensity and operates in a global economy.

My colleague Mr Ross has already referred to the Minister's contact with lecturers and their trade unions, and one would have some degree of sympathy for that action. However, I also know the restrictions that all Departments are under to deliver an effective and efficient service to the whole of the Northern Ireland public in the days ahead. That will obviously cover all services, including the further education sector.

The Assembly has recognised the importance of the matter, and the positive role that further education lecturers play in the well-being of Northern Ireland. However, we must recognise the circumstances and constraints that exist in dealing with the matter — and I think that we have done that by generally accepting the amendment. At the same time, we must acknowledge the Assembly's willingness to see the matter through to a satisfactory conclusion. I support the amendment.

Mr McClarty: All sides of the House acknowledge that further education plays a fundamental role in the creation of a knowledge-based economy for Northern Ireland. The issue is not, therefore, merely another pay dispute. In many ways, there is no pay dispute. My hon Friend the Minister for Employment and Learning, the employers and the trade unions all agree that pay parity between further education lecturers and teachers should be established.

The motion goes to the heart of the economic future of Northern Ireland. The further education sector has a key role to play in delivering the skilled workforce that is required if our economy is to flourish in the twenty-first century. We all know the economic challenges that face Northern Ireland. We have all heard economists, employers and trade unions tell us that skills — the very skills that are delivered by the further education sector — are essential if we are to have a growing, modern, knowledge-based economy.

If that is the vision that we as an Assembly share, we need to demonstrate it in concrete, practical ways, one of which could be through working to ensure pay parity for further education lecturers. If we genuinely value the crucial economic role that is played by the sector, we will recognise that lecturers should have pay parity with teachers.

The lack of such parity sends out all the wrong signals about the further education sector and about choosing a career as a further education lecturer. It suggests an outdated view that further education is somehow second best and is of secondary importance to our economy. It is not; it is equally as important as schools and universities.

The Executive must find a way of working towards pay parity for further education lecturers. Of course, as an Assembly, we have responsibility for the entirety

of the public finances, and we recognise the many and varied public-expenditure priorities. However, if economic growth and the creation of a knowledge-based economy are priorities for this Assembly and Executive, we must recognise the role of the further education sector and we must secure pay parity for further education lecturers. I support the amendment.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank Paul Butler for tabling this motion and for his comprehensive presentation. Like Robin Newton, I acknowledge the positive and significant contribution made by so many lecturers in Northern Ireland. Quite a number of lecturers are in the Gallery today, and I welcome them.

Teachers in the further education sector are, for the most part, qualified to at least degree level. They hold, or are working towards, teaching qualifications through the University of Ulster. In addition to their academic qualifications, further education lecturers, particularly those in the trade sectors, have high levels of professional experience in their subject areas. I have to declare an interest in this matter, having done, quite a few years ago now, three years of City and Guilds courses at the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education.

I personally know several lecturers, and I know that taking industrial action has not been an easy decision for them. They do not want to cause any delay, frustration or hardship to their students. It is clear, given the circumstances, that their morale and motivation cannot be good at this time.

Further education is vital to the development of students' and workers' skills and is a vital gateway for people who want to re-enter the education system through lifelong learning. The further education sector is therefore essential to the social and economic regeneration of each region. I do not think that anyone can argue with that.

It is crazy that, as Claire McGill said, lecturers earn nearly £3,500 a year less than teachers. It is no wonder that their morale and motivation are so poor. If the sector is vital to the social and economic fabric of Northern Ireland, if the people who work there require similar qualifications to those of post-primary and university teachers, and if they are carrying out similar roles — as we all know they are — why are their efforts being rewarded with lower wages than those of their counterparts?

There is evidence that the recruitment and retention of college lecturers is becoming more difficult. In the long run, that could result in degradation of the quality of teaching and research. That would obviously have a negative impact on educational, social and economic outcomes — the key aims of our education effort.

Imagine if this were the private sector, with one company paying less to its workers than another. What would be the result in the long run? The company that

was attempting to pay less for the same skills would ultimately lose quality and its market position. Its product would be inferior, and everyone would know it.

That logic is self-evident in the private sector, and the same logic must apply to the public sector.

12.30 pm

It is essential that the dispute be resolved as quickly as possible — especially before the merger of colleges on 1 August 2007. That, and the unsettled pay dispute, will be a recipe for disaster. The goodwill of lecturers made this a reasonable year for their students; however, goodwill may become scarce in August if there is no resolution to the dispute in sight. Demoralised and demotivated lecturers can hardly be expected to do the highly professional job that we have come to expect of them.

We cannot afford to send a signal to lecturers and students that the education provided by further education colleges is of lower quality and is not as valued as that provided by schools and universities. The current high standards must be maintained in the long run. It is only the commitment of further education staff to their students that maintains the high quality of education across Northern Ireland. That goodwill can be stretched only so far, and for so long, before the most committed teachers in further education simply move to another sector.

Quality across our educational system must be maintained at the highest level possible. Most people would find that acceptable. There is no doubt that people who deliver education, whether in schools, colleges or universities, should be properly rewarded for their work. That financial reward should be commensurate with their qualifications, experience and effort.

I urge the Minister and the Assembly to take whatever steps are necessary to resolve the dispute as a matter of urgency.

Some Members: Hear, Hear.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion as amended. I received training in technical colleges at different stages in my life. First, in my post-primary education, I received training in woodwork and metalwork at a local technical college. Later, I achieved an O level in technical drawing. It is hard to believe that, even at that stage, the teachers who were teaching academic courses were on a different pay scale to those lecturers teaching non-academic courses in the same college. I valued both types of training. As my education progressed into the engineering field, I increasingly valued the technical skills of those in engineering and the skills of those involved in crafts.

There is no justification for the differences in remuneration between lecturers and teachers. The emphasis on lifelong learning encourages people to continue their education throughout their lives. Why should those teaching people who have left secondary education be paid less?

The new post-primary curriculum changes may provide an opportunity for the Executive to examine the issue, and I will return to that later. I have experience of briefings on the new learning partnerships that are being extended across Northern Ireland. As other Members have said, that has resulted in further education lecturers going into local schools and delivering courses to pupils. Again, there is a huge inequality, in that those lecturers, even though they are teaching recognised courses, and teaching the same pupils, are paid less than the teachers employed at those schools. That cannot be allowed to continue.

It is widely recognised that we need to increase the private sector in Northern Ireland and that there is often a shortage of skills in craft and technical areas. If we wish to encourage more people into those types of training and courses, we must value those courses and the lecturers who teach them. We must raise, as a society, the significance and the importance of the further education sector and those who teach in it. There should be equal recognition of the training of young people and adults, at whatever their stage in life. One group should not be treated as second class.

From reading the briefings, I have discovered that 66% of teachers receive additional responsibility allowances, but only 25% of lecturers receive those allowances. Why is that the case?

The purpose of some of the negotiations that took place was to try to change that situation and encourage the adoption of a fairer pay policy. It is important that there are no such inequalities.

This is not the Hain Assembly, or a local council complaining to the Northern Ireland Office. We must recognise our authority and our responsibility, and work within our remit and with the cards that we have been dealt. We should not walk away from here having called for action while we pat ourselves on the back, knowing that nothing will happen. The amendment that has been selected improves the original motion, and at least outlines a planned set of actions, which, it is to be hoped, will have a result.

The Assembly's Research Service has been helpful in providing the details of the business case submitted by the Department for Employment and Learning to the public-sector pay committee at Westminster, which stated:

"Pay proposals for each pay round and for each staff group in the FE sector are submitted for approval each year in a collective pay remit for the sector, prepared, on behalf of the Colleges, by the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges."

Pay proposals must gain clearance from the Department for Employment and Learning and approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel before they are submitted to the public sector pay committee. That process involves several Departments, and it would be

helpful if we knew the extent of the public sector pay committee's authority and the potential penalties that it can impose if that authority is breached. How did the Welsh manage to obtain a settlement while we did not? Opportunities exist for a way forward, however, and it is to be hoped that those will be provided in the context of the proposed changes to the education system.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the debate, and the SDLP will endorse the motion as amended. I spoke recently to Irish Government officials on a range of North/South matters. Interestingly, they observed that, although the corporation tax reduction was, and will continue to be, a catalyst for economic growth, the Republic of Ireland was being marketed internationally as much for its skills base as for its levels of corporation tax.

The millions — now billions — that have been invested in research and development and skills development through the Irish Republic's national development plan serve to underline the importance that should be attached to skills development in the North if we are to attract economic opportunity for all. There is much to be learned from the Republic of Ireland's experience when acknowledging and promoting our FE sector.

The FE lecturers' pay dispute is an acute issue. Members will know that the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC is hosting an event to promote Northern Ireland, and that event is bigger than some might realise. It is big enough to justify the presence of four or five Ministers, including the Deputy First Minister, in the next few days. The Minister for Employment and Learning may also attend the event. How will we answer potential economic investors who want to come to Northern Ireland but ask whether Northern Ireland has the skills base to meet their manufacturing needs? Should our response be that we do not have the skills base, and that those in the FE sector who provide those skills are in dispute over their pay and conditions? That is an incongruous position for this part of the world to be in, at a time when we hope to receive an economic boost as a result of the emerging new political order.

I have several questions for the Minister for Employment and Learning to try to move the issue of pay parity forward. First, if the equal treatment of FE lecturers and the advancement of a skills base for economic development — and development overall — in the North are such crucial issues, are the Executive making them a matter of negotiation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Are those matters being discussed, as we heard yesterday from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in and around other issues as part of continuing negotiations on corporation tax?

Are the Executive working with the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Department of

Finance and Personnel to take forward negotiations with the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Pay parity for FE lecturers is too important not to be part of such negotiations. Given the length of time that has been spent in trying to resolve the issue — something that fell originally to the management of the further education sector in the North — FE lecturers need to hear today that this issue will be part of negotiations with the Chancellor to progress matters generally in the North.

The DUP Member Alastair Ross flagged up another issue. Is there any resistance in DEL or DFP to getting this matter resolved? It was interesting that the DUP Member said that although pay parity was important, it could not be resolved at the price of breaking the pay-policy review system because the implications for the North would be too great. His comment was interesting, and it begs the question: is there resistance in Government, including in DFP, to asking that the issue of pay parity be resolved, because to do so will be at the price of breaking the pay review system? The Minister should report to the Assembly on his latest conversations with the Secretary of State — who might not be the Secretary of State much longer — on this matter.

If Wales and Scotland are not part of the pay review system, is it not the case, legally and politically, that regardless of what action the Exchequer might take, the Executive could impose pay parity?

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am grateful to those who moved the motion and the amendment, and to those who have participated in the debate.

It is fair to say that it would be rare to find almost unanimity around the Chamber where an industrial dispute is involved. However, I do not need to be persuaded that FE lecturers in Northern Ireland should have pay parity with schoolteachers. I fully support the principle of pay parity for FE lecturers — lecturers and schoolteachers do essentially the same job and should enjoy equal status. It is wrong that one group should be rewarded at a lower level than the other. However, it is inaccurate to say that all FE lecturers in Northern Ireland are paid less than their counterparts in schools. Although the overall remuneration package for schoolteachers tends to be higher than that for FE lecturers at an individual level, the differential can vary widely.

However, the average FE lecturer, unlike a schoolteacher, does not have the potential to enhance his or her basic pay through progression on an advanced teaching scale, or through the payment of management allowances for undertaking additional responsibilities. An FE lecturer's salary scale is also longer, and, therefore, it takes more time to reach the top of the scale.

As a result of their pay differences with schoolteachers and the rejection of their claim for pay parity by the Treasury's public sector pay committee, FE lecturers,

understandably, feel undervalued and aggrieved. Poor relative pay for FE lecturers, when compared with that of schoolteachers, does not affect the importance of their role in supporting Northern Ireland's economic development, in particular the enhancement of the skill base and the implementation of the post-primary review. Increasingly, FE lecturers are required, on the one hand, to support the skills needs of employers, and, on the other hand, to teach schoolchildren the technical curriculum that is now available under the educational entitlement framework.

Fewer than two weeks ago at Belfast City Hall, there was the unwelcome paradox: a variety of guests from all walks of life, including myself and other Members, were there to celebrate 100 years of success in FE in Northern Ireland while, outside, the people charged with its day-to-day delivery were forming a picket. I made reference to that point in my remarks at the City Hall.

12.45 pm

In any college that I have visited, I have endeavoured to engage with the lecturers' unions, and, when asked, I met their representatives. I have brought the unions and the employers together in my office, and I am conscious of the need to resolve the matter. Many Members mentioned that need, and I hope that they will forgive me if I do not respond to their individual comments. It is accepted that there is a strong argument for pay parity.

Mr Attwood asked whether I had had discussions with the Secretary of State. The answer is yes. I asked him to contact his colleague, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Stephen Timms, on my behalf, which he did. I received his response a few days ago, and I am perusing it. In reply to Mr Attwood, the Secretary of State and I are actively involved in discussions.

I have brought the matter of pay parity to the Executive on several occasions, and I pay tribute to the staff in my Department and in the Department of Finance and Personnel for their consistent work on the subject. They know how important the issue is to Northern Ireland, and, together, we are working hard to resolve it. Hopefully, the two Departments will complete the work on the matter in the next week, and we will then contact the parties involved in the dispute to consider steps that might be taken to move the issue forward.

The Treasury has imposed a national pay policy, and, in a note to Peter Hain, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury pointed out that Finance Ministers from the UK decided at a quadrilateral meeting last year to apply the policy generally. For a variety of reasons, the group of lecturers involved in this dispute fall under that national pay policy.

Reference has been made to the Welsh model. In Wales, the linkage between lecturers' pay and pay councils pre-dates the formation of the public-sector pay committee. However, nothing is ever as straightforward

as it seems. There is pay parity in Wales, but individual lecturers' earnings vary considerably. We have also considered the situation in those parts of the UK in which there is individual plant, as opposed to collective, bargaining.

Many Members have used the word "anomaly". There is no question that this situation is an anomaly. That is the reason why I am seized by the necessity to work urgently on the matter, and the reason why my Department has put in a lot of effort in recent days. Normally, we would not be involved at all; it should have been a matter between employers and employees. The Department is involved only because of the national pay policy. Neither is it a matter of money; the money is there to pay the claim.

I am indebted for the advice, help and support that we have received from the Committee for Employment and Learning. I noted, and echo, the remarks made by Mr Spratt on behalf of the Committee, who pointed out that it has taken evidence on the matter. The pay dispute is a bizarre situation that everyone agrees should be settled: employers, unions, the Department, the Committee, and everyone in the Chamber. No Member has said that they are not happy with the proposals to pay the claim. However, the fact remains that we are dealing with a national issue.

Alex Attwood pointed out that people say that we have sanctions. What does that mean? We do not quite know, but we know what it could mean.

Quite clearly, it could have an impact on the Northern Ireland block grant. It could even have implications for the UK on a much wider basis: if a policy were breached here with repercussive effects in other parts of the UK, it could be argued that Northern Ireland was to blame for a UK-wide increase. The Department must steer through all kinds of issues.

I want the House and lecturers to understand that the Department is not playing Scrooge. I have listened carefully to Members' arguments on the benefits to the economy of the output of those lecturers. That is where policy is moving. At present, it is a fundamental policy, which has gained ground during the years of devolution: the link between further education, higher education and the economy is constantly growing. Those sectors work together much more closely now than they did several years ago. Undoubtedly, further education is considered fundamental to the economy. That point has been extremely well made throughout the Chamber.

Although it is not the main purpose of my visit to the United States, I intend to visit the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. People who work in Newry and Kilkeel Institute of Further and Higher Education and Omagh College of Further Education, for example, are participating in the exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution, which aims to sell Northern Ireland to an

international audience. I will be on a visit to North Carolina, a state that has a similar history to that of Northern Ireland and where further education has been the driving force of a revival of the economy.

The public sector pay committee was made aware of the anomaly between further education lecturers' pay and that of schoolteachers. However, it took the view that whatever the merits of pay parity, it should not be obtained by setting aside current limits on public-sector pay increases. Indeed, as Mr Butler and Mrs McGill will know, it went further and said that it could accept the argument for parity but that the way to achieve that was to bring down teachers' pay. I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I do not believe that that was a genuine, serious suggestion: in fact, it was disingenuous. I regret that that comment was made. Realistically, how could anyone make a stand in favour of it?

Where does the situation go from here? College employers, unions and the Department are agreed that there is little merit in resubmitting the business case to the public-sector pay committee. That decision was made at a meeting that I convened some weeks ago. Although there are recruitment problems, the Department is unable to point to any that are sufficiently significant or widespread to merit a change in the committee's case.

That brings me to the second part of the amendment, which calls for the inception of a "mechanism to achieve pay parity". I wish it were that simple. However, devolved Administrations are required to consult with the Treasury on pay issues. The Department of Finance and Personnel has that responsibility. Through its statement of funding policy, the former Lord Chancellor's Department — now the Department for Constitutional Affairs — has stated that it regards pay policy as a key macroeconomic variable over which the Treasury retains control. Therefore, the Assembly is not master of its own house on that matter. However, it seeks to be as creative as possible.

Although they make up a group of workers not traditionally known for their militancy, lecturers have already, as has been referred to earlier, held seven days of strike action. That is unprecedented. I do not want to see that continue. There is also ongoing industrial action. With the new super-colleges coming into being on 1 August 2007, that is deeply regrettable. However, I understand their frustrations.

The Department wants to support the claim and has the money to pay for it. However, it cannot ignore what the Treasury says. We will continue to do all that we can to resolve the dispute as quickly as possible. The Department wants to see movement on pay parity as soon as conditions permit.

On completion of the two Departments' work, we will inform the employers and unions of the situation, and it is to be hoped that an offer will be put on the

table for the pay year 2006-07. That would cover from September of last year. It will be September again in few months, but we are talking about the 2006 claim: the 2007 claim has not even been mentioned.

Members must understand, therefore, that we are almost a year behind and that lecturers have been without that pay award since 1 September 2006. September is approaching again, and a new claim will, of course, be submitted for the following year. I assure Members that the Department for Employment and Learning — in conjunction with the Committee and others in the House — is doing all that it can, as quickly as possible, to resolve the dispute.

The Department understands that there is to be a Cabinet reshuffle at Westminster. We do not know whether a new Chancellor will adopt a different approach to that of the outgoing Chancellor, but considering where the current Chancellor is going, it would not be very wise to put too much money on there being a change of approach.

The Department is fully aware of the further education lecturers' situation. I appreciate the comments that have been made in the debate, and I apologise for not dealing with every Member's contribution. However, so many Members made the same valuable points.

I know that the employment and learning sector is at the cutting edge of attempts to revive Northern Ireland's economy. Alex Attwood made the valid point that the Republic's success lay in its ability to capitalise on its good professional and technical education. Even the folk in Invest NI, and others who work closely with the Department, are saying the same. We hear the same message everywhere we go, and I am fully seized of its urgency. I will do everything that I can in the days ahead to try to resolve the situation, and I have no doubt that I can continue to rely on the support of Members in that endeavour.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet as soon as the Assembly suspends for lunch. The debate will continue when we resume. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The sitting is resumed. We shall conclude the debate on pay parity for further education lecturers.

Mr B McCrea: I hope that it is in order to state that the debate has been very interesting but that, during the past hour and a half in the canteen, I have been put straight on a range of matters by people from other places. I am now particularly well informed about a range of matters.

The debate has been most useful. I was glad to hear from the Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Employment and Learning, who stressed the urgency of the matter and pointed out that key staff were already beginning to leave the further education sector. Dominic Bradley raised the issue of the skills strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds, and spoke of how important that will be as we go forward. He also highlighted the crucial role that the further education colleges and their staff will play in implementing that strategy. That is a very important point, which should be borne in mind by all Members.

I noted the comments of Mr Lunn, who said that he supported the motion and the amendment. I wish to make the point that some people had difficulties with the motion — not with its sentiment, but with its practicalities. I was grateful to Mr Ross, who succinctly outlined the problems that some colleagues from the Department of Finance and Personnel may have in approaching the Treasury. I realise that that will cut little ice with our friends who lecture in further education colleges, but it is a matter that must be confronted because to do otherwise risks our being made an example of by those across the water. That could lead to a possible reduction in our block grant. We must take those points on board. It is excellent that we seem to have cross-party support for the amendment.

Claire McGill complimented Sinn Féin on proposing the motion. I stress that it is important to build a cross-party consensus on this matter. It is not enough to state that one side or the other has done everything. We must work together because that is the right thing to do. Mrs McGill did, however, raise the very important issue that there is a salary differential of £3,500 between teachers and lecturers who do exactly the same job. That puts some figures on the problem. At lunchtime, I learned that a gentleman with eight years' experience as a lecturer is earning less than his daughter, who has two years' experience of teaching. That demonstrates the basic inequality of the position with which we are faced — it is just not fair. We must fix that position.

I listened with some interest to the hon Member Robin Newton, who talked about apprentices, technology, and the agreement in principle that was reached between

employers and the trade unions. I accept that Mr Newton has much experience, particularly in the plastics sector. He is knowledgeable about these matters, and his contribution was very useful. He highlighted a fundamental point that we must address when he stated that Northern Ireland has limited natural resources — we have no oil, gas, gold or suchlike. The only resource that we have is the people of Northern Ireland. It is important for us to build on the skills of those people if we are to compete in a modern world.

Pat Ramsey mentioned that many people who are lecturing are qualified to degree level, although they may still be working towards their teaching qualifications. That point must be borne in mind. Many of those lecturers work to the highest possible professional standards and are doing a really fantastic job, for which they deserve to be properly remunerated.

One point that has been raised is that we do not seem to have got the message across on the difficulties with recruitment. That point led on from something that Mr Ramsey said.

The reason for that is largely due to the dedication of teachers in further education colleges. That dedication has been taken advantage of, and they have been used and abused because they stick at the job for a long time. If this situation were taking place in the private sector, people might well have gone elsewhere.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time has elapsed.

Mr B McCrea: I beg your pardon. I thought that I had 10 minutes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No. Five minutes are allowed for the winding-up speech on the amendment.

I call Mr Paul Butler for the winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Butler: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Much has been said on this topic, and it should not take me 10 minutes to make the winding-up speech.

Although the motion, as worded, has not been accepted, it is important that today's debate has produced consensus, and that is why Sinn Féin has accepted the amendment.

The further education sector is the most integrated sector in education and has the most balanced workforce. That has been reflected in the Chamber today, and all parties have made positive contributions on the need for pay parity with schoolteachers. I welcome that; and I welcome the comments from the Minister, Reg Empey, on the issue. He is trying to resolve the situation.

Although Members have spoken at length about further education lecturers, we have not said much about the students in the colleges or how the issue will impact on them. Further education colleges are

shutting down for the summer. However, in August, when the colleges are due to merge, lecturers will be engaged in the mergers. The sector is not characterised by militancy nor is it prone to industrial action, yet, as some Members mentioned, lecturers are reluctant to participate in that work. They have been greatly frustrated. Other aspects of that frustration are evident from the fact that lecturers are not co-operating with staff in the colleges and are not filling in reports.

It would be good to have the pay issue resolved, so that all of the other issues could also be resolved and colleges could get back to work. I am sure that every Member wants to see that.

As I have already said, tens of thousands of further education students have left examination halls and colleges to contribute to the economy here or in other countries. Some are now industrialists and are leading lights in the economy here. We want that process to continue.

Reference was made to how the South of Ireland has used its further education sector to further its economy. We want that to happen here.

I welcome the fact that Members from all the parties — and there were quite a few — support the spirit of the motion. Sinn Féin would have preferred the wording of the motion to have called for an end to further education lecturers' pay levels being decided by the Government's public-sector pay policy. That is the issue: lecturers here want to know why those in England, Scotland and Wales can get pay rises while they have been singled out.

Another issue is the comparison with the pay of schoolteachers, who last September were awarded a 2.5% rise and are due another one shortly. The gap between the pay of further education lecturers and schoolteachers is widening.

I hope that Members will be sending out a clear message today. When the Assembly was restored on 8 May, lecturers wanted to see this issue being debated in the Assembly. Issues such as this can now be debated here — Peter Hain and other direct rule Ministers no longer fly in to make decisions and then fly out again. Members can help to settle this dispute.

Once more, I welcome the fact that Reg Empey is doing his best to resolve this dispute.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the campaign of further education lecturers for pay parity with teachers in schools; notes that Further Education lecturers' pay is currently restricted by HM Treasury's public sector pay policy; and urges the Executive, in light of this constraint, to secure urgently a mechanism to achieve pay parity.

Transformation Fund

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

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 for the winding-up speech.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Executive to consider making available a transformation fund, similar to that in England, Scotland and Wales, to support the professional development of the childcare and early education workforce in Northern Ireland.

I want to place on record my gratitude to the Business Committee for allowing the motion to be debated today. I bring this motion to the House out of concern for this important matter, which will ultimately shape our future workforce in Northern Ireland.

It should concern every Member that there is no — and I emphasise the word “no” — training and development strategy for people working with young children. However, just recently, £250 million was allocated for that type of training in England and Wales. Why should this part of the United Kingdom be different? Surely we value future generations just as much as do others.

I want to draw to the Assembly's attention the remarks of the Children's Minister, Beverley Hughes, on 13 February 2006. She was setting out the next steps in delivering a world-class children's workforce, including the development of an integrated qualification framework, and she said:

“We need to set our sights high and aim to develop a truly world-class workforce if we are to improve outcomes for all our children and young people, and reduce inequalities between the most disadvantaged and the rest.”

A transformation fund has the potential to improve the outcomes for children in later childhood and in their adult lives. It is also the case that the children's workforce has a central role to play in improving the skills of our overall workforce.

Part of the aim is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of graduate-level early-years professionals in Northern Ireland. It is also essential to invest in the skills development of the early-years workforce below graduate level. Increased training should be available to those working with disabled children and children with special educational needs.

The findings of the recent pre-primary research study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) reinforced the

importance of the education of early childhood teachers. The study found that children fare significantly better in language-skills development with teachers who have achieved a higher level of education.

Currently in Northern Ireland, staff who work in community or voluntary preschools have to pay for their own ongoing training and professional development, and there is a significant disparity between their pay levels and those in the statutory sector. It is essential that we equip the childcare and early-education workforce in Northern Ireland to match those developments. It will then contribute to an overall strategy for children's services that can deliver positive and better outcomes for children and families, and reduce inequalities for children, young people, families and communities.

In addition to the expansion of graduate qualifications in the childcare sector, emphasis must also be placed on improving practical-based qualifications among the general childcare workforce. In Northern Ireland, only 9% of childminders hold a recognised childcare qualification, while just 27% have completed introductory training. An integrated qualifications framework would do much to enhance career development, job satisfaction and self-esteem in the profession.

Investment in our children's future will reap financial and educational benefits for them throughout their lives.

2.45 pm

There are approximately 1,185 childcare staff in Northern Ireland. The average salary of a full-time playgroup leader is £16,623 per annum, while the average salary of a full-time playgroup assistant is £11,967 per annum. Those figures compare with annual salaries of approximately £42,000 for a nursery school principal and £33,000 for a nursery school teacher. Although those employed in playgroups may not have undertaken the same level of study as those employed in nursery schools, it is still a huge difference for what is often the same work. To recruit and retain high-calibre staff, it is important that that disparity be addressed, ensuring that all staff feel valued.

In England, a transformation fund of some £250 million, which was launched in April 2006 and will run until August 2008, supports two major areas. Of that £250 million, £51.8 million has been set aside to cover the costs of course development and financial support for the new early-years professional status (EYPS) qualification, which is being led and managed by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC).

The rest of the transformation fund — about £200 million — has been allocated to local authorities to support the professional development of the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early-years childcare sector. That development will concentrate on five delivery strands: quality premiums; recruitment incentives;

home-grown graduate incentives; full level 3, 4 and 5 training; and support for additional-needs training.

The fund supports the transformation of quality in early-years education by establishing training routes towards a new graduate-level status for early-years professionals; by providing financial support that allows early-years staff to undertake training towards EYPS; and by supporting progress towards the Government's objective of ensuring that, by 2015, all full day-care settings employ a graduate with EYPS to lead work with children and parents.

The transformation fund is working towards the Government's objective by providing a recruitment incentive, a quality premium, and a home-grown graduate incentive for eligible full day-care providers in the PVI sectors. The fund also provides greater parity between the maintained and PVI sectors by boosting the qualifications of early-years staff in the PVI sectors to create a high-quality and diverse workforce.

The transformation fund is investing in training and development to increase the qualifications of staff employed in the PVI sectors, particularly by enhancing the number of staff with level 3 qualifications and by training more staff to work with children with additional needs.

Similar initiatives have been introduced in the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom. In 'Building a Better Scotland — Spending Proposals 2005-2008: Enterprise, Opportunity, Fairness', which was published on 29 September 2004, Scottish Ministers set a target to increase the number of qualified early-years workers from 66% in 2003 to 85% by 2009. Resources will be directed at investing in infrastructure for the delivery of workforce training and development. That will include funding for IT or the setting-up of training rooms or facilities; money to fund staff to replace those staff who are attending training courses; and matched funding for European structural funds applications for the delivery of accredited qualifications.

Mr Campbell: The Member mentioned the Scottish Executive's strategy, which is called 'Building a Better Scotland'. Will he recommend that the Minister follow suit and launch a strategy called 'Building a Better Ulster'?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Lord Morrow: I thank my colleague for making that point. I have absolutely no problem with his suggestion. I see that the Minister is smiling: no doubt she agrees with Mr Campbell.

In Wales, the Flying Start initiative is targeted at infants and children up to three years of age in the most deprived communities.

Key measurable outcomes for children are language development, social and emotional development,

physical health and early identification of high needs. In order to target positive outcomes, the main elements of the programme are prescriptive and draw on a menu of options that have been demonstrated to be effective. At the centre of the programme is quality part-time childcare for all two-year-old children in the target areas. Trained professionals deliver that childcare, which focuses on child development and on learning through play. Providers include the maintained sectors, private and voluntary nurseries, playgroups and childminders.

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

Mr Butler: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“, and to consider this matter in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and in light of the other budgetary pressures facing the Executive.”

Go raibh maith agat. Although Sinn Féin agrees with the broad thrust of the motion for a transformation fund to be made available, it must be set in the context of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and budgetary constraints.

We all want our children to have the best possible start in life. I want improved outcomes for all our children. In order to achieve that, as has already been said, we need a workforce that is committed to the children that it teaches and helps to develop, especially in the early years of their lives. We need a workforce that inspires trust and respect from parents and carers as well as from the children with which it works.

The transformation fund is a good concept that has worked in Britain, where it has been used to bring about quality early-years provision, which, in turn, has meant better outcomes for children and their families through investment in a better qualified early-years workforce. It is clear from the aims and objectives of that fund that a qualified workforce has a central role to play in achieving better outcomes for children and in making as great a difference to their life chances as possible.

The transformation fund in Britain is designed to bring about a better-qualified workforce that can be retained — an important element to be considered — and better developed, and that offers better career progression.

In the North, we know that the quality of experience during a child's early years has a significant impact on his or her outcomes in later childhood and adult life. If it were to be established here, I would support the aims of the transformation fund in its attempts to invest in the skills and development of an early-years workforce. In particular, increased training for those who work with children who have disabilities or special educational needs would be a most welcome step.

The transformation fund aims to stimulate the supply of early-years professionals through the development, delivery and accreditation of appropriate training routes

for those who work in the early-years sector. It provides financial support for staff in the early-years workforce and invests in training and development to increase the skills and qualifications of staff employed in the private, voluntary and independent sectors. However, the Executive would have to consider the comprehensive spending review and other budgetary constraints before making available a transformation fund.

Research here has shown that the rate of child poverty, which is relevant to the motion, is equal to, if not higher than, that in the rest of the Britain. Between one third and one quarter of all children here will grow up in poverty. There is evidence to suggest that the poverty rate here exceeds that of elsewhere in these islands. Research has also shown that we have a lower level of childcare provision here than that in Britain. Good quality early-years provision can combat the disadvantage that children who live in poverty face. High-quality preschool provision has been shown to benefit children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In England, the Government have set the ability to access affordable childcare provision as a target, and that is an important element of their transformation fund. That target was seen as a central plank of the Government's campaign to tackle child poverty.

In the South of Ireland, €218 million has been allocated to childcare programmes since 2000. Among other things, that money has been used to provide capital grants assistance to not-for-profit and private childcare providers and to community-based groups in areas of social disadvantage. It is said that investment in a transformation fund would cost in the region of only £5 million a year. That point is relevant to our amendment.

In Britain, the Government also introduced the Childcare Bill to try to improve the provision of childcare. That is a relevant point that should be considered. The resulting Childcare Act 2006 that applies in England highlights the importance of a needs-based approach to childcare policy and provides that an adequate number of childcare places should be available for working parents. In conjunction with that Act, the British Government also produced a 10-year strategy for childcare in England and an action plan for the implementation of that strategy. A parallel strategy and action plan are needed here to improve the provision of childcare facilities.

Government policy on childcare provision should be seen in the context of a transformation fund, which could also help to establish a strategic approach to the development of early-years provision here. Such a fund would mean that money would be spent in the most cost-effective way and would bring about a first-class early-years-education sector to give our children the best possible chance in starting out in life. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I am on record, as is the Ulster Unionist Party, as being extremely supportive of a strategy for nought- to seven-year-olds. We have a conundrum of numeracy and literacy difficulties in areas of high social deprivation, while an excess of teachers are coming out of our teacher-training schools. We could deal with that conundrum by employing that excess of teachers in a more timely and appropriate manner and in a way that uses their skills and professionalism. That would present an opportunity not only to make significant reductions in our primary-school class sizes, but to increase the provision of dedicated pre-primary school facilities for children up to seven years old.

The budgetary constraints to which the previous contributor referred are a genuine issue, but it is beginning to sound as though we are hearing the same old story on every issue that we discuss. We accept that we cannot spend beyond our means, and I know that the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel will consider these matters, but if we really want to bring about a step change in Northern Ireland by doing something dramatic, innovative and creative, there is nothing on which we could better spend our money than trying to address the inequities that arise when our children do not get a proper education.

I hear the plaudits that have been given to Scotland and I commend the work that has been done there, but we should also refer to other parts of the world where people have taken a different approach. In particular, we should consider how things are done in Finland, where all public-sector day-care centres are staffed by people of graduate level, as well as of other levels. Not only do 60% of Finnish children attend such day-care centres by the age of three, but more than 25% attend them by the age of one. I do not necessarily advocate that that is the right way to go for Northern Ireland, but it is important to consider the investment that that society has placed in the education of its young children. It comes as no surprise that Finland is ranked number one by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development for numeracy, literacy and the general standard of its education. On certain issues, we should consider that.

I should also mention in passing that Finland takes a holistic approach. People are not required to put their children into a day-care centre; people can — and 25% of parents do — choose not to put their children into such centres. Parents can educate their children at home and the Government pay them money for doing so.

When a woman has her first child, she is given 75% of her salary to stay at home to look after the child for a year.

3.00 pm

All those issues cannot be solved via a debate. However, they are an indicator of the huge steps that must be taken if underperformance in the education system is to be tackled seriously. I am in favour of increased professionalism. All education reports state that if people in the childcare workforce are well educated and professionally trained, their work will be better.

Some people simply have an aptitude for working with children, and it is important that they are not thrown on to the scrap heap. Childcare should be about fun, play and allowing children to learn in the right way. That would produce many benefits: better social interaction; improved literacy skills; and the ability to be a proper citizen. There is a danger that when Members say that more graduates are required, people who are already involved in childcare might think that they are no longer needed. Nothing could be further from the truth. The issues of childcare and early education should be examined in a holistic way. They should be part of an integrated education system that is a properly financed public-sector provision, with a professionally trained workforce.

I hope that the Minister of Education takes those points on board. I pledge the Ulster Unionist Party's full support for the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm labhairt ar an rún seo agus a rá go bhfuil mo pháirtí sásta tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú. I am pleased to contribute to the debate. The SDLP supports the motion and the amendment.

The new curriculum for early-years education — the foundation stage — includes the preschool year as well as the first two years of primary school. The preschool year is a firm part of our children's education, and is not, as some people assume, a luxury bolt-on.

A Nobel laureate in economic sciences, Dr James J Heckman, states that investment in social policies that intervene in the early years have very high rates of return, while social policies that intervene at a later stage in the life cycle have low economic returns. A large body of scientific evidence shows a persistent pattern of early intervention resulting in strong effects. Significantly, those substantial long-term benefits are not necessarily limited to intellectual gains but are most clearly seen by measures of social performance and lifetime achievement. In other words, people who participate in enriched early-childhood programmes are more likely to complete school and much less likely to require welfare benefits, to become teenage parents or to participate in criminal activities; rather, they become productive adults.

Research suggests that, in comparison with no experience, all forms of preschool experience have a positive impact on attainment in national assessment

tests that are taken at the age of seven. In addition, preschool attendance has been found to improve school commitment and to reduce the risks of disaffection and delinquency during the latter stages of schooling. However, the quality of provision appears to be a crucial determinant of the effects on educational attainment. High-quality provision involves small group size, high adult to child ratios, a balanced curriculum and highly trained staff.

In Northern Ireland, we have high adult to child ratios, the foundation-stage curriculum and a wonderfully enthusiastic and well-trained preschool workforce. The training needs and career structure of that workforce must be streamlined in a way that gives it full professional recognition and a commensurate level of remuneration. For too long, the preschool workforce has been the Cinderella of the education system. That perception is changing as people start to appreciate the immense value of preschool education. It is now time to take practical steps to make the necessary changes.

In order to maximise the benefits of preschool education for our children, the most highly qualified workforce possible is needed. The better qualified the workforce, the more benefit our children will derive from their expertise — benefit that will last throughout their lives. There is no good reason why staff in community and voluntary preschool settings should not have the opportunity to develop professionally to degree standard. Staff are entitled to a professional career structure that provides access to a continual professional development based on remuneration at a professional level, and coequal with that of other sectors.

The preschool-education expansion programme provided the resources aimed at giving every child in Northern Ireland a free preschool place in the immediate preschool year. However, there has been no parallel programme of staff development and proper remuneration for those who deliver the programme.

For a comparatively modest investment, a staff-development programme and the remuneration issue could be addressed in a strategic and incremental manner, through a transformation fund similar to that introduced in England.

The role of the preschool year in education is of the utmost importance and can exert an influence on the education of children well into their school life and beyond. We need to ensure that everything possible is done so that our children get the best start in life, and derive maximum benefit from the preschool year. We can help transform the qualifications of those who teach our children at that age.

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

Mr Lunn: In this matter, Northern Ireland should follow the excellent example of England, Scotland and

Wales. The Alliance Party has no problem welcoming the motion, although it notes the use of the word "consider", which puts a slight caveat on it.

As mentioned, roughly £200 million is allocated to training people to work with young people and children in England and Wales. As Mr Butler said, that works out at roughly £5 million for Northern Ireland, which is the figure given by NIPPA — the Early Years Organisation. The Department for Employment and Learning's document 'Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland' sets a clear rationale for that type of investment. There is no doubt that it would be wrong to leave Northern Ireland trailing in that regard.

Investment in staff and training is an essential part of any successful society, and of any successful economy. That applies just as much to those who work with our youngest people as it does to anyone else, and just as it did in the context of previous debates on pay for further education lecturers and on literacy and numeracy, referred to by Mr Basil McCrea.

To put it simply, it is time that we got our priorities right. The motion needs not just approval today, but delivery soon. It is legitimate to ask the proposer of the motion, a member of an Executive party, to outline how the required £5 million can be raised or reallocated from elsewhere. The Alliance Party notes the cautious tone of the amendment. On any scale of priorities, that expenditure would rank as essential investment in young people. If enormous sums of money were not spent propping up a segregated education system, £5 million would be relatively easy to find. The Alliance Party is happy, nevertheless, to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Shannon:

"It might be that tha benefits o' investin in weancare an afore schuill larning cud be a muckle better investmunt in larning than bein din at aa' later stage, gien that aa' lerge pert o' baith kent an no kent skills show themsels afore weans stert schuill."

This wus takin' frae aa' paper oan tha benefits o' early weancare in comparisin tae coast factor an is plain tae see that tae stert aa' wean aff oan tha richt fut is maist diffinently mony weel spent.

"It may be that the benefits of investing in childcare and pre-school learning could be greater than investment in education at later ages, given that a very significant part of cognitive and non-cognitive skills development occurs before children start school."

That quotation is taken from a paper that assesses the benefits of early childcare in comparison to the cost factor. It is quite clear that starting a child off on the right foot is worth the additional cost.

It has been shown that preschool — be that nursery school, day care, mum and toddler groups, reception classes or playschool — is instrumental in the early growth and the social development of a child. That is especially the case for children from lone-parent

backgrounds, who account for one in four children in the Province.

Children from a more difficult background, in whatever form that takes, benefit the greatest from preschool education and the attention that they can be given there. The more positive attention that children receive, the quicker they will begin to achieve their potential. Single parents, who must work to provide for their children, while retaining the household burden of chores and with problems on their own, simply do not have the desired time to spend with their child engaging in exercises such as reading, colouring or other activities.

It has also been shown that children learn more in their formative years than they do in the rest of their lives. Therefore it is imperative that children be provided with the best possible start in life. Preschool education is not about getting an early start and learning specifics, even though that may be the case in some instances. It is more a forum in which a child can grow in self-confidence, obtain social skills and learn to interact with adults and other children in a relaxed and informal arena.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Shannon: I do not have much time left. The Member has had his chance, so, if he does not mind, I will not give way.

It is clear that early-years development has an instrumental effect on a child's confidence, and learning those early social skills can make the huge gap that exists between preschool and primary school that little bit easier to bridge.

However, that is not the only role that preschool fulfils. Those children who are slightly behind other children in a class, possibly due to their birthdays falling later in the school year, can receive individual attention. Preschool provides the perfect forum for helping those children in a friendly and social atmosphere.

Some 57,000 of our children have speech difficulties. If trained professionals were in position at an early stage in order to provide the necessary attention to detail, we would immediately witness the benefits.

A child would receive the added attention that he or she needed, without detrimentally affecting the development of the rest of the class, were someone with the necessary training to recognise that child's speech difficulties. That individual could then inject into class and playtime certain activities that would encourage the use of word formation and structures, all the while advancing, encouraging and entertaining the rest of the class.

The sad fact is that teachers of primary 1 classes have neither the time nor the resources to concentrate on one child who is having difficulty with forming words. The longer that the problem persists, the more it becomes

ingrained in that child. An early-years professional in place would say that the best way in which to combat a child's speech difficulty is through the use of phonetic nursery rhymes or similar exercises.

Training definitely has a major role to play in early-years development, and to encourage that training can only be beneficial, not only to individual children but to entire classes and generations.

The UK mainland is beginning to see the benefits of the transformation fund, which enables and encourages greater training and learning for early-years workers. Northern Ireland should be in there, trying to get the resources to meet its specialist needs. We should also have a transformation fund.

I was speaking to a teacher who is in charge of primary 1 and primary 2 classes in a small rural school. She told me that the difference in children who went to different nurseries that adopted different approaches was noticeable when they entered primary 1. She also said that those children who did not regularly attend preschool often took most of primary 1 to settle in and catch up socially with other children.

We have an opportunity to support the motion and implement a better system for our children.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The amendment that my party colleague moved does not distort the original motion but sets it in the context of the comprehensive spending review. However, it is important to make it clear than Sinn Féin supports the sentiment of the motion.

A child's foundation years are vital. Early childhood development is the foundation of lifelong learning and helps to provide a fair start in life for all children.

It is important that children be given the best possible support by those who are involved in their development. In order to do that, we must ensure that those who carry out that important role are given every opportunity to enhance their skills. The transformation programme appears to be working to that aspiration.

As a parent, I am only too aware of the stress of being a working mother, and I am lucky that I have always been able to depend on my family for assistance. However, not everyone can avail themselves of family support. Therefore we need to ensure that there is adequate provision of affordable, quality childcare services. Unfortunately, that is not the case at present.

3.15 pm

There is a shortfall of registered childminders in the North. At a time when more and more parents work full time, and more and more families depend on childcare, we must invest in those services, as future economic prosperity depends on families having access to affordable, quality childcare.

Members have said that other areas are taking steps. In the South of Ireland, there are childminder development grants of up to €630 towards set-up costs for new childminder services and the development of existing services. In England, Sure Start funds grants towards helping childminders to get started, and the Welsh Assembly has made start-up grants available. We lag behind in the support and provision available for children and the early-education workforce.

The Department of Education is now working on a new early-childhood education and care strategy. That aims to create a cohesive way of supporting the integration of service delivery, and a representative group has been formed to ensure that the advice of stakeholders is sought in developing the strategy.

One area that has been identified for further exploration is the work of the workforce strategy group, which is due to meet in the next few days. It will clarify the roles and responsibilities of workers in the sector and how those might evolve in the light of policy developments to ensure that the workforce continues to meet the needs of children in future.

The development of the childcare and early-education workforce would be enhanced by the establishment of a transformation fund that would set out clearly what is available and provide incentives for improvement.

I support the amendment.

Mr G Robinson: I have pleasure in supporting the motion and the call for the introduction of a transformation fund. Investing in enhancing the skills of those who work with preschool children will have long-term benefits. We must break down the barriers between childcare and education, so that hard-pressed parents and their children do not miss out on activities, opportunities and practical help. A loving home, freedom from poverty, good health and high-quality education enable children to reach their full potential.

We want to help all children to do well and to reduce the difference between what the poorest children and others achieve. Good early learning can have a major impact on a child's achievement at the age of five, and out-of-school activities can contribute to a more personalised curriculum for pupils, as well as help parents to manage the demands of a working day.

Sure Start and extended schools can help parents to fit learning and development opportunities for their children into flexible childcare arrangements. When children and families face particular problems, they can, for example, receive help, advice, parenting support or assistance in finding a job. Sure Start has pioneered the joining-up of services, especially health and employment services, around the needs of children and families.

Across the United Kingdom, over 5,000 schools already work to deliver extended out-of-school opportunities and easier access to personal support for children, parents and their communities. We must ensure that there is a choice of affordable childcare and ready access to other opportunities and services.

It is the Westminster Government's intention that, by 2010, 15 hours of free early education and childcare that can be used flexibly will be provided for three- and four-year-olds. A local Sure Start centre will provide easy access to childcare and services for children from birth to five years old. In the most disadvantaged areas, it will provide such services on site and reach out to make sure that they are used by those most in need. Schools will offer easy access to childcare; out-of-school activities; parenting support; community access to school facilities; and quick referral to specialist health and social care services when necessary. We must ensure that Northern Ireland is able to match the services provided across the water.

The quality of staff is the most important factor in securing high-quality childcare and early education for children and in building parental confidence. A transformation fund will support training and development and the appointment of more highly qualified staff, mainly in the PVI sectors, where qualification levels are lower than those in the maintained sector.

The provision of a highly skilled childcare and early-years workforce that is among the best in the world should be our objective. I support the proposed introduction of a transformation fund, and I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: The quality of the learning experiences of young children bears a direct correlation to the qualifications, expertise and professional development of the teachers and others working with them. The £250 million that has been allocated nationally through the transformation fund for the training and development of people working with young children on the mainland is to be welcomed, but even on a pro rata basis, with Northern Ireland having some 2.8% of the UK population, that should indicate an investment in Northern Ireland of about £7 million.

The Department for Employment and Learning paper 'Success Through Skills' sets out a rationale for putting an overarching framework in place for the development of the skills of the workforce in general. The paper highlights the need to focus on raising the skills of the current workforce; enhancing the knowledge base of those entering the workforce; and addressing the employability skills of those not in employment.

Some 12% of people who work with young children have level 2 qualifications; that is not an adequate level of attainment for such an important job. It is therefore important that provision be made to enable this section

of the workforce to progress to at least level 3 — which is what most of us would understand as an A-level equivalent. The practicalities of achieving this would, of necessity, involve using modules of continuous professional development and accredited prior learning. Those people are already in place. We should now skill them to a better level for the important job that we have given them.

The accreditation of prior learning and prior experience is ideally suited to the situation. It can also be effectively delivered in further and higher education colleges, which are both flexible and local. Most are able to deliver this kind of initial assessment and build upon the additional skills, suitably accredited, which the individual worker needs. Further education colleges could also help to deliver workplace modules, which would be the most cost-effective way of improving the skills of the workforce.

In England and Wales, the transformation fund has provided some £250 million for the period from April 2006 until August 2008. The fund supports the transformation of childcare settings by establishing, and providing financial support for, training routes towards a new graduate-level status for early-years professionals. This is an important part of the Government's overall childcare strategy, which is designed to enable single mothers and young mothers in two-parent relationships to join the workforce. The Government's aim is to ensure that all full-day childcare settings employ a graduate with early-years professional status by 2015. The fund does this by providing a recruitment incentive for staff and a quality premium for all eligible full-day care providers. The objective is to increase the numbers with level 3 qualifications. It also involves training more staff to work with disabled children and children with special educational needs.

NIPPA, whose work in this area I want to commend in the warmest possible terms, has calculated that an expenditure of some £5 million a year would enable Northern Ireland to achieve parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. This parity is important, and we do not want to fall behind. This plan would allow for 100 individuals each year to go on the graduate programme and for 10 individuals to progress to postgraduate level. In addition, it would allow 75 workers to obtain level 3 qualifications.

With a graduate-recruitment incentive and administrative costs included, this represents a very good value-for-money deal. It would create a properly graded employment structure in this important area and show a commitment to the value and importance that the Executive place on early-years education. All in all, it is a good deal, and I commend it to the Minister and to the House.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion and the amendment.

Now that power has been devolved to the Assembly, it is imperative that we take responsibility for investing in the training, registration and professional development of the early-years workforce.

A transformation fund for Northern Ireland will emphasise the importance of recruitment, appropriate working conditions and overcoming low levels of pay. Such support will provide fitting incentives for those who have a vocational commitment to the care, well-being and development of the youngest children in society. We have a responsibility to cultivate an ethos of investing in our children and young people. We must also introduce a system of early intervention in order to help to rectify the unacceptable levels of deprivation and underachievement that exist.

Generations of low levels of literacy and numeracy in the adult and young adult population can be remedied through the development of an excellent system of early-years care and education that is comparable to the best in Europe. In order to do that, we must recognise the skills and devotion of the childcare and early-years workforce. That includes not only those who are working in the sector, but those who would enter the sector if they could be guaranteed a secure career-development structure, be provided with working conditions that match their skills and hard work, and receive appropriate remuneration.

Northern Ireland has a childcare and early-years workforce that wants, and deserves, that recognition. The current workforce must receive recognition of its invaluable knowledge and experience through appropriate working conditions and the opportunity for continuous professional development. The future workforce must be provided with the incentive to become a graduate, and postgraduate, profession.

There is a wealth of good practice in the childcare and early-years sector. The appropriate application of funding to the sector will add value to existing excellence and will help to replicate that good practice elsewhere. Appropriate investment through a transformation fund for Northern Ireland can facilitate all those vital elements. However, the funding must be underpinned by the development and implementation of a high-quality system of support for and investment in the childcare and early-years professionals.

I support the motion and the amendment. Our children deserve the best possible start that we can give them.

Mr P Ramsey: I am grateful to Lord Morrow for bringing such a hugely important issue to the House.

Many parents and children in Northern Ireland are under high levels of economic and social pressure. Parents across the North are faced with huge mortgage

repayments. Many people struggle to survive on low incomes, and there are many lone parents. In many households, both parents work long hours to make ends meet. In far too many households, unfortunately, there is no wage earner.

It is not surprising that a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report, published in 2007, into child well-being in the world's richest nations showed that Britain has the worst record across a range of dimensions, including educational well-being. That statistic comes after 10 years of a Labour Government and is despite many of the positive social reforms that that Government have introduced. Many of the social factors included in the UNICEF report that impacted negatively on the UK's scores are probably different in this part of Ireland than in Britain, because of the different community and family structures here.

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

However, there is no doubt that there are very high levels of child poverty and other pressures affecting people here that are different to Britain. There are structural and resource problems in our education system. Recent reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Westminster Public Accounts Committee have highlighted the low literacy and numeracy levels of many schoolchildren. Indeed, that issue was debated in the Chamber only a few weeks ago, when it was agreed that much work was needed to change the structure of the education system and that more resources should be invested in it in order to substantially improve the levels of literacy and numeracy and other skills for school-leavers.

Members are often indebted to the Assembly's Research Service for the papers that it provides on many debates. Outside bodies also advise Members on various issues. Some Members have mentioned the Sure Start programmes that operate across Northern Ireland. They are undoubtedly models of best practice. However, Northern Ireland is falling way behind England, where there are around 800 Sure Start centres of excellence.

Ruth Kelly described children's centres as being at the heart of the Government's determination to wipe out child poverty. In Northern Ireland, four centres of excellence for Sure Start programmes have been promised. Ruth Kelly also stated that, by 2010, there will be 3,500 Sure Start centres of excellence in England. If that figure is equated to Northern Ireland, how many centres of excellence will we be entitled to by then?

3.30 pm

I shall take advantage of the Minister's being in the Chamber to ask her a question: where are the four proposed centres of excellence? I know that the bidding process for one centre of excellence had started. Has a decision been made on that? If so, could the decision be announced?

A major Northern Ireland survey of more than 2,000 single mothers found that they had huge difficulties in obtaining suitable childcare, which was the biggest hurdle in the way of getting a job. The transformation fund should be implemented as part of a wider set of social and economic policies to help people to balance their working and family lives, allowing children to enjoy a healthy childhood, during which they are nurtured by their parents, families and society.

To reinforce the argument, I shall return to an earlier point made about NIPPA. Currently, all staff who are working in the voluntary, community and preschool sectors in Northern Ireland must pay for their own training and professional development, and for any ongoing training. In addition, they face a significant disparity in pay, compared with the statutory sector.

If the Assembly's vision is for our early childhood services to become world-class, it is essential that the childcare and early-years education workforce in Northern Ireland be equipped to match developments elsewhere. That will enable the workforce to contribute to an overall strategy for children's services through the delivery of positive and better outcomes for children and families, and through reducing inequalities for young people, children, families and communities.

The motion is important, and I hope that the Department of Education, in particular, will be more proactive. If best practice operates in England, why has it taken so long for the appropriate levels of funding to be delivered in Northern Ireland? I appeal to the Minister to take action, particularly in respect of the Sure Start programme, which is one of the best programmes in the areas of preschool provision and parental skills. The centres of excellence in England that I mentioned take a holistic approach and offer speech and language therapy, and other therapies. It is important that there is the same level of access across the board, whether a child lives in Liverpool, Manchester, Belfast or Derry.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is bunsraith seirbhíse ardchailíochta é fórsa oibre ardchailíochta. I fully recognise that a suitably qualified workforce is essential to ensure that quality services are provided in early childcare and education. A high-quality workforce is the foundation of a high-quality service.

Research shows that children who experience high-quality preschool provision have better cognitive, social and emotional development by the time they start primary school — and maintain an advantage until at least seven years of age — than children who do not experience preschool education and childcare. Conversely, poor-quality childcare may offer no developmental benefit for children and may disadvantage them.

In the North of Ireland, early-years policy transferred to the Department of Education in November 2006.

Before that, responsibility for early-years policy lay with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, with the Department of Education responsible for the preschool expansion programme. The transfer of lead responsibility for early-years policy to the Department of Education signals an intention to provide an integrated approach to policy and service delivery, which many Members have mentioned. Improved joined-up delivery of early-years services should provide better outcomes for children and parents and better value for the public purse.

My Department has already begun to formulate a new early-childhood education and care strategy for children from birth, up to and including the foundation years of primary school — children up to six years old. The strategy will bring together Sure Start programmes, preschool education and home-childcare agendas in a cohesive way in order to support the integration of service delivery, taking into account all relevant factors and the effects that those changes will have on the lives of children and families.

I agree with George Robinson, who mentioned the value of extended schools. That is a very good programme and should be continued.

The Irish-medium sector is developing a three-to-19 strategy. A review of that strategy is ongoing, and the Department of Education will examine the outcomes. There is also a review of special needs. Both those strategies will feed into our preschool strategy.

It is generally accepted that the first few years of a child's life are critical to his or her future development and well-being. During those early months and years, a high percentage of children's learning takes place: attitudes are formed; first relationships are made; concepts are developed; and the foundation for all later skills and learning is laid. Last week, I met representatives of the Forum of Nursery Teachers, who stressed the importance of high-quality preschool provision. There is much evidence to suggest that ability gaps open early, long before formal schooling begins, and that the highest returns come from early interventions that set the stage and create the abilities that are needed for success in later life.

Children learn more effectively through play, active investigation, enquiry, first-hand experience and talk. Therefore, our provision must facilitate those matters and involve parents, carers and staff working closely together to support children's learning. Our nursery schools are one example of a quality service that supports children.

Policy-makers have recognised that equitable access to quality early-childhood education and care can strengthen the foundation for lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families. Government facilitate access to

childcare through the provision of the childcare element of the working tax credit, which can meet up to 80% of childcare costs for eligible families.

The objectives of the early-needs strategies are: to set out a clear vision for early-years policy; to be consistent with early-years strategies in Ireland and Britain, together with international frameworks; to establish evidence-based policies that draw on research and good practice elsewhere; to identify suitable structures for service delivery; to examine interrelationships between early years and wider childcare and education reform; and to examine appropriate funding mechanisms and to identify outcomes, based on quality service delivery and taking equality issues into account.

In recognition that the early-years strategy would contribute to wider aims and objectives and to a number of cost-cutting strategies, work on the development of the strategy is being overseen by an interdepartmental group that consists of colleagues from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Employment and Learning, and the Department for Social Development.

The transfer of the early-years policy to the Department of Education represents an opportunity to deliver early education and care from an integrated platform. The Department of Education recognises the valuable contribution that early-childhood education, care and development makes to young people. That is why the Department, in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department for Social Development are developing a nought-to-six strategy. We will also examine cohesive delivery arrangements, which will form an integral part of that strategy.

The Department of Education has formed stakeholder groups to ensure a participative and partnership approach to policy development. Work on the strategy has been broken down into four key deliverables, one of which is the workforce thematic groups, which are charged with clarifying the future roles and responsibilities of workers in the sector and how they might evolve; for example, by fulfilling training needs in the light of policy developments in order to ensure that the workforce in the early-years sector continues to meet the needs of children in future.

The group draws its membership from a broad range of stakeholders in order to capture input on the delivery, policy and practice of early years; it includes representatives from the sector skills councils, who will seek to secure the necessary supply of training to close any skills gaps in the sector.

Statutory nursery schools and units attached to statutory primary schools are, in effect, grant-aided schools and are staffed by qualified teachers and

classroom assistants. In the voluntary private sector, centres must meet minimum quality standards if they are to continue to receive funding. Minimum standards are intended to reassure parents and others about the quality of provision that is being made for their children, to ensure that the educational experiences are appropriate for children in the year before they begin compulsory schooling and to establish a sound foundation on which to build quality preschool education in the North of Ireland.

In all voluntary private centres that are in receipt of funded places — that is, those that are participating in the pre-school education expansion programme (PSEEP) — at least half the staff must hold a relevant qualification in education or childcare. That is defined as an NVQ level 3 or equivalent qualification, which at least one member of staff in each centre must have, and an NVQ level 2 or equivalent qualification, which all other qualified staff must hold. Voluntary and private preschool centres are expected, as part of the process of improving the quality of their provision, to work towards ensuring that all staff have relevant qualifications.

During the development of the early-years strategy, my Department will continuously seek ways to learn from good practice elsewhere, including local, national and international examples, to inform our thinking. I understand that although transformation funds have been established in England and Scotland to create a more professional early-years workforce in the PVI sectors, similar plans are at an early stage in Wales and the South of Ireland. It is important that we do not restrict ourselves to models in England, Scotland and Wales, and that we look to our neighbours in the South, and, potentially, other countries in Europe. I welcome the comments that were made about Finland earlier in the debate.

Members referred to a possible title for an early-years strategy. Obviously, a title using the word “Ulster” sounds good, and I am sure that the people of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal will be delighted at the suggestion of integration. So, “Cúige Uladh” — the ancient province of Ulster — sounds very good to me.

In the South of Ireland, the White Paper on early childhood education, ‘Ready to Learn’, sets out a comprehensive strategy for the development of early-childhood education for all children up to six years. As part of the strategy, the Department of Education and Science has been engaging with stakeholders to develop a quality framework, which will include qualifications for the early-childhood sector. Officials are aiming to complete that framework by late 2007.

In Scotland, between 1999 and 2006, the Scottish Executive invested £24.8 million through the workforce development fund to drive forward their programme of work to develop the early-years in-

childcare workforce. A further £12 million will be provided, £6 million in each of 2006-07 and 2007-08.

In Wales, although the Flying Start initiative has made some progress — £4.1 million in 2006-07 — in investing in initial planning and workforce development in early-years and play workforces in the most deprived communities, the continued use of that initiative will be on a discretionary basis. The Welsh Assembly is working closely with the Care Council for Wales to consider the development needs of the childcare workforce.

In England, the Children’s Workforce strategy is supported by £250 million of funding from April 2006 to August 2008, with the aim of creating a more professional early-years workforce in the PVI sectors. It is too early to provide a final cost for the introduction of a similar transformation fund in the North of Ireland until the workforce thematic group’s research has been completed. However, that work cannot be looked at in isolation; it must be considered in conjunction with the other thematic groups.

It is anticipated that my Department will be in a position to publicly consult on a draft strategy by February 2008. Although it is too early to pre-empt the strategy’s recommendations and to determine spending priorities that are currently being considered as part of the comprehensive spending review, it will be a priority of mine to ensure that the strategy reflects a co-ordinated Government response to early-years policy.

I look forward to working with my ministerial colleagues, and my colleagues in the Assembly, in taking forward this important, pivotal strategy that will impact on addressing economic and social disadvantage and on promoting social inclusion.

At a later date, I will respond to Members’ questions on children’s centres. I have many questions on that issue myself. Tá mé ag dúil le bheith ag obair le mo chomrádaithe aireachta le haghaidh a thabhairt ar na dúshláin atá romhainn agus leis an straitéis fhíorthábhachtach seo a chur chun cinn. Rachaidh an straitéis i bhfeidhm ar an mhíbhuntáiste eacnamaíoch agus shóisialach agus cuideoidh sí leis an chuimsitheacht shóisialach a chur chun tosaigh. Go raibh maith agat.

3.45 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We have had a good debate on a transformation fund and the provision of early-years education, and I welcome that. There has been broad agreement that a strategy for early-years provision is essential to the delivery of first-class early-years provision for all children.

We can learn a lot from the example of the transformation fund in Britain and what it has achieved. However, although Members have spoken in support of the idea, we must be cautious and look at it in the context of the

comprehensive spending review and the budgetary constraints. One thing is clear about the concept of the transformation fund: it stimulates some joined-up thinking in delivering and improving early-years provision. I welcome the Minister's statement that there is some joined-up thinking between the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Some of the other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development, should also be involved.

Reference has been made to NIPPA, which represents the playgroup and preschool sector. I think that it was Pat Ramsey who made an important point about the staff in that sector. Given that they are part of the community and voluntary sector, they have to pay for their training and further education needs. That must be looked at.

Childminding provision has not really been touched on today. The childminding association that represents childminders in the North of Ireland has made a number of key points about the provision of childminding services. People have a growing reluctance to embark on childminding as a career or to go through the registration process. That could put children at risk. There also seems to be a high drop-out rate in that sector. Registered childminders are by far the most popular and affordable form of full-time childcare, but there has been a 19% drop in the supply of places that are available with registered childminders and a significant increase in the number of unregistered childminders. I hope that the Minister and the Assembly will take that concern on board.

The aims of any transformation fund should be, first, to provide a first-class early-years service for children, and, secondly, to provide parents with an opportunity to get back into the workforce. A recent survey of 2,000 unemployed mothers found that obtaining suitable childcare was by far the biggest barrier to their getting back into work. There was clear evidence that the level of childcare here is lower than that in England and that there is a significant shortfall in childcare places here, again compared with England. Three quarters of mothers surveyed said that they would like a job, and two thirds said that the lack of adequate childcare provision deterred them from seeking work. A quarter said that childcare problems were a constraint on the hours that they could work. Therefore those figures have raised several issues that need to be addressed. Go raibh maith agat.

Lord Morrow: I accept the amendment, as it does not detract from the motion in any way. I want to make that clear.

I was interested in the contributions to the debate. I thank the Members who took the time to come to the

House to listen to the debate and, more importantly, those who contributed to it.

I was struck by a number of things that were said. First, Basil McCrea said something that was quite striking and significant. He said that we needed a step change in Northern Ireland, and that the best way to achieve that was to start with the young. How right that is. You do not start with people late in their lives; you start with those who are in their early years. I am sure that the Minister of Education was listening, and I will comment on some of the points that she made.

I was particularly interested in what Mr Dominic Bradley said. I think that he used the phrase "this should not be a hinge-on." I thought that that was significant and true. Sometimes, the perception is, and has been, that the early years of education are not the important years — instead, early-years education is something that is provided when some money is left over. I am sure that the Minister was listening to that point, and I hope that she is not just going to commit her leftovers to the early-years programme. That is a significant point.

Mr Trevor Lunn, who is not in the Chamber at present, mentioned £5 million. There is no doubt that that figure has been mentioned and that the amount is significant. However, it seems insignificant when it is being invested in the future workforce of a nation — it is a very small amount of money for the Executive to be considering as an investment in future generations. I am sure that the Minister has not missed the point.

Mr Jim Shannon referred to that fact that teachers quickly identify the difference between children who attend preschool and those who do not. Primary-school teachers have said that there is a significant and noticeable difference. Again, I think that the Minister will take notice of that observation.

I was encouraged by the Minister's saying that she will bring out a draft strategy by February 2008. She rightly referred to England, Scotland and Wales and what they were doing about the issue, and she said that it is one of her key priorities. The Assembly can take comfort from that. At least the Minister now recognises that early-years education has to be tackled and is not something that should simply be a leftover. It should form an integral part of her programme, and I look forward to seeing her draft report.

I encourage the Minister to keep on that particular road because that will be crucial. No decision that the Assembly may make in the future will be more significant than this one.

I hope that the Executive hear what the Assembly is saying collectively about this matter — and I hope that the Minister reports our views back to the Executive. This matter is not something that should be "considered", and it is not something that the Executive "should do"

if money is left over. It is something that must be programmed for. It should be integrated into all future spending plans that the Executive will be putting to the Assembly.

The Assembly is united on this issue, and Members will be watching with particular interest to see how the Executive respond to today's debate. I trust that it will be the Minister's priority, when she goes back to the Executive, to bring to the attention of her Executive colleagues the fact that the House is united on the motion and the amendment. The Assembly is saying that this is a key priority and should be an important part of any strategy that the Executive might want to bring before the House.

My time is up, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have 10 minutes.

Lord Morrow: I am sorry; I did not realise that I had 10 minutes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Paisley Jnr: Keep talking.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Keep her lit.

Mr Paisley Jnr: He has nothing else to do.

A Member: Go back to page one.

Lord Morrow: Well, I had jumped past three pages, right enough.

We want to see a fair and equitable society in Northern Ireland; everybody should aspire to that. No political party with any sense of modesty could disagree with that aim. How do we bring about that aspiration? We start with the young — the nought-to-six years or nought-to-seven years age group. We must shape that generation, so that it can shape the future of this country.

I hope that, as a result of today's deliberations, the Minister of Education will not simply make a carefully prepared statement to the House and walk out again as if today's debate never happened. I do not accuse the Minister of that; I could accuse her of many things, but not of that.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the degree of unity that has been demonstrated in the House today in support of the motion and the amendment should not be interpreted as an excuse to kick the issue into touch and leave it on the sidelines? Does he also agree that the ball must be picked up and moved forward immediately?

Lord Morrow: Mr Bradley has made a fair point. This side of the House looks at the issue from the opposite view — the Minister should not kick the ball from one place to another. To be fair to the Minister, she is not going to do that. I may have learnt little in life, but I have learnt that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should address his remarks through the Chair.

Lord Morrow: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker; how could I forget? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Bradley made a succinct point, and I noticed that the Minister was paying particular attention as he did so.

Mr Pat Ramsey mentioned child poverty, a phrase that sometimes falls glibly from people's lips. I do not include Mr Ramsey in that, because he was the only Member to raise the matter. It sometimes seems that child poverty does not exist and is just a phrase that fits well into a sentence. The sad fact is that child poverty does exist, and, to date, attempts to address it have not been tackled in a cohesive manner. Society should be downright ashamed of that.

Child poverty presents a challenge to the Assembly, its Ministers and the Executive. I am glad that the Assembly has stood up to the challenge today and has united behind the motion and the amendment to say that the issue should be tackled.

Mr Deputy Speaker, it is time for me to quit. I wholeheartedly commend the motion and the amendment to the House and ask for its unanimous support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Lord Morrow, I am remarkably impressed that you said in nine minutes what you had adequately covered in five.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Executive to consider making available a transformation fund, similar to that in England, Scotland and Wales, to support the professional development of the childcare and early education workforce in Northern Ireland; and to consider this matter in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review, and in light of the other budgetary pressures facing the Executive.

Pension Provision for Former RUC Part-Time Reserve

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The Member who moves the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The Member who moves the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

4.00 pm

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the right of members of the former Royal Ulster Constabulary Part-Time Reserve to proper pension provision, as agreed, without division, by the Assembly on 20 November 2001; and calls upon the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make representations to the Secretary of State to have the matter satisfactorily addressed.

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I thank Mr Buchanan for tabling the amendment, and I gladly incorporate it into the motion. Much has been said about putting the past behind us, and that is a goal that is worth pursuing. To many of my unionist tradition, the past symbolises ugliness. Part of that ugliness is represented by some of those who sit diagonally opposite me in the Chamber. Yet the fact that that party is here — complying and working in a democratically elected British institution of government — demonstrates the drawing power of the opportunity to make it a lasting reality that that ugliness is truly a monster of the past. Together, we all have a role to play in surpassing our own dreams of fulfilment and in putting the past behind us. In getting to that point, progress has also been made by embracing and introducing many rights issues.

However, at the heart of my motion is a right that has been denied without justification, good cause or sound reason. An issue has been forgotten because the Government hoped that it would fade away. Therefore I ask the House to put a wrong to right. I ask for support to call on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to go to the Secretary of State — whoever that may be — to have the matter satisfactorily resolved.

On 20 November 2001, the Northern Ireland Assembly resolved:

“That this Assembly supports the right of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve (Part-Time) to proper pension provision.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p146, col 2.*]

Policing was a reserved matter when my party colleague Derek Hussey ably put that case, and it still is. Some may argue that the issue of RUC pensions should wait until policing is devolved. However, after waiting more than five years, why should the issue be postponed and prolonged? Who is to say that policing

will be devolved in the lifetime of this Assembly? The case for supporting the part-time RUC Reserve was made emphatically in 2001. The House did not divide then, and I trust that that will be the result of today’s debate. Nothing has changed since 2001 when Derek Hussey addressed the Assembly of that time. However, the Government have shifted, and some responsibility lies with elected politicians, in that our inaction has allowed the plight of former members of the part-time RUC Reserve to drift. Sadly, some of those people have since passed away.

We now have a restored Assembly, and Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) are joined in a friendly working relationship. That brings an opportunity not only to pay tribute to the part-time RUC Reserve but to help bring closure to a right that was so lamentably denied by Government that the denial in itself has almost overtaken the issue. Therefore in order to put right that wrong, the matter of pension provision, as agreed in 2001, should be extended to today. I ask OFMDFM, ably represented by the junior Minister Mr Paisley, that special attention be paid to the request that it ask the Secretary of State to consider a service-recognition gratuity payment, and I include that alternative in line with the amendment. That element of direct rule, which the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have not succeeded in evicting, appears to think that a gratuity payment could be deeply divisive.

Incredibly, Paul Goggins, from the Northern Ireland Office, said that to do anything — and I mean anything — in recognition of the service of the part-time RUC Reserve would be somewhat offensive to former regular and full-time RUC Reserve officers. He feels that the award of a long-service medal would be sufficient recognition, and would want to conclude the matter in such typically dismissive direct rule fashion.

I hope that the House will give the Government its answer, and that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will bear in mind the amendment: a one-off form of financial provision that both recognises and rewards.

There is no begging, cap-in-hand or handout mentality in the proposal. I hope that I can reflect the dignity and integrity that is to be found in the patience and fortitude of the reservists as they strive to make their case, which was first brought to the Assembly more than five years ago. Perhaps, their title — a job description that signifies their part-time status — is working against them.

Scandalously, the warped conclusions of the Northern Ireland Office appear to have demoted and downgraded the status of part-time reservists, never mind recognise their value and service to the country. Although still awaiting the outcome to their legal case, the equally deserving part-time soldiers expect to reach a pension

settlement. Part-time RUC reservists cannot even get their foot on the settlement ladder.

Mr Goggins said that a pension or gratuity could not be considered because of administrative difficulties. That is ministerial spin for, "They are entitled to a medal, but when it comes to money, we do not have a list of who served, and we cannot be bothered to compile such a list." It seems that it was all right to send part-time reservists out on duty but there was no need to keep a record of who actually went. There we have it — entitlement to a pension or gratuity is being dismissed and kicked into touch on account of administrative difficulties, divisiveness and cost.

I wonder how much the direct rulers want to be reminded about costs? I wonder how much they want to be reminded about throwing money around, slush funds, jollies in Hillsborough and the accusations levelled at them for keeping this place operating — and still they went on to accuse Members of taking money under false pretences. How about the cost of a bottle of wine? Do Members remember the cost of a bottle of wine that the Establishment managed to find the money for? How much money has been spent to keep organised terror groups sweet? How much more money will be spent to buy off people with a less than glorious past?

The RUC Reserve has a glorious past. Therefore, is it not an outrage that the Northern Ireland Office dismisses the request for financial provision for the part-time RUC Reserve on the basis that it is not clear what level of payment would be regarded as appropriate recognition?

Notwithstanding that, the NIO's reasons are that with other more pressing priorities, the cost would be difficult to justify — those are Government words, not mine. How do they know the costs if they admit that they do not know the number of people involved? Anyway, they have already decided that any financial provision would be divisive and offensive to others. Is that arrogance not scandalously reprehensible to the House and highly insensitive to the part-time RUC reservists? Today, Members can begin to put that right. Let us take the first step by attaining the willingness of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to take this case forward and upward, and urge and encourage them to draw satisfactory closure on a chapter that is unworthy of Government but worthy of giving due and fair recognition to the part-time RUC Reserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will end by saying that it is my first opportunity to welcome the junior Minister and address him as such in the House. I await his response with anxious anticipation. I am sure that it will be suitably delivered.

Mr Buchanan: I beg to move the following amendment: After "2001;" insert

"or, alternatively, a one-off appropriate gratuity payment".

The amendment seeks to add to the motion and not, in any way, to act against the sentiments of the Member who proposed it; indeed, I congratulate Mr McNarry for bringing the important matter before the House. The amendment is simply to ensure that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister use its influence to lobby for adequate recognition for those who served as members of the part-time RUC Reserve. That recognition need not necessarily take the form of pension provision, but could take the form of a one-off payment that would ensure that the service and dedication of those officers is recognised by the Government.

The service that was given by members of the part-time Reserve of the Royal Ulster Constabulary must be recognised by the Government. Those people not only gave their time to serve the community, but were prepared to put their lives on the line to provide that service. They simply cannot be ignored or treated like part-time workers in any other job. Being a member of the RUC was not like any other job. When part-time members put on the uniform to defend and uphold law and order in the land, they placed their lives, and those of their families, in extreme and ongoing danger from a bloodthirsty terrorist organisation.

Those part-time RUC Reserve officers carried out the same duties to the same high standards as their full-time colleagues. In many cases, they worked the same number of hours each week as the full-time officers, under extremely difficult circumstances. Although they may have been employed on a part-time contract, many of those officers worked 60 or 70 hours each week — perhaps more — at the height of the Troubles. They must, therefore, be treated the same as any other officer who gave that level of service.

A part-time RUC Reserve constable was paid an hourly rate that was equivalent to that of a full-time constable who was aged 21 years or over when joining the RUC. The rate of pay did not increase, regardless of the length of service rendered, unlike that of colleagues in the regular force. Neither did part-time officers receive any overtime payments if they exceeded eight hours' duty or worked on public holidays. For many years, the Government used the part-time RUC Reserve to provide policing on the cheap.

At present, a part-time officer merely receives a long-service medal and a certificate of service. Although that is commendable, it is inadequate recognition of the courage, devotion and commitment that was displayed by those officers as they put their lives on the line to protect and to uphold law and order in the Province. Surely it is not unreasonable that the Government provide a fair and equitable financial package for such a sterling record of service.

As I mentioned earlier, being a member of the part-time RUC Reserve was not like being employed in any other part-time job. The same standards cannot, therefore, be transferred on to it. That is why the unique situation that those people find themselves in must be recognised by the Government, and a suitable level of recognition given to them. They have been treated with contempt when it comes to their entitlement to a recognition award. They have been turned into a political sacrifice. It is time that all stumbling blocks were removed and the matter satisfactorily resolved.

Of course, lack of funding is blamed as the hindrance to making a decision on such payments. As the proposer of the motion mentioned, when it comes to making payments to republican or loyalist organisations, or to fund inquiries, any amount of money can be found. However, when it comes to giving proper recognition to those who have put their lives on the line to withstand the enemies of law and order, it seems that money cannot be found.

I know that many Members wish to contribute to the debate. I will, therefore, conclude my remarks.

However, I hope that all sides of the House will support the amendment and the motion, just as they supported a similar motion that was debated in the House in 2001. I hope that everyone will vote to recognise those who gave so much to Northern Ireland.

4.15 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In an Assembly debate on this issue in November 2001, it was stated that the House must send out the message that RUC Reserve pensioners deserved proper recognition and pension rights. However, what about proper recognition and pension rights for those ordinary pensioners who have contributed so much to society and their own communities? They have paid into the system all their working lives, yet in retirement find it almost impossible to make ends meet because of the low state pension paid to them. If they do receive an occupational pension — something that they have paid into for many years — it is taken into account when they claim pension credit, and it is deducted from their pension-credit entitlement.

The Chief Constable of the PSNI stated that service alone — which appears to be the sole criterion for the gratuity payment — is not defensible. He also said that rewarding contribution would be divisive, as it would be outside the reward-and-recognition schemes that are available to PSNI employees, including the part-time Reserve.

In December 2004, a letter was sent to the police division of the NIO calling for RUC part-time reservists to be granted their due reward after years of pay-and-pension rights neglect by central Government. The letter

concluded that society had benefited from security provided by committed part-time officers and that the Government should repay the debt and provide them with financial security. Why, therefore, do the Government not repay the debt to those pensioners who have contributed to the system and provide all of them with the financial security that they not only deserve but to which they are fully entitled?

There have been many recent debates in the Chamber on such matters as care for the elderly and fuel poverty. There was also a recent debate on the huge contribution that carers make daily in looking after the most vulnerable in society. Surely those who give up so much of their lives are entitled to a proper income for the services that they provide. Exception cannot be made for a few; if it is, all pension provision will be called into question. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Attwood: As we did on the previous occasion on which this matter was debated, the SDLP accepts the broad thrust of the proposals, particularly the proposal for a one-off gratuity payment. I think that that is also the position of the Policing Board, although I will stand corrected on that.

There are two reasons why the SDLP sympathises with the broad thrust of the motion. First, we have sympathy for the general principle — to which, I think, Mr Brady was alluding — that part-time workers who engage in equal work of equal value should be entitled to pay and conditions on a par with their full-time colleagues. Part-time reservists are not the only people who on occasions over the past 20 or 30 years — or currently — have been in part-time employment and who have worked 40, 50 or 60 hours a week. The SDLP endorses — and the Chamber should endorse — the general principle that arises there: workers who are defined as part-time, but who in many instances are much more than part-time, should be entitled to pay and conditions of equal value to their full-time colleagues. It is an important principle. If that is what the Sinn Féin Member was alluding to, I welcome it, but it is a principle that the whole Chamber should endorse.

The SDLP accepts the broad thrust of the amendment, because the part-time Reserve suffered disproportionately to any other section of the old RUC during the conflict. The unfortunate and tragic statistics of the past 40 years show us that the number of part-time officers who were injured or killed far exceeds any other section of the security forces.

The reason for that is simple. They were recruited locally; they lived locally; they were targeted locally; and they were killed locally. There is something particular about the part-time Reserve that the Chamber should acknowledge by supporting the broad thrust of the proposal. Whereas everyone is entitled to be treated equally — whatever their employment status, part-time

or otherwise — the reality of life in the North must be acknowledged. The part-time Reserve suffered horribly and disproportionately among those involved in the security forces during the years of conflict.

None of that takes away from the fact that the SDLP has grave reservations about the conduct of individuals and elements in the old RUC. As Members know, there is particular evidence about the conduct of individuals and elements in the part-time RUC Reserve at various times during our tragic history. Nothing that I say in respect of the broad thrust of the motion should deny or diminish the fact that many people — and not just in the nationalist community — encountered standards and conduct on the part of individuals and groups in the part-time Reserve that were highly questionable and are still of grave concern.

As with many other matters, this needs to be addressed and to be referred to the study group under the chairmanship of Denis Bradley and Lord Eames, who need to get their heads around all these issues quickly. I want to put down a marker for them — and for the British Government and anyone else inclined to proceed in the North on a basis that is other than ethical. Yesterday's decision by the Public Prosecution Service on the Stevens Report; the comments of Maurice Hayes; the comments of the Secretary of State in recent weeks; and the unfortunate comments of the outgoing Oversight Commissioner about dealing with the past — all suggest to many victims and survivors, and certainly to the SDLP, that many people, including some in high places, are attempting to create circumstances in which the truth of the past is denied and there is a lack of accountability. Whether those involved are in paramilitary organisations, Government or political parties, the SDLP sends out a warning that it will not stand for it.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party, like other parties, will be supporting the motion and the amendment.

At the outset, I pay tribute to the contribution made to this society by the part-time Reserve. It made a major contribution in holding the line between democracy and the rule of law on the one hand and anarchy and terrorism on the other. That Northern Ireland avoided the latter by the narrowest of margins is due in no small part to the contribution of the men and women who contributed to our security through participation in the part-time Reserve.

It is important to clarify that the part-time Reserve was not an outgrowth of the unionist section of the community dealing with a threat that emanated solely from another section of the community, namely republicanism. Rather, they were servants of the entire community: Protestants and Catholics, unionists and nationalists, and those unaligned with either tradition, like me and some of my colleagues. They served the entire community against threats from a variety of

sources, including the IRA and loyalists. It is important that the Assembly should recognise that.

Mr Attwood has already mentioned the difficulties that were faced by members of the part-time Reserve. In addition, it should be recognised that, due to the nature of the work that the part-time Reserve was engaged in, its members tended to be involved disproportionately in security functions, rather than the traditional policing functions that are seen in normal societies.

That tended to disproportionately expose Reserve officers to the real and present threat on the front line from various terrorist organisations.

The subject of the motion also relates to part-time workers. Although the RUC part-time Reserve were nominally part-time workers, in practice they provided a full-time service — indeed, beyond a full-time service compared to what most of us recognise as a normal working week. They were effectively full-time officers who were employed on the cheap, as they did not have the same rights and protections as other officers. In many circumstances, part-time Reserve officers did the same job as full-time officers, but without the same degree of protection.

As such, there is a wider issue in relation to the rights of part-time workers. Indeed, I am sympathetic to the comments made by the two Members who spoke before me about the need to ensure that proper protection is available for those in part-time employment, particularly those who are effectively doing full-time jobs. However, it is important to focus on the RUC part-time Reserve and on the contribution that its members have made, taking note of the particular context in which they operated and the threats that they suffered.

That said, the Assembly must be conscious that the motion calls on another body, the Northern Ireland Office, to take action on a matter that is not within the Assembly's control. The Assembly does not have control over the policing and criminal justice security budgets — that lies elsewhere. Despite the many competing pressures on those budgets, I would like us, as elected representatives, to be clear that, if we had those powers, we would commit to addressing the issue with the necessary resources.

It is important that the Assembly does not underestimate the sheer pressure involved in managing the financial aspects of policing and criminal justice. Members must recognise that, when those powers are devolved to the Assembly, there will be competing pressures. However, I am certainly prepared to make clear that, if the Assembly had those powers, we, as elected representatives, should be prepared to make that commitment.

Mr Attwood raised the issue of dealing with the past. It is crucial that we move forward with a collective mechanism that can address everyone's demand for

justice, truth and acknowledgement. Such a mechanism must also be able to provide some form of closure to what has happened in Northern Ireland in the past. That cannot happen selectively, which is a problem that has arisen in the past. The resources are not available to allow all cases to be handled with the same level of intensity as previous inquiries have done.

I look forward to the consultative group, which will be chaired by Lord Eames and Mr Denis Bradley, coming up with a collective, holistic approach that can reinforce the concept of a shared future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Allan Bresland, who will be making his maiden speech in the House. As Members know, the convention is that a maiden speech should not be interrupted.

Mr Bresland: I welcome the motion and congratulate the Member who proposed it for debate. Obviously, the power to give recognition to the service of those who served as members of the part-time RUC Reserve lies at Westminster. However, I support the call for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to use its influence to resolve the issue.

The service given by the part-time Reserve was equal to that given by members of the full-time Reserve and by regular RUC officers in Northern Ireland. From the creation of the RUC Reserve in 1970, its part-time members were trained to the same level, and carried out the same duties, as other officers. They faced not only the same dangers as other officers while on duty, but the part-time nature of their work meant that they faced a greater threat of attack while engaged in other employment.

The fact that one in every six of the police officers who were killed as a result of terrorism in Northern Ireland was a member of the part-time Reserve illustrates that those officers were not casual workers, but police officers who were on the front line in the fight against terrorism and who served an entire community. For that service, part-time Reserve officers received a medal and a certificate. To send someone away after they have literally put their life on the line for many years is a real insult to the dedication and service that those men and women showed to the community that they served.

Members of the part-time reserve were simply regular officers who worked part-time hours, and it is vital that that be recognised.

4.30 pm

I support the amendment tabled by my colleague Mr Buchanan, which ensures that pension provision is not the only way in which service can be recognised. Although I support the idea of pension provision for former officers, I recognise that attempts to secure that provision have been problematic. If it is not possible to

provide those officers with the pension provision that they deserve, they should receive an appropriate one-off payment.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister could send out a strong signal to those who served in the part-time reserve by stating that they will lobby to ensure that those officers get the recognition that they deserve. The motion mentions that the issue was debated on 20 November 2001, and it is significant that that motion was passed unanimously. I hope that there will be no need for the House to divide on this occasion.

I support the amended motion, and I hope that all Members will do likewise.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When a motion is tabled, I not only look at the content, but I try to assess why it was proposed. I do not believe that this motion was brought to the House for the reason that is outlined on the Order Paper.

This debate has been going on between unionist parties and the British Government, and between the Policing Board and the British Government, for several years. It is worth noting that the debate on 20 November 2001 lasted a total of 27 minutes — that is how much effort was put into persuading Members on that occasion.

This motion was tabled for no other reason than to cause upset in the Chamber. It is part of the UUP's campaign to be in opposition in the Executive. It is, perhaps, an attempt to embarrass the DUP or to embroil Sinn Féin in some sort of row that the UUP will ride in on the back of.

To date, what progress has been made on a pension scheme for part-time RUC reservists? Mr Hussey, a former MLA, brought the issue to the House in 2001, and I note from one of the press articles of the time that he was an RUC part-time reservist, but he did not declare that in the debate. When Mr Hussey was campaigning on this issue as late as 2006, the Police Federation told him that he was wasting his time. It had lobbied the Government, and the Government had turned their backs on the matter. The Police Federation was so alienated from Mr Hussey's campaign that it would not even meet him to collect a petition that he had organised.

I would have imagined that the representative body of the former RUC and of the PSNI would have been to the forefront of any campaign to secure a pension and would have met him. However, according to the press articles, that does not seem to have been the case.

Let us consider the reality of pension contributions for the part-time RUC reserve. Some Members have told the House that many reservists worked up to 40, 60, or even 90, hours a week. How do they know that? The British Government do not have the rotas or the

time sheets for the part-time RUC reservists who served. I would like to know where that survey was done and how much credibility it has in telling us that working 90 hours a week was common practice for part-time RUC reservists.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not. I had to listen to that Member enough yesterday. *[Laughter.]*

Under the terms of the part-time RUC reservists' contracts, they only had to work a minimum of two hours a month. Let us look at the issue from the perspective of parity and equality. Perhaps there was an RUC reservist who worked for 90 hours a week, and another one who worked for two hours a week. Despite the fact that there are no time sheets and no lists of who served, the Assembly will give them both pensions. If I was the RUC reservist who had worked for 90 hours a week, I would be mightily peeved that the person who had worked for two hours a week would get the same pension as me. However, the mathematicians on the other side of the Chamber believe that they can work it all out.

As for the terrorist threat from which those reservists apparently protected us all without fear or favour, the experience of the Alliance Party and the DUP — as well as, it would appear, the SDLP — is clearly different from that of my party. After yesterday's announcement, I do not know how anyone can have the brass neck to enter this Chamber and tell us that the RUC as a whole was protecting us from terrorism. I wonder whether the families on the Ormeau Road who lost loved ones at the bookmakers are watching this debate. I wonder whether Pat Finucane's family and the family of Brian Adam Lambert, a young Protestant who was shot to death in Lisburn, are watching this debate.

The Assembly has today chosen to debate an issue over which it has no control. It does not even know the number of hours that people worked so that it could pay them a pension, yet here we are debating the issue. To use the words not of a Republican propagandist, but of a Lord of the British state, John Stevens:

"I have uncovered enough evidence to lead me to believe that the murders of Patrick Finucane and Brian Adam Lambert could have been prevented. I also believe that the RUC investigation of Patrick Finucane's murder should have resulted in the early arrest and detection of his killers. I conclude there was collusion in both murders and the circumstances surrounding them."

If RUC reservists — whether they worked two hours a week or 40 hours a week — were involved in that collusion, should they be given a pension as well?

All the parties in the Chamber tell us that they are concerned about the victims, but here we are, discussing this issue. Certainly, pain and harm were caused to RUC reservists during the conflict, but to see many of the people looking into this today —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have your time sheet and your time is up.

Mr G Robinson: I am honoured to be able to speak in this debate as I have long recognised and supported the deserving case that the RUC part-time reservists have for a pension or gratuity. In a political climate in which the word "equality" is often used, the motion before us must be viewed through that same principle. There must be equality of recognition on the part of the Secretary of State that the job that the RUC part-time reservists did during the dark days of the Troubles deserves to be recognised in the same way as that of any other individual who put on the RUC uniform and played their part in protecting their community at grave personal risk. Too often, the reservists paid the ultimate price, just as their full-time colleagues did.

There are families today without a husband, father or brother purely because that family member put on an RUC uniform. Sadly, the Secretary of State and his predecessors seem to believe that a member of the part-time RUC Reserve is of lesser standing than a full-time member of the RUC in terms of pension and gratuity rights. That is not only unjustifiable on the grounds of equality, but wholly despicable.

Were part-time members of the RUC Reserve not murdered, maimed and left with psychological damage equal to that of their full-time colleagues? Does the aftermath of injury and psychological trauma not still play a part in their everyday lives? We must also remember that the price of that service in the RUC Reserve was paid not only by the reservists, but by their families as well. In the statistics for death and injury for members of the RUC, there are no subdivisions into categories of full-time, full-time Reserve or part-time Reserve; neither should there be such a subdivision for pensions or gratuity payments. In the awarding of the George Cross — only the second collective awarding of that honour after Malta in 1942 — there were no subdivisions either; all officers were equal.

Officers of the part-time RUC Reserve often did a full day's work — and gave up days off such as holidays and weekends — and then came home to put on the uniform so that they could go out and do their duty shift. The people who did that deserve proper recognition for the invaluable role that they played in what might be called their ordinary day's work, in which they — both men and women — were covered by employment and pension regulations. Why did those employment and pension rights suddenly disappear when they put on their RUC Reserve uniform and did that extraordinary work? I can only describe that situation as contemptible, particularly as the outgoing Prime Minister of the United Kingdom will no doubt have a healthy financial future courtesy of the taxpayer and, it seems, a retirement that is publicly acclaimed on a global scale. In financial terms, what is the difference between a retiring Prime

Minister — who will no doubt avail right away of his pension rights — and the many individuals who took on a high-risk role to protect their community?

The answer is that the Prime Minister will have the respect of, and profile in, Government in London. There is no doubting the inequality that exists between part-time RUC Reserve members and outgoing Prime Ministers when it comes to pension rights and respect. The profile and plight of the part-time RUC Reserve's former members is totally ignored by those with the power to act in London — including the outgoing Prime Minister. He, too, must be held responsible for ignoring the equality agenda, which he so fully promoted in other instances, when it came to the pension rights of the part-time RUC Reserve. His Government ignored the many pleas on behalf of RUC reservists, yet wasted millions on inquiries to appease those who murdered, maimed and psychologically traumatised members of the RUC Reserve and their families.

On 20 November 2001, the Assembly supported a call for equal pension rights for the part-time RUC Reserve. I welcome Mr Attwood's commitment that he and his party sympathise with the motion and will not oppose it. I hope that all parties in the Assembly will demonstrate that same support for the motion and the amendment, as the issue has been on the political agenda for too long. A speedy resolution will be made easier and more likely if the motion and amendment receive Members' unanimous support. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Armstrong: Before participating in the debate, I wish to declare an interest. I was a proud member of the part-time RUC Reserve for 14 years, from 1974 to 1989, in a republican area of east Tyrone, which I policed impartially. I am not here to plead for myself but to speak on behalf of many former colleagues who do not have a voice in the Chamber.

In response to the Sinn Féin Member for Upper Bann, I contend that the debate is intended to pay tribute to the part-time RUC Reserve and to request that its former members receive a pension that is based on the hours that they served, as any other official in a Government job would receive.

The campaign has been going on for some time. It was the Ulster Unionist Party that raised the issue of pensions for part-time RUC reservists in the Assembly in November 2001. The resolution received cross-party support. The direct rule Administration, to their eternal shame, chose to ignore that campaign, so here we start again.

The motion is very important, as it seeks a small measure of justice and recognition for the brave men and women of the RUC Reserve. The part-time RUC Reserve was formed on 1 September 1970 as the Troubles began to boil. Like their fellows in the regular

RUC, the part-time reservists took their place in line to protect society from descending into anarchy. They wore the same uniform, performed the same duties and ran the same risks as the regular RUC did, and they did so 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Tragically, all too often they paid the same price as their colleagues. The terrorists who stalked this land made no distinction. The first member to be murdered was Reserve Constable Raymond Frederick Denham, who died on 12 January 1972. As Members know, he was not to be the last: a total of 53 part-time RUC Reserve officers were killed, either when on or off duty, and a further nine were murdered following their retirement or resignation from the RUC.

The rate of pay early in the Troubles, when danger was at its height, was pitiful. Provisions for widows and dependants were scandalous. The men and women of the part-time RUC Reserve answered the call out of their sense of duty and loyalty. They certainly were not in it for the money.

The motion is about natural justice. When the Patten Report was implemented, a severance package was produced for members of the regular RUC. The disbandment of the Royal Irish Regiment's home battalions last year was accompanied by a severance package, which was less generous, but welcome nonetheless.

Regardless of the hours that part-time RUC Reserve constables worked, the rate of pay awarded did not exceed the basic pay for a constable of 21 years of age. Part-time RUC Reserve constables, by the nature of the place in which they lived and policed, were both courageous and professional while policing Northern Ireland during the period that is known as the Troubles.

Many people lost pension and benefit entitlements from previous employers through transferring to the full-time Reserve. The date that they transferred was taken as their starting date, rather than the date that they joined the Reserve. The police authorities and the Government used the Reserve to provide policing on the cheap.

4.45 pm

No one who values law and order would begrudge the men and women of the RUC and the Royal Irish Regiment their due. However, it would be nothing short of a disgrace, and a betrayal of the services of many brave men and women, if the part-time Reserve of the RUC were denied similar financial recognition for their service and sacrifice.

We have recently witnessed groups such as the UDA demanding — and being granted — funding in order to go away. What kind of a country are we building, if money can be found to pay off those who helped create the Troubles — I am not looking at anybody — yet there is no money available for the RUC Reserve

officers who put their lives on the line to protect the community?

Society owes the part-time RUC a debt that cannot be paid in monetary terms. However, its members are entitled to some compensation — natural justice demands it. I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. It touches on a wide range of important issues and will challenge the consistency of many Members in the Chamber.

For the record, I reassert the SDLP's overarching principle, relevant to the motion. All part-time employees of the public or private sectors should have an entitlement to equal conditions, without exception. The SDLP, being a party that is not exclusively interested in looking after its own, will support the motion as amended.

Dr Farry: Will the Member recognise that the RUC served the entire community? When she referred to the SDLP looking after the interests of those who are not of "its own" — referring to the unionists, — is she saying that the RUC was essentially a unionist force?

Mrs D Kelly: I do not believe that I made that remark.

Mr O'Dowd, in his earlier comments, quite rightly condemned yesterday's decision by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) not to pursue those guilty of the murder of Pat Finucane. However, the SDLP is not here to take lectures from Sinn Féin. After all, who gave the British Government the incentive to cover up the past? It was no one but Sinn Féin in its discussions with the British Government a year and a half ago, when Mr Murphy rushed to Westminster and welcomed the legislation relating to on-the-runs (OTRs). Furthermore, Sinn Féin welcomed the amnesty for former members of the security forces that meant that victims' rights would be denied, that no one would serve a day in prison — despite what was in the Good Friday Agreement — and that they would never have to face their victims or have to give any answer to society for their role in the past.

The RUC Reserve suffered greatly, as did many people in our community — across the community. When I say "our community", I am not defining it as nationalist, unionist or dissenter — I am talking about all the people of the North of Ireland. *[Interruption.]* I will not take lectures from the Alliance Party either

The SDLP has taken an ethical approach to this debate. It does not support, and will not support, any attempt to cover up the past.

Mr Newton: I want to point out that the SDLP has spoken to the motion in a measured way, which contrasts strongly with the rant of the Sinn Féin Member for Upper Bann. In his closing remarks, he stated that there was no doubt that pain and harm had been caused to the RUC Reserve. In fact, there was murder, and there was torture. In many ways, the fact that people were

members of the RUC Reserve was used, in the border areas, as a reason for carrying on a campaign of genocide.

That came from a policy that was propagandised, promoted and protected by Sinn Féin as it sought to drive the British presence out of Northern Ireland. There are those within the ranks of Sinn Féin who must take responsibility for the promotion of such a campaign.

Mr Storey: I have raised this a number of times in the House and the Members opposite failed to answer the question. Does the Member agree that they went further in the IRA statement of 2005, because it actually said that the IRA campaign was entirely legitimate? A 60-year old farmer in my constituency, Mr Johnny Moore, was blown to pieces by the IRA when he came home from doing his time as a member of the RUC Reserve. According to republican ideology in 2005, his murder and the murders of many of our constituents were entirely legitimate.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for the clarity of that intervention. The hours that a man served, or a woman served — let us remember that a high number of the RUC Reserve were women as well — has been mentioned. Many of these people were actually going out and doing a day's work, and coming home and donning the uniform to carry out other duties that were indeed to protect the entire community: not a section of the community.

They were milkmen; they were postmen; they were factory workers; they were the ordinary people of this land who were giving generously of their time. They deserve a pension for what they have given, and we should do all that we can to resolve this issue.

Mr Shannon: Contrary to the Sinn Féin opinion in relation to this matter — that you cannot make flesh of one and meat of the other, as one comment ran earlier — in mainland UK, part-time emergency personnel have already had their pensions upgraded and modernised. Would the Member agree that with that in mind, this motion can ensure that an honest and equal pension can and should be paid?

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that information.

Mrs I Robinson: If we use the analogy that Sinn Féin is using, would the Member agree with me that some MLAs within Sinn Féin should get a full pension and others should not? They do not all do a full-time job, as some are interested in farming and other issues and therefore do not always work a full complement of hours.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that.

When considering this motion, we should reflect that the work of the part-time RUC Reserve had more than its share of high risks and unenviable tasks. If the likelihood of pension provisions is poor, then what contingency plans are in place? What else can we offer

the men and women who worked so diligently at this tough career? Certainly, the DUP is supportive of a satisfactory one-off payment in recognition of their contribution.

These men and women still did the job that was asked of them, and they did so to protect our communities. We should not now turn our backs on them. They are a credit to history and to the present, and they are part of our future. They set a very high benchmark for the level of service provided by the police. The Secretary of State must now show leadership on this issue — and stop stalling and wasting time — by accumulating a pension suitable for the end of their careers.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Paisley Jnr):

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this debate to acknowledge on behalf of the Executive the matters that have been put before the House today. I congratulate the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry for achieving this debate, for getting it in the Order Paper and for keeping up the tradition of supporting the rights of part-time workers.

This is of course a reserved matter, and with the best will in the world, it will remain a reserved matter. It is ultimately a matter for the Secretary of State, but I believe that there has been recognition of this deserving case, and that a deserving case has been made.

One Member stated that only 27 minutes was spent on this matter the previous time that the House debated it. I am glad that today more time has been spent on this deserving case and that we have had a much fuller debate.

However, the significant difference between 2001 and 2007 is that today the Executive are represented in this debate to note the matter and to acknowledge the concerns that have been expressed. The Executive will pass the matter to the Secretary of State — whoever that may be — over the next 72 hours. They will drive home the point that this Government cares about all their people and that they want to see the rights of people encouraged and supported and want to put right the wrongs of the past.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve was formed on a part-time basis under section 9 of the Police Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 to provide temporary support for the regular RUC and to reduce, in particular, the number of overtime hours that were required. The Reserve was also formed to provide relief for the regular officers who had been working excessive hours and who were being severely stretched due to the terror campaign.

The part-time Reserve was seen as broadly similar to the service that was provided by unpaid special constables in the rest of GB. Part-time Reserve officers were recognised as casual workers. They were not contracted to work set hours, and they did not have to report for duty if requested. Many part-time Reserve

officers were in employment elsewhere, for example, in the Civil Service, or as schoolteachers or farmers. Given that a person can be a member of only one occupational pension scheme, they would not have been eligible to join any occupational part-time Reserve pension scheme, had one existed at that time. That is why the request for a special ex gratia payment has been made.

Members of a pension scheme must contribute towards the cost of providing the benefits of that scheme. On considering the provision of a police pension scheme, Government actuaries calculated that the rate of contribution required to be made by part-time Reserve officers, along with the administration costs associated with the processing of such a scheme, could exceed the benefit to the individual. In some cases, the pension benefits paid to the individual would be less than a contribution. Given the irregular working hours of part-time Reserve officers, such a scheme would have been difficult to administer, as over 9,000 officers would have been considered eligible for it. It is important to recognise that such difficulties are not insurmountable. That is the point that the Assembly has made today.

However, in 2001, in line with provisions for other part-time workers in the United Kingdom, a stakeholder pension scheme was introduced, to which part-time Reserve officers had access and could contribute. The scheme was set up with favourable rates for police officers and managed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland pensions branch. Not all officers have taken up that service, but it exists for them.

When the debate commenced, Mr McNarry referred to the ugliness of the past. I hope that we are looking at a brighter future, and that the issues of the past can be considered much more effectively.

I congratulate my colleague Allan Bresland for making his maiden speech. Other Members made a clarion call for the removal of the stumbling block that has been in place. Mr Brady said that proper pension rights for all who have paid into occupational pension schemes should be identified. No matter the justification, and no matter what side of the House it comes from, recognising the rights of part-time workers is progress.

Mr Attwood made the very important observation, which was not lost on anyone, that those who worked part-time in the Police Service suffered disproportionately. That point should be driven home.

I respond with caution to Dr Farry's point that had we the power, we could pay for the pensions. I am reminded of the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments that we cannot make those sorts of commitments on the hoof. Therefore I am delighted that this matter remains reserved. It is up to the Secretary of State to cough up; it is not for us to make those commitments before they are prioritised in our Budget round.

5.00 pm

Nonetheless, in identifying the needs of part-time workers, the point he made was correct. I leave the issues with the House and say on behalf of the Executive that the matter is noted. We acknowledge the concerns raised and will pass them to the Secretary of State as soon as Hansard is printed.

Mr Spratt: As a former chairman of the Police Federation I fully support the motion and the amendment. The motion is an important contribution to recognising the professionalism and sacrifice of the members of the part-time RUC Reserve.

The first part-time Reserve members joined in 1970. Since then, thousands have served in the force, and many continue to serve. The key difficulty is that the part-time reservists are deemed to be working as casual labour rather than as part-timers with fixed hours of contract. So far, the Police Federation and other bodies have been unable to persuade the Northern Ireland Office that, notwithstanding that criteria, a part-time pension, or a gratuity, is justified and long overdue. I agree with Mr McNarry, who said that it is a wrong that needs to be put right, despite the feeble excuses from the Northern Ireland Office.

I have attended many meetings where the part-time Reserve pension was raised with the Northern Ireland Office and at senior Government level. I do not know where Mr O'Dowd gets his information from, but, despite what he says, this matter has been raised consistently with the Government over the years, and it is wrong for him to say otherwise.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: No, I will not give way. I confirm that the past chairman of the Police Federation, Irwin Montgomery, raised the issue in 2003 in a conference speech. In 2004, the matter was raised again with the Police Advisory Board, which was chaired by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ian Pearson. I am delighted that the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister will raise this with the future Secretary of State, whoever that may be, in the next few days and that the matter is going to be discussed again.

Despite the discussion between the Police Federation and the Northern Ireland Office, and the support of the Assembly on 20 November 2001, along with support from the Northern Ireland Policing Board, the Government have consistently done nothing but make excuses for not being able to make the pension or gratuity available. My colleague Tom Buchanan was correct to say that on many occasions the part-time Reserve worked the very long hours that were necessary when the regular force needed support to enable it to carry out normal policing functions.

Despite what Mr O'Dowd said, the part-time Reserve filled out overtime sheets, and the hours should be on record.

Mr O'Dowd: The hours should be available, but they are not.

Mr Spratt: The hours are certainly available. I welcome the responsible attitude of the SDLP on this and agree with much of what Mr Attwood said earlier about part-time working. The Police Federation is currently taking a case involving a female part-time Reserve officer for the award of an annual leave entitlement for excessive hours that she has worked. If that case is successful, it may be helpful to the case for a pension or gratuity. As has already been mentioned, there are many part-time workers, and it may also be helpful to them.

I congratulate the Member for tabling the motion. We, on this side of the House, fully support the motion as amended.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for allowing me to make the winding-up speech on this important debate. I thank the Members who have — mostly — made significant contributions to the debate, and I congratulate the sponsor of the motion and the mover of the amendment. I welcome and congratulate the junior Minister Ian Paisley on his first performance at the Dispatch Box on behalf of the Executive.

In many ways, the motion represents unfinished business from the decades of strife that still cast a long shadow over the present. Not least among the unfinished business of the Troubles is the provision of proper and adequate pension rights for the former part-time Reserve of the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross.

There appear to be some misunderstandings about the part-time nature of what was known as the part-time RUC Reserve. Some people regard the part-time Reserve as part-time employees of a part-time force. Reserve officers were full-time workers who were employed under renewable contracts, and the Chief Constable of the day regarded that section of the force as an essential and effective part of core policing. Indeed, successive RUC Chief Constables also stated regularly that they would have had great difficulty in meeting policing needs without the services of the part-time Reserve.

The full-time element of the Reserve was made up of full-time workers, and the part-time Reserve was a part of that. Members of the part-time RUC Reserve were not, therefore, part-time workers of a part-time force, as one would normally understand it. They were part-time workers of a full-time force.

Part-time RUC Reserve members were liable for National Insurance contributions under the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland)

Act 1992. However, nowhere in RUC regulations was there a mention of pensions for part-time members.

It is clear that under the terms of the relevant pension legislation, part-time Reserve members were in non-pensionable employment. Neither was there any pension provision for full-time members of the RUC Reserve. However, unlike the part-time RUC Reserve, those full-time members received a bounty, which was paid every three years. Presumably, that bounty could have been invested in a private pension plan. The part-time RUC Reserve, which did a vital job, received none of that consideration.

The majority of part-time RUC Reserve members gave many years of service to the entire Northern Ireland community, and that should have provided them with a reasonable annuity and, in normal circumstances, a lump sum at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer. It is, therefore, an insult to all part-time workers — let alone police reservists — that no proper pension provision was made for the part-time RUC Reserve.

For the sake of natural justice, I ask the Assembly to agree that the part-time RUC Reserve has been overlooked for many years in respect of either a bounty payment or a pension. That injustice should not continue, and, in the spirit of laying those years to rest, the Assembly must ask — demand, in fact — Her Majesty's Government to review the situation and put it to right.

The Unionist Party happily welcomes and accepts Mr Buchanan's amendment. Mickey Brady's contribution appeared to confuse the position of the former part-time Reserves with that of ordinary pensioners, but there is a clear distinction. Those who were employed in the service of the Government should be rewarded with a pension or some form of recognition.

I welcome the contribution made by Alex Attwood, who accepted the broad thrust of the motion and the amendment and saw it as a principle of natural justice — which it is. I also pay tribute to the fact that he recognised the particular sacrifice of the part-time Reserve officers, who suffered horribly. I welcome the support given by Dr Farry on behalf of the Alliance Party and congratulate Allan Bresland on making his maiden speech on such an important issue.

I come now to the ill-judged remarks of John O'Dowd. I thought that he misjudged the issue — which he clearly did not understand — and the tone of the House. Although he is a Sinn Féin representative, he got his information completely wrong. Derek Hussey was never a member of the RUC part-time Reserve, as alleged by John O'Dowd, which confirms how seriously he has misread the issue; instead, he offered his own jaundiced, prejudiced views. He sought to introduce other matters that were not —

Mr Weir: As was mentioned yesterday, perhaps Mr O'Dowd's remarks show the implications of getting rid of one's intelligence wing.

Mr Kennedy: I will leave Members to draw their own conclusions. However, I understand the point that Mr Weir has made. John O'Dowd should be ashamed of the contribution that he made in the House today.

George Robinson highlighted the great personal risks that were undertaken by former part-time members of the RUC Reserve and reminded the House that the Reserve was awarded the George Cross in recognition of its courage. My colleagues Mr Billy Armstrong and Mr Spratt, who served with distinction in the RUC, also deserve special mention. Mr Armstrong reminded us of the cost in lives. That is why John O'Dowd should hang his head in shame. Fifty-three serving part-time Reserve officers were murdered; another nine officers who had retired from the service were singled out for cruel murder by the organisation that Mr O'Dowd represents politically.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member take a point of information?

Mr Kennedy: I will not take a point of information. I enjoyed Mrs Kelly's contribution — who is no longer in the Chamber — when she engaged in a bit of political argy-bargy with the Shinnars. I was happy enough with that.

I commend Robin Newton for recognising the part-time Reserve's outstanding service. The junior Minister Mr Ian Paisley Jnr reminded Members that policing is a reserved matter and that it is likely to remain so. However, at least he said that the former part-time Reserve is a deserving case and that the difficulties, in his words, "are not insurmountable". I plead with Mr Paisley Jnr to ensure that strong representations are made on behalf of the Executive and the Assembly as soon as possible to whoever will be the new incumbent at Stormont Castle.

I thank Members for their contributions and look forward to full and unanimous support for the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the right of members of the former Royal Ulster Constabulary Part-Time Reserve to proper pension provision, as agreed, without division, by the Assembly on 20 November 2001; or, alternatively, a one-off appropriate gratuity payment; and calls upon the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make representations to the Secretary of State to have the matter satisfactorily addressed.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker:*]

5.15 pm

ADJOURNMENT

Recent Flooding in East Belfast

Sir Reg Empey: My purpose in calling for this Adjournment debate is to highlight the recent flooding in East Belfast. However, issues have been raised that apply on a wider basis and not only to my constituency.

Members will be well aware that East Belfast was particularly badly affected by last week's floods, in which several homes and businesses were destroyed. Fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom are suffering a similar fate today with substantial damage to their properties.

One concern that I wish to highlight is not specifically about blocked drains here and there, but about the non-devolved issue of insurance. Members know that a significant number of people who were affected by the floods — many of whom are Housing Executive tenants — did not have home contents insurance. I do not know whether that is the case in England today, but there is something radically wrong when people's properties and personal effects are destroyed and no form of compensation is available.

This Assembly provided urgent financial compensation for those who suffered losses last week, but that money was intended to help people to get back into functioning homes. Many people in East Belfast and, indeed, in other affected areas will be out of their homes for six months. Given that situation, the local authorities should examine how they can encourage more people to insure their belongings.

Sadly, it appears that as time passes, incidences of freak weather conditions are on the increase. It is not that long ago that high winds caused considerable damage to properties in Northern Ireland, and now we have flooding. There is an issue to be addressed, and I appreciate the fact that the junior Minister has come along to listen to the debate, even though insurance is not a devolved matter. I assume that he has sacrificed a trip to Washington, DC in order to contribute to the discussion.

If, in the future, we are to fall victim to emergency situations such as those we have experienced in recent weeks, will the junior Minister direct the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to engage with the insurance industry? It cannot be in that industry's

interest that so many potential customers do not avail of home contents insurance.

Eight weeks ago, the Housing Executive wrote to tenants to point out that many of them did not have insurance and advised them of the benefits of having it. Although it may seem simple to say that people should be insured, many families live right on the edge, and the extra money that it costs to insure is sometimes beyond them. Sadly, a number of them are making provisions for water charges, which will add to their burden. That is a bit of a joke when one considers what people have suffered in recent days.

An approach should be made, perhaps nationally, to the insurance industry to see what steps can be taken to negotiate large-scale schemes that people can join to protect themselves and the contents of their homes. That can be made affordable, with easy payment methods, where people are not penalised for not having enough money in the first place. Discounts and benefits are often available for those who pay bills by standing orders or direct debits; many of us in the House take advantage of that. However, the opposite applies to somebody who does not have that facility; they have to pay more, and that applies not only to insurance but services such as electricity and gas. That is a movement in the wrong direction.

The public authorities could use their influence to spur forward debate on the issue. Although insurance is a non-devolved matter, I ask the junior Minister Mr Paisley to give consideration to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister writing to the insurance sector's representative body. It would be useful to draw to its attention what has occurred here, and, unfortunately, across the water after yesterday's flooding, to see whether that body could take an initiative. Furthermore, the Assembly would be seen to be in support of people who lost belongings in the flooding. In all probability, many of the products, appliances and furniture that were destroyed in that flooding have not been paid for. The belongings may have been paid for on hire purchase and, without insurance, those people will have to continue to pay for them, even though the contents have been destroyed and must be replaced.

A number of people received special social security loans, and I have no doubt that the money provided by the Assembly was also helpful. However, there is something missing when so many people can be affected. If people could afford insurance but did not take it, it could be argued that that is their own fault. However, the Assembly has an overarching responsibility to do what it can to ensure that people have as much protection as possible. As weather conditions become more erratic, the flooding of recent days could, sadly, occur again. Last night, people who were interviewed on television reports of flooding in England said that they had flood defensive schemes and had been told by the authorities

that they would not flood again. Some of those people were flooded twice within a week. No useful purpose is served by having so many people going through life without insurance cover for those circumstances.

There is a possibility that some people may take legal action against the Department for Regional Development on the grounds that they could allege that the Department did not perform its functions properly. However, the average person who cannot afford insurance will not be able to take on a Department in the courts. The emphasis must be put on trying to avoid crises; therefore, I appeal to the junior Minister to make a suggestion to the insurance industry. Perhaps he might also consider contacting the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry — currently Alistair Darling, although that may change in the next couple of days — and perhaps ask the Department of Trade and Industry to intercede with the insurance industry nationally. The junior Minister could talk to colleagues in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere, so that public authorities could apply the maximum amount of pressure on the industry to try to solve the problem.

In recent times there has been a long debate in this country about pensions, and there is clearly a huge problem. I believe that there is also a huge problem with insurance, and the unfortunate circumstances that were particularly concentrated in my constituency last week exemplify that.

There are many unfortunate people who, apart from losing things that were of sentimental value, have lost practical items. Many of those things that will have been thrown into a skip had not yet been paid for. People will be left with that liability, and must now buy new furniture at their own expense. Some will be driven to taking social security loans or into the hands of unscrupulous moneylenders. That is deeply unsettling and moves those people in the opposite direction to that which Members would wish.

I ask the junior Minister to consider my suggestions as to how the Assembly might influence the insurance industry at a national level and encourage authorities at a local level to ascertain what can be done to negotiate the best possible deals for people in these circumstances. They must not be penalised because they cannot pay premiums by direct debit, and schemes must be made affordable so that people can benefit from the comfort and security of having some basic insurance and the knowledge that they will not face further destitution. In the long run, those people might be driven on to state benefits, so it is in the interests of the state to attempt to minimise their exposure to damage. Therefore, everybody wins.

I commend these suggestions to the Assembly, and I hope that the junior Minister will inform Members in due course of whether it has been possible to make progress.

Lord Browne: I thank the hon Member for East Belfast for raising this subject. As a representative of East Belfast myself, I welcome the opportunity to place on record my deep sense of gratitude for the swift and decisive actions taken by the many statutory and voluntary agencies that were involved during the unusual flooding and the subsequent clean-up, not only in East Belfast but in the many other pockets of devastation around the Province.

Perhaps more importantly, this debate should be a precursor to an evaluation of the effectiveness of emergency planning for, and responses to, such events. The flooding disaster affected many homes in East Belfast and the rest of the Province, and proved to be the first real test for the Executive, who were not found wanting. The people who suffered in the disaster benefited from having local Ministers who were able to take crucial and timely decisions.

The disastrous effects of the flooding cannot be underestimated. The rain and, worse, sewage soaked into floors and seeped into walls, destroying houses, which must be entirely gutted of furnishings. Whole rows of houses need to be decontaminated because of the raw sewage that flowed through them. That will take time, and many householders will be out of their homes for six months or more. More specifically, the rainfall on Tuesday 12 June was, to say the least, extraordinary.

I accept, in part, the Minister's public assertion that no system could have coped with such a downpour. I want to thank him for his quick response to my questions and those of my friend and colleague Robin Newton. It was important to clear up any confusion about the cleansing of gutters and drainage systems, the effect that uncleared drains would have had on the floods, and the last time that those in the most affected areas were cleansed.

5.30 pm

Having discussed those matters with a hydrologist at the weekend, I am convinced that biannual cleansing is adequate. I noted in the Minister's responses to the questions that I raised that the drains in the overwhelming majority of the areas that were worst affected by the floods were, indeed, cleansed within the last six months. However, I want to explore a little further the Minister's statement that no system could have coped with such a downpour.

It is my understanding that the drainage system in Northern Ireland is built to cope with 50 mm, or two inches, of rainfall each hour. Undoubtedly, the rainfall during two hours on 12 June far exceeded that figure. Although it would never be justifiable to commence works on the sort of enormous storm drains that could cope with a once-in-1,000-years torrential downpour — like the drain in Los Angeles that features in the

famous drag race in 'Grease' — it must be accepted that the more land that is cemented over, the stronger the efforts must be to provide adequate drainage.

It is clear that Northern Ireland does not have the infrastructure to deal adequately with the heavy rainfall that has caused floods in many parts of the Province, such as Londonderry, the lower Ormeau Road and parts of the Clonduff estate in East Belfast. It was not the first time that residents there had been subjected to flooding — indeed, they told me that the recent floods were the fourth occurrence of flooding in 17 years.

It seems that rivers and tributaries are causing problems in East Belfast. Many of the pockets where the most severe flooding took place, such as at Ladas Drive, the Castlereagh Road, the Cregagh Road, in and around the residential homes at Orangefield and Clarawood, Towell House nursing home at Knock and other properties at Hawthornden Road — which shows how widespread the floods were — were affected when the Loop River, the Connswater River and their tributaries broke their banks, causing an unstoppable deluge that residents were powerless to prevent.

I want to thank those who got involved and did their level best to help the people who were affected by the flooding. In the first instance, the Fire and Rescue Service clearly demonstrated its ability to adapt to the conditions with the use of boats and rafts, as well as its state-of-the-art mobile satellite control centre, which, as I was shown, helped greatly and certainly was needed. By using that satellite system, the Fire and Rescue Service was able to prioritise the help where it was needed.

As a Belfast city councillor, I believe that the council was exemplary. It quickly established a flood helpline and a crisis centre that later evolved into an important information centre at Avoniel. That centre proved vital in keeping residents informed of developments and how they could get aid. I want to thank the Housing Executive, the Department for Regional Development and the many repair units, especially the Red Sky Group — all of which played an integral role in securing homes. Where nothing could be done, temporary emergency accommodation was quickly found.

Now that the water has subsided and residents have started to pick up the pieces, I want to put on record my gratitude to my hon Friend the Finance Minister — and, indeed, to the whole Executive — for providing the one-off payment of £1,000 in grant aid to those affected by the flooding.

In the longer term, however, other schemes will be needed. Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, should consider the possibility of including an additional element in social housing rent for compulsory home insurance schemes, as Sir Reg Empey suggested. At the very least, the Minister should consider the viability of an opt-out scheme that

will give tenants the ability to consider insuring their homes. At present, the possibility of tenants insuring their homes is not on their radar.

People in my constituency of East Belfast and many other parts of the Province have been affected considerably and incalculably by the freak flooding that occurred two weeks ago. For those with insurance, it was a disaster that can probably be dealt with. For those without, it is a cruel, even unmanageable, burden that will only increase the plight and despair in which they find themselves. Each and every time a disaster strikes, lessons will be learned, and I believe that those lessons will be learned now.

Mrs Long: I thank Sir Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, for bringing this issue before the House. It is particularly poignant that our debate is taking place when regions in England and Wales are experiencing heavy flooding. Three lives have been lost there due to flooding, and I extend the sympathy of the House to the families affected. The loss of life drives home the seriousness of the issue and shows how critical it is that the Assembly addresses the management of flooding.

As other Members have said, last week's events had a devastating impact on householders, businesses and schools. There was a massive effort and mobilisation in communities, the voluntary sector and statutory agencies to try to minimise the impact of the floods, but, even two weeks on, it is clear that some people are still living in severe and dire circumstances. For many of them, those circumstances are unlikely to change in the near future.

I am sympathetic to Sir Reg's comments about the difficulties that the people who are uninsured have experienced. It is particularly sad that those who can least afford to buy insurance are those who can least afford to be without it. Measures should be put in place to ensure that people give insuring their homes a higher priority. The implementation of an opt-out system for insurance, as suggested by Lord Browne, would be a helpful starting point.

I pay tribute to those from the emergency services — the Fire and Rescue Service and the PSNI — who worked tirelessly throughout the flooding, in appalling conditions, to clear blockages and to get the flood water away from homes. They also tried to start the repair process for some of the people who were worst affected. Credit is also due to staff from the Housing Executive and other agencies, including Northern Ireland Water and Roads Service, who worked into the evenings and tried to make progress.

As a Belfast city councillor, I echo Lord Browne's comments on the role of Castlereagh Borough Council and Belfast City Council in trying to manage such a significant crisis. Much preparation work had been

done in the intervening months since the last flood, and the councils considered the issue of widespread flooding and how plans to deal with such a disaster could be made. Had the councils not done so, we may have been less well prepared and the effects might have been much worse. Credit is therefore due to those who not only had the endurance to deal with the situation as it evolved but the foresight to prepare for it.

A number of Ministers visited the sites of the flooding and people who had been affected, and that was appreciated. Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, visited some of the affected residents and listened to their concerns, and I know that that was welcome. Conor Murphy and Peter Robinson also visited some of the affected areas, and that was appreciated.

The quick response from the devolved Administration was in contrast to the delay and debate that has often accompanied such events in the past, and I am sure that Members welcomed that response.

There are other matters that I must address. I pay tribute to the volunteers who were involved in the aid effort, including the Red Cross and, particularly, the Salvation Army. They did a great job in taking care of people — not just those who were directly affected, but those who took part in the emergency response. Credit is due to the members of those groups for giving up their time so generously.

I wish to highlight issues that are the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). That office holds particular responsibility for promoting sustainability, although other Departments ultimately implement those policies. In view of the response of OFMDFM, it is appropriate to raise sustainability issues. One of those issues is the recurrence of flooding. I would not suggest for one minute that our sewerage system could have coped with the flooding, but we must carefully examine each incident and determine whether the lack of a quality sewerage system in any way exacerbated the distress and the damage that was caused.

Thorough investigation into maintenance schedules — a matter that Members have already referred to — and the quality of the system is required because the network is old. Such investigations are particularly important because many areas have been subjected to repeated flooding in recent years, often in less extreme weather conditions, which suggests that underlying problems need to be addressed.

Repeated flooding is also reflected in insurance premiums; when people renew their insurance, they find that their premiums have risen. That prices people further out of the insurance market.

The number of occasions on which extreme weather events occur is also of note. The Met Office model that is used to determine the return periods of storms must

be re-examined in the light of climate change. It is clear that a one-in-280-years return-period storm is a fairly extreme event. We all recognise that, and, having witnessed it, have no need to measure it. However, there are occasions when measuring a storm by return-period can be misleading. I worked in drainage and sewerage matters for a long time and I know that, within a three- or six-month monitoring period, a one-in-20-years return-period storm could occur on more than one occasion.

We must therefore bear in mind climate changes and ensure that, when we are designing systems and developing strategies, they are suited to the weather conditions that we shall experience not only today, but in the future. Evidently, that picture is changing.

I accept that no sewerage or drainage system could have carried the flows that our systems have been expected to take in recent weeks. However, although designing for those peak flows is neither economical nor — owing to the problems that they would create in dry weather — practical, we nevertheless must consider how we will plan drainage and sewerage in future.

We must take sustainability into account when planning the urban environment. East Belfast has seen unprecedented development in recent years. Sites have been filled in and development has proceeded more intensively inside the urban footprint. The proportion of roofs and paved areas, as opposed to open spaces, is continually increasing. That increases the speed of water run-off, and thus increases the risk of flash floods. Our current planning system has not responded well to that factor.

We must consider: sustainable urban drainage systems; the creation of artificial soak-aways; the use of attenuation tanks and perforated pipes; storm-water separation; and recycling of rainwater. All of those measures can slow the progress of water to the drainage system and, by spreading the peak flow over a longer time period, they can reduce the peak flow, thus maximising the benefit that can be derived from the existing system for the minimum cost.

In other parts of the world, such measures have been effective. We must, however, also respect the environment. We continue to build on river flood plains, and we are then aghast when those flood plains flood. If we do not carefully manage river flood plains and open spaces, what we have experienced in the last few weeks will recur.

Our management of floodwater and attenuation is similar to the building of ever-bigger roads to cope with increasing traffic. Everyone recognises that that is not a sustainable solution. Alternatively, flexibility in working times would ensure that all the traffic is not on the road at the same times.

Similarly, floodwater can be managed carefully so that it can either be retained and released slowly or deflected in different directions to try to improve the situation. Those issues must be considered from the earliest point in the design process and throughout the cycle of the system.

5.45 pm

Floodwater in the urban environment must be managed in a way that minimises damage and disruption. In the last couple of weeks, I have read a number of articles on this matter. There is an acceptance that flooding will occur in urban areas, so the issue is how that flooding can be contained to cause the least mayhem and damage to people's properties. The solution could range from creating channels in the road system to carry away floodwater to the introduction of much more complicated measures.

None of those measures is cheap. Any approach will require investment and, therefore, engagement with developers, planners, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment and local communities, if we are to deal with the problem effectively.

It is very clear that a sustainable, practical and cost-effective solution must be found. The problem must be comprehensively addressed because we do not want the victims of the recent floods to suffer any further misery and destruction. We also want to prevent any loss of life, which is a real risk in areas where urban flooding occurs.

I realise that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the junior Minister who is in the Chamber today, will not necessarily be able to respond to all of the issues today — I am aware that OFMDFM is the driver for sustainability rather than the delivery mechanism. However, I hope that it can drive that agenda hard throughout the other Departments, because I suspect that unless we respond creatively to this problem, we will be discussing it more frequently in the Chamber.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for East Belfast for raising the issue. I do not seek to apportion blame today; that does not help those who have needed help most. Rather, I pay tribute to the agency staff and volunteers who were involved in dealing with the aftermath of the recent floods.

We must learn lessons from the recent events and take steps to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are never again left to endure those terrible conditions. Ultimately, what was most distressing about the floods was what people endured in the days and weeks afterwards.

As I said, the most vulnerable were the worst affected by the floods — the elderly, the disabled, single parents,

those with mental health difficulties and families who are barely surviving on benefits. As Mrs Long mentioned, some people continue to be badly affected and are struggling from day to day and from week to week.

Benefit levels here are not exactly generous, and when a person's choices are limited or restricted by the extent of their resources, contents insurance sadly falls way down the list of priorities. Many of those affected did not even have the money for the bus fare to Avoniel Leisure Centre to avail of the services there. Some had no cooking facilities and no money for food. I pay tribute to some of the local Churches in the area that provided emergency funds, hot food, blankets and bedding.

Many people really needed cash to get them through the worst, and, thankfully, the Assembly helped by providing payments. However, we must do more, and lessons have to be learned from previous experiences. The debate about compensation is not new; compensation has been the subject of a long-running dispute throughout the conflict. Sadly, those affected by the floods have also experienced the same problems as those whose houses were damaged by bombs during the conflict. Some were able to claim compensation through the Compensation Agency, but many were not. Again, it was the most vulnerable who suffered, because they had either no contents insurance or inadequate contents insurance cover. Cash payments helped where possible, and were sometimes claimed back when insurance was paid. Sadly, however, some people were left with no cover, no cash and no help, so there are more lessons to be learned.

Through the Social Security Agency, the Department for Social Development offered community care grants for those who qualified for them and crisis loans or budgeting loans. However, when people are in a desperate situation and are faced with devastation, the last thing that they need is a loan that will add to their financial problems and take more money out of their benefits every week. That solution was absolutely ridiculous. Who wants to take a loan when they need money just to make ends meet?

I mentioned the offer of community care grants, but only certain people qualified for that benefit, which covers only basic necessities. The Department for Social Development and the Minister should look at this issue. The Social Security Agency and the Housing Executive should consider providing insurance cover for those most at risk. What will be the total cost to the Housing Executive and the Social Security Agency of repairs and replacing goods? Would it not make more sense to insure against the risk?

Reducing the cost of insurance, which was suggested by Sir Reg Empey, will not make much difference to people whose bills are increasing and who are facing water tax — regardless of promises made during the

election campaign. Provision of insurance to those most at risk will make a difference and take care of those people in the likely event that this will happen again.

Mr Newton: Like other Members, I thank the Member for East Belfast Sir Reg Empey for tabling this necessary Adjournment debate. This matter is of the utmost importance to people in the east of the city, but it also has ramifications for constituencies throughout Northern Ireland.

The recent flooding in East Belfast has caused much despair and difficulty for many residents. However, the emergency services and the volunteers should be praised. Had it not been for their rapid response and the way in which they dealt with a huge volume of calls from residents in distress, the situation would have been much worse.

I thank my right hon Friend and colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, for providing a financial package, through the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, to the people of East Belfast and other constituencies throughout Northern Ireland to help ease the burden of returning their homes to their former standard.

It is appropriate, as other Members have said, to thank the members of the Executive for their willingness to act in harmony to tackle this matter. Had we been operating under a direct rule Minister and not had a devolved Assembly, I doubt that such a rapid response would have been forthcoming.

Flooding is a serious problem in the east of the city. Lord Browne mentioned one area in which properties have been flooded four times in 17 years. That issue must be addressed. The public has a perception that the sewerage system is out of date and is unable to cope with large quantities of rainfall. The Assembly will have to address that, however we do it. The increase in number of newbuild homes will place even greater strain on the already overworked system.

Although we have been told that the rainfall in East Belfast was 2 ft above the highest recorded level for 23 years and that no drainage system could have coped with that volume of water, those who suffered flooding will not accept that as a reason in the future.

As the east of the city continues to develop into the most attractive area to live in in Belfast — or even in Northern Ireland — the Assembly must meet residents' expectations of safety and quality of life.

Unless the matter is addressed in the near future, life will become completely intolerable for those who, as Lord Browne mentioned, regularly face such problems.

Another issue that must be considered is the cleansing of rivers and tributaries. When I wrote to the Minister for Regional Development to ask how often the Loop River and its tributaries in East Belfast are

cleaned, I was informed by him that an annual cleaning and inspection is carried out. Furthermore, I asked him when certain areas in East Belfast last had their drains cleaned, and I was informed that that type of operation takes place twice a year in urban areas. However, numerous residents informed me that they had not seen a drain-cleansing team in their area for several years. That is not to say that the drains were not cleaned, as the residents might simply have missed the workmen.

One resident, however, pointed out an issue that, although small in itself, might have a multiplier effect. He commented that, because the gratings of the drains that need cleaning are located in a car park that serves a high-rise block of flats, the guy driving the cleansing vehicle has absolutely no way of finding out whose car or cars are parked over the drain gratings. Therefore, the guy simply drives away thinking that he has done his duty. That means that the drains might not be cleaned for at least a year, or even longer.

I know something of people's personal toll and the impact of the flooding on them. It made me feel extremely humble to be in homes where the whole ground floor of the dwelling had, more or less, been washed away and destroyed, not only by water but by raw sewage.

While out and about in the constituency, I met different people. One husband and wife and their two children, as they stood in their living room, had nowhere else to go. They ended up spending the night — or nights — in the Park Avenue Hotel. In their case, the insurance company representatives would take five days to arrive on the premises to assess the damage, because they had to come over from England.

I also met an 84-year-old woman who is normally confined to her house because she suffers from severe illnesses. She had been sitting in her living room — that is what she does — as the flood waters came in around her. Had it not been for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the lady would have continued to sit there while the floods rose around her. I pay tribute to the PSNI officers from the Willowfield station who, as far as I am concerned, rescued that woman from what might have been a life-threatening condition.

On two separate occasions, I was told by residents in the Orangefield area, that abuts the river near Belfast City Council's Orangefield Park, that they had been standing in their house, knee-deep in water, when, all of a sudden, the water drained away. One resident commented that people could have been swept off their feet by the pressure of the water going away. The strong perception is something of a major nature — perhaps some blockage — allowed that water to drain away. I suspect that we will never know what happened, but there is a strong perception that, in those circumstances, the flooding might well have been avoided.

In the high-rise flats on Clara Way, not only were the residents on the ground floors flooded out, a guy on the eighth floor was also affected because of the back-up of water coming into his apartment. Again, those people were flooded not just by water but by raw sewage.

I thank the members of the emergency services who helped to rescue those people, and to thank once again the volunteers who helped people in their time of need.

Two of my Belfast City Council colleagues have already mentioned the reaction of the council, whose emergency response units sprang into action extremely quickly. The council also opened Avoniel leisure centre to the public. I also pay tribute to the Salvation Army, which set up an emergency response centre on the Cregagh Road, giving people a place to go in a time of need.

My reason for speaking in this adjournment debate is to highlight that people in East Belfast need to have confidence that the sewerage and drainage system will be updated, and that its maintenance will be transparent to prevent a similar problem arising in future. I call on the relevant Ministers to address, with the Executive and Committees, the issue of sewerage and drainage, and to bring the system into the twenty-first century. If all the warnings about global warming are true, the weather conditions that we have recently experienced may become more frequent.

6.00 pm

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Paisley Jnr): I am in the rather anomalous position of replying to a Minister who has had some input into the Executive's activities on the subject under debate. Nonetheless, if he forgives me, I will struggle through and try to teach my granny how to suck eggs.

The Executive intend to respond to all debates in the House even where, as the Member for East Belfast Sir Reg Empey rightly identified, the matters are of a reserved nature. The Executive care about the people of Northern Ireland and want to demonstrate that by playing a role in the proper governance of all matters that affect our people.

On behalf of the Executive, I offer my condolences to the families of those who have lost their lives in the recent floods in the rest of the United Kingdom. That, to a large degree, puts into perspective what has happened in Northern Ireland.

I shall set out what actually happened. On the morning of Tuesday 12 June 2007, there were severe thunderstorms across Northern Ireland, causing flooding in domestic and commercial properties and on roads. The worst affected areas were Belfast, Castlereagh and Omagh. Bangor, Comber, Crossgar and Saintfield were among those areas that were affected by a second wave of flooding on Friday 15 June 2007.

On 12 June, rainfall totals between 12.30 pm and 4.00 pm in south and east Belfast were between 40 mm and 50 mm in a two- to three-hour period. Based on historic records, such a downpour would not be expected more than once every 100 to 200 years. Heavy rain also began to fall on Thursday 14 June, continuing until Friday afternoon. County Down and parts of Belfast were again the worst affected.

All the Members who have spoken in the debate have spoken of the heartache that has affected many people in our community. Members have also rightly identified that, while the headlines have now disappeared as newspapers and journalists move on to other stories, people are still affected by those issues. Indeed, many people will be out of their homes for six months or more.

The Administration's response was both effective and rapid. Members have rightly compared the reaction of our Administration to that of others in the rest of the United Kingdom. The sheer intensity of the rainfall overwhelmed the infrastructure, but Ministers are determined to learn any lessons that can be gleaned from the experience. The Executive have decided to set up a single telephone number for those affected by future weather-related and other emergencies. The number will be supported by a call-centre facility.

The Executive have asked for a thorough review of all emergency-planning processes that have been inherited from direct rule Ministers, not only those relating to emergency flooding, to strengthen our existing procedures and to highlight any areas for improvement. Mrs Long and Dawn Purvis highlighted that as a matter that they would like to be addressed, and a commitment to that has already been made.

The swift response by the Executive and district councils was key in the rapid delivery of help to those affected. That help included the early release of up to £5 million for practical assistance to those facing severe hardship. Ministers were told that, by 21 June, approximately £2 million of that money had already been spent, both on direct payments to householders and on the general clean-up.

There was a detailed discussion at last week's Executive meeting, during which tributes were paid to the workers of the agencies and organisations involved in the aftermath of the floods. There was particular praise for the local councils, which, at very short notice, administered the £1,000 emergency payment to the householders who were most severely affected. To date, approximately 750 payments of the emergency fund have been made.

Thanks to Sir Reg Empey, the issue of insurance has been the driving force during this debate. I add a caveat to my remarks by identifying that those who had insurance, and those who did not have insurance,

were affected in the same way. The insurance companies, as the Member for East Belfast Mr Newton pointed out, have not been able to pay out as quickly as the emergency fund payments were made. The Executive rose to that challenge, and demonstrated leadership on the issue.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has estimated that over 70% of its tenants do not have contents insurance. It is not clear how many private-sector tenants and homeowners are in similar circumstances. Information is provided twice a year to tenants on the importance of protecting their homes and their valuables, and, although tenants are free to arrange their own insurance, a pay-as-you-go home-contents insurance scheme is available through the Northern Ireland Tenants Action Project. The Executive encourage tenants to use that scheme.

The Minister for Social Development has indicated to the Executive that she intends to meet the entire range of stakeholders to ascertain what scope there may be for future action on the issue of insurance. Members will welcome that approach. I am sure that she will present a report, detailing her progress, to both the Executive and the House.

Businesses are required by law to have employers' liability insurance and motor insurance. The majority of insurance policies also cover public liability, product liability and product. Through Invest Northern Ireland, the Health and Safety Executive advice has been provided to companies on how to improve their insurance profiles. Therefore, the Executive are mindful of the matter.

To avoid any confusion in the House on the differences in insurance, compensation, and the ex gratia emergency payment, I shall outline the three different schemes. Insurance deals with specific items that are damaged and is covered by insurance policies. Compensation requires liability to be established before it can be paid. However, the ex gratia emergency payment, which the Executive made, is an extraordinary payment, and was made on welfare grounds for householders. The liability for damage was not an issue and did not have to be established.

There were some comments in the press, which were not mentioned in this debate, about the possibility of applying for a European Solidarity Fund. That is a matter for the Secretary of State. However, the European Solidarity Fund is available only in the event of a major national disaster having taken place in a member state of the European Union. To be eligible for assistance under that scheme, the estimated cost of the direct damage must be over €3 billion, or 0.6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the state in question. Members can give a mighty sigh of relief that, although the scale of the problem that we faced was terrible on an

individual basis, it was not, thank God, as devastating as a national disaster.

To make the UK eligible for the European Solidarity Fund, it is estimated that a 0.6% threshold of GDP means that the costs of direct damage from a major national disaster need to exceed £6.5 billion. Furthermore, that scheme provides for major infrastructure damages, and not necessarily for personal damages.

I shall draw the attention of my colleagues on the Executive to the debate. I thank the Members for contributing to the debate — each in a unique way.

Mrs Naomi Long quite rightly identified issues regarding sustainability in which OFMDFM plays a leading role, and she brought her knowledge of drainage schemes to the attention of the House. I am sure Members will ensure that those issues are addressed in the review that the Executive is driving forward.

Dawn Purvis the Member for East Belfast identified and laid down a challenge to the Executive to ensure that lessons are learned. The challenge has been made, and we must pick it up and run with it. I am sure the Executive will respond to that challenge.

Robin Newton made some very constructive criticism about drainage clearances in parts of his own constituency, and I am sure that the relief when that drainage system was unblocked was clear for all to see. He is right to identify the fact that if there was a blockage; it should not have been there in the first place.

Lord Browne identified the appalling vista of sewage that affected many homes in Northern Ireland. He rightly identified the personal heartache that it caused to many individuals. He also said that he had discussions with a hydrologist — not something that we can all boast, but at least we now know how he spends his weekends. I note his point on the serious matter of insurance opt-out, and I will draw it to the attention of the relevant Ministers in the Executive.

Finally, I will turn to the important points made by my colleague Sir Reg Empey. He asked OFMDFM to write to the insurance sector concerning a UK-wide initiative. OFMDFM should be made aware of that point, and I will inform him of progress in that regard. Indeed, some of the matters that he raised in his contribution can be raised within the margins of the review, and I have no doubt that he will do so.

Adjourned at 6.12 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 2 July 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Royal Assent

Budget Bill

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 became law on 29 June 2007.

Royal Assent

Welfare Reform Bill

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Welfare Reform Bill has received Royal Assent. The Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 became law on 29 June 2007.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion to change the membership of the Business Committee. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Patsy McGlone replace Dr Alasdair McDonnell as a member of the Business Committee. — [Dr A McDonnell.]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

NHS Dental Treatment

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern about the lack of availability of NHS dental treatment and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to act immediately to ensure that NHS treatment is available to all those who are entitled to it, in conjunction with a dental health strategy.

The motion's purpose is to highlight the present shortage of dentists carrying out NHS work and to draw attention to the urgent need for the implementation of a better dental-health strategy for everyone in Northern Ireland, especially for children and older people, as well as economically disadvantaged people and people with disabilities.

The failure of previous Governments to agree terms with dentists to carry out NHS work has meant that dentists here, in increasing numbers, are taking on more private patients. In turn, that has led to the present situation in which people, when they seek dental treatment, find it very difficult to make appointments for NHS services. Some have to travel significant distances to access NHS treatment.

A report on the Southern Health and Social Services Board area showed that, in October 2006, only 43% of dentists were providing NHS treatment; by May 2007, a few months later, the number had dropped to 21%. Although those figures are particular to one area, the picture is similar across the west. Many constituents in Fermanagh and South Tyrone have expressed their concerns about the growing problem and the difficulties that they face when trying to access out-of-hours services for emergency treatment.

General dental practitioners, who are independent contractors, provide the majority of services. There is no obligation on them to treat patients under the Health Service, and the current contractual arrangements do not permit health and social services boards to require dentists to provide NHS dental services.

Finding a solution to this situation must be a priority. Ensuring that patients have access to dental care is the first step, after which the problems with dental contracts must be resolved. Funding for hospital-based services that deliver specialist treatment must be secured, and the number of training places for dental hygienists and dental nurses must be increased.

The primary dental-care strategy for Northern Ireland proposes fundamental changes to the way in

which dentistry is provided, including the introduction of local commissioning and new contracts for high-street dentists. That offers an opportunity to make radical changes and to transform poor oral health.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member agree that there are only two routes open to the Minister to ensure widespread dental care: either dentists being compelled to carry out some NHS work or offering dentists incentives to do so? The incentive route would allow dentists to hold the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ransom for the price contracts that they demand.

Mr Gallagher: I want to make it clear that I am not an advocate of compulsion. I notice that the Minister is in the Chamber; I await his comments on that area.

The poor state of oral health among the people of Northern Ireland is well documented. It is much worse than anywhere else on these islands. By the time children here reach 12 years of age, they have more than double the level of tooth decay that their counterparts in England have. The greatest single reason for children having to go under general anaesthetic is to have teeth extracted.

The Department must make tackling our poor record on dental health a key issue. The lack of availability of NHS dental treatment inevitably increases the risk of poor oral health, with the attendant negative impact on general health. Most at risk are vulnerable people in the community, those who experience social deprivation, elderly people, and, as I said earlier, young children.

The lack of availability of NHS dental treatment also has a severe impact on people in rural areas, who have to travel greater distances to be treated. Very often, they do not have access to public transport.

Approximately 53% of the population is registered with a dentist. Registration, however, lapses if individuals do not attend their dentists within a 15-month period.

An awareness campaign is needed to inform the public about that issue, since many people, when they require urgent treatment, discover that they are no longer registered. The availability of NHS dentists, and equality of access for all sections of the population, need to be addressed urgently. That will require the Department and the health and social services boards to take immediate steps to employ additional dentists to provide treatment for NHS patients.

The underfunding of dentistry has been carried over from previous Governments, and it has fallen behind other areas of the Health Service. Since 1997, UK-wide general spending on the Health Service has increased by 64%. However, spending on general dental services has increased only by 22%. As a result, the salaries of dentists who have concentrated on NHS

work have markedly reduced. Since costs for premises and equipment are the dentists' responsibility, it is not surprising that more and more of them face falling incomes and put a greater emphasis on the treatment of private patients.

The new strategy must ensure that dental-health promotion, information and advice for patients are key elements of new contracts, because dentists have a significant role to play. That work is time-consuming, and it should be part of a wider care package in dentists' contracts. Two out of three dentists in Northern Ireland believe that they are unable to spend sufficient time with their patients. Patient surveys indicate that patients want more time with their dentists to discuss preventive measures. Patients want their dentists to spend more time advising them about good dental health.

The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is at Committee Stage; it provides an opportunity to begin to address some of those issues. The proposed policy change that allows dental services to be commissioned locally by health and social services boards is a first step in tackling the difficulty of access to Health Service dental care.

I ask the Department, in conjunction with the health and social services boards, to take steps for the immediate employment of NHS dentists. Local commissioning will allow resources to be targeted at areas of greatest need. Priority must be given to the safeguarding and development of community dental services in order to protect that role in providing care to the most vulnerable patients, such as older people and those with special needs.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome any opportunity to speak on health issues. However, I am at a loss to understand why the motion has been tabled. As Mr Gallagher said, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is already dealing with the issue of NHS dental treatment. The Committee Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill gives Committee members the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill line by line, and to add to it or take away from it.

However, I have to concede that, although there have been improvements in oral health over the past few years, children and adults in Northern Ireland continue to have higher levels of dental disease than their counterparts in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. All Members accept that fact. Figures from the 2003 child dental-health survey show that 60% of Northern Ireland's five-year-olds already have tooth decay. Some 50% of that decay presents in the most deprived 10% of the population, and 75% is in the most deprived 20% of the population. That equates to

approximately 8,000 children in the Province having teeth extracted annually under general anaesthetic. Alarming, a high percentage of children attending for dental general anaesthetic are under five years of age.

12.15 pm

There is also a problem with taxpayers funding the training of dentists who, shortly after qualifying, concentrate on private work outside the National Health Service. We must urgently ensure that sufficient NHS dentists are available throughout Northern Ireland. Much good work is being done at community level, and I want to refer to one example. The area community dental service and health-visiting teams throughout the Southern Health and Social Services Board area work in collaboration to improve the health of all and reduce inequalities in healthcare. They are particularly concerned with improving tiny tots' teeth — I think that that is rather sweet. I should not have said that — sugar is bad for teeth. With additional Investing for Health funding, they have been able to extend the programme by providing free toothbrushes and toothpaste for children in the most deprived areas. All children who attend health-visiting assessments receive oral health advice from a health visitor.

Toothbrushes, fluoride toothpaste and leaflets on oral health are also provided. Feeding cups are distributed by health visitors to encourage children from six months of age to use a feeding cup, and inappropriate feeding practices are discouraged. If health visitors identify families in need, resources are provided for other family members; therefore, inequalities in healthcare are also being addressed. Health visitors have been trained to run the programme, and resources are distributed by the area community dental service.

The provision and distribution of feeding cups by health visitors during children's assessment visits reinforce the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA) recommendations that children should be introduced to drinking from a cup at six months of age and that bottle-feeding should be discouraged from age one. Inappropriate and prolonged use of a bottle can result in long-term health problems. Examples are poor feeding technique; food refusal; speech problems; and tooth decay. Health visitors also raise parents' awareness of the dangers of sugar-sweetened drinks, which can cause tooth decay early in childhood.

There is substantial evidence to show that the provision of toothbrushes, and toothpaste containing 1,000 parts per million of fluoride, produces a significant improvement in the levels of decay in young children's teeth. Health visitors encourage parents to assist with twice-daily tooth brushing until

children can do it effectively themselves, usually by the age of seven.

Early childhood is a vital time for good nutrition and healthy tooth development, which can reduce the risk of health problems in later life. The tiny tots' teeth initiative shows that increased collaboration and partnership working is a starting block towards the achievement of the shared goal of better health and well-being for all. Working together can make a difference and encourage parents and carers to adopt healthy lifestyles for themselves and their families.

This is important work and an indication of what can be achieved through collaboration. However, it is essential that we ensure that sufficient dentists are available for patients throughout Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad of the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I share Tommy Gallagher's concern about the lack of NHS dental treatment.

I am contacted by constituents who regularly experience such difficulties. They cannot find a dentist who can take them on as NHS patients in an area close to them. As a result, they are forced to go to clinics in other areas and pay the additional travelling costs. Given that those who live in the most deprived areas live with high levels of social deprivation, they are more likely to have poor oral health. Children who live in the top 20% of most deprived wards are twice as likely to have dental decay as those who live in the top 20% of most affluent wards. Those in the former category pay more to access treatment, which is a disincentive for getting the required treatment.

The oral health of the North has consistently been worse than that in the South of Ireland or in England. The average five-year-old child in Belfast has approximately 2.5 teeth affected by tooth decay, and a similar child in London has about 1.5 teeth affected. A similar child in Dublin has only one affected tooth; there is a great disparity there.

The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill contains proposals to allow the Department to commission dental services and to employ dentists directly. I hope that that will go some way towards achieving better results.

The Department must target resources at the areas of greatest need and encourage dentists to register and provide care for patients with greatest need. That must be a priority. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am sure that every Member agrees with the sentiment of the motion; however, I have difficulty with it. In the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, there is a substantial section on dental care and contracts for dentists. Members discussed the Bill, and it was sent to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public

Safety for scrutiny. The Committee has taken evidence from dentists and others.

Discussing on the Floor of the House a Bill that is with the Committee makes us nothing more than a talking shop. Instead, we should follow the procedures that have been laid down in Standing Orders for the handling of a Bill, and for all of the work of the House. The Bill should be discussed in Committee and any amendments should be brought before the House.

Although we agree with its sentiment, it amazes me that the motion could be brought before the House when the Bill is with the Committee. We must regulate our business better.

I will not, therefore, speak to the motion. I agree with its sentiment; however, we should follow the procedures that are right and proper.

Mr McCarthy: The want of dental facilities in Northern Ireland is nothing short of a scandal. In fact, it is a shame on those who are supposed to deliver a basic health service to the people of Northern Ireland.

Dentistry and the prevention of tooth decay are a vital part of our Health Service and should be available on the NHS to everyone from the cradle to the grave; however, that is not the case. Dentistry — like every other facility in the Health Service — is grossly underfunded, and that must be put right without delay. I sincerely hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel does not classify the need for sufficient funding for a decent Health Service as a crowd-pleaser. Visiting the dentist when necessary is a basic human right. The prevention of tooth decay should be an important part of that health facility. The money paid by Government to dentists for basic work falls far short of the actual work and materials used. Therefore, dentists perform work privately and, thus, many constituents cannot get an appointment.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: No, I will not give way. I have only five minutes.

The result is that newly qualified dentists leave Northern Ireland for more lucrative posts elsewhere. The fundamental problem of funding resources and support for primary-care dentistry must be a priority for the Assembly. The number one priority must be the health of our people, and sufficient funding must be forthcoming.

We hear much talk of a new multi-sports stadium costing millions of pounds, but no one seems to agree that we really need such a facility. It is certain that no one can agree on where it should be sited.

Furthermore, a new Irish language Act will cost us millions of pounds. I am sure that those are noble causes, but we cannot afford such luxuries if ordinary

folk cannot even get a dentist. Surely common sense would tell us to get our priorities right. Luxuries can come later. If the motion is passed, I will expect the Health Minister to get the necessary funding through the Executive to allow all dentists to provide a first-class service to everyone in Northern Ireland.

Dr Coulter's comments amazed me. All private Members' motions that come to the Floor of the Assembly have been approved by the Business Committee. The UUP has two Members who sit on that Committee, as do most other parties. They must believe that today's motion is important. I expect the parties that make up the Executive to listen to the voice and the will of the Assembly through their elected Members who sit on the Business Committee.

I am glad to see that the Health Minister is present — he has attended every debate on health matters and has perhaps been one of the busiest Ministers.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCarthy: I expect Mr McGimspey to attend tomorrow's debate on the shortage of respite care. I sympathise with the Minister to some extent because, since 8 May 2007, his Department has been asked to find resources for several important health issues: free personal care for older people; equality in prescription charges; dentistry facilities for everyone in Northern Ireland; and increased provision of respite care for all who need it.

With the support of the Health Minister's Executive colleagues, dentistry facilities for everyone can be provided. That is exactly the type of thing that the Assembly was set up to do. Shortly, it will be proved whether the Minister and his Executive colleagues can deliver on what elected Members have stated as priorities. The entire Business Committee deemed the provision of dentistry facilities for everyone to be a sufficiently important subject to debate, and I support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the motion. However, I am at a loss, as was the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as to why the motion is before the House today, given that that Committee is still considering the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Notwithstanding that, the access to and availability of NHS dentists in Northern Ireland has been an ongoing problem for far too long, resulting in ever more people missing out on vital oral healthcare. As a consequence of the increasing numbers of dentists who are moving to private clinics, fewer dentists now work for the NHS. The cost of oral healthcare that private clinics provide further isolates many in the community, who are forced to join waiting lists or travel great distances to visit their dentists. Healthcare, oral or otherwise, is the right of everyone, and Northern

Ireland lags behind the mainland in the number of people who are registered with dentists.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the health boards must examine what is being done to ensure that newly qualified dentists enter and remain in the NHS, and how to improve the system so that dentists are not lured into private practice. The cost and restrictions that face dentists serve only to frustrate the current systems, and certain limitations mean that many dentists feel forced to go into private practice. Therefore, the Department must consider how to improve the lot of the NHS dentists who struggle to keep costs down while providing a high standard of service to their patients.

The Assembly should not tolerate the major knock-on effects of ignoring dental hygiene. More children suffer from tooth decay in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. It is a deeply rooted problem. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: He delivered that line with a straight face.

Mr Buchanan: Yes, I did.

Members must support any programme to educate children about oral health and to encourage them to visit the dentist. Tooth decay, particularly in children, is a result of an unhealthy diet. That problem is made worse when the teeth are not regularly checked. If the encouragement of children to attend regular check-ups at locally based NHS dentists can be made to coincide with education on healthcare, that should reduce the numbers suffering from tooth decay. Preventive measures can be embedded in the mindsets of children before major dental work is required.

Ideally, there should be no differentiation between the services that are provided by the NHS and by private clinics. Unfortunately, however, that is not always the case.

More pressure will be added to the already pressurised NHS dental service because more of the ageing population are retaining their own teeth.

12.30 pm

The NHS needs the resources to meet demand to a high standard, and that should be made clear in the overall dental-health strategy. The Department must examine the frameworks that are currently in place to eradicate any future escalation of that problem. What is being done in those areas that most suffer from dental problems and where people cannot readily access a local NHS dentist?

According to the British Dental Association (BDA), the uptake of dental services is low in clearly identified areas of Northern Ireland. Those areas must be targeted with literature and resources that detail what people can expect from their local NHS dentist.

The Health Minister cannot afford to stall on this matter. There is a great need to alleviate this fundamental problem, which can be easily rectified with the right strategy in place, and easy access to an NHS dentist.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister must be happy that there is a five-minute time limit on each contributor to the debate because Kieran McCarthy was getting through the health budget rightly, and spending it on a number of measures.

Others, including the Chairperson of the Health Committee, have mentioned that the Committee has begun to examine dental-care provision and have said that the current system must be changed through the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. I have no doubt that the comments of Members and the response of the Minister will be taken on board by the Committee when it considers the Committee Stage of the Bill, as Bob Coulter said. I look forward to the debate that we will have on the Bill in the House in the coming months, and to making progress on the issue of lack of provision of NHS dentists and dental care.

Reports and strategies that have been commissioned over the years have shown that the North has the worst oral health in Britain and throughout the island of Ireland. The primary care strategy of September 2006 outlined that the reasons for that related to lifestyles and deprivation — as mentioned by Mr Buchanan. It has been widely accepted that people who live in areas that are affected by multiple deprivation suffer the worst levels of oral health.

The location of dental practices has been largely due to market forces, rather than attempts to meet the needs of people who live in a particular area. Equity and equality should be at the heart of our attempts to improve oral health care for all. Dental practices should be located beside shops and community and health centres. Dental practices must provide a flexible and mobile service for people who live in rural constituencies, and particularly for those with special needs. Those services must be beside — and brought to — people in order to improve oral healthcare. I am sure that the Minister will take that point on board.

Schools, particularly preschools and primary schools, are currently promoting healthy-eating schemes for our young people. Children are becoming more aware that sugary foods and drinks harm their teeth and gums. However, despite that, the primary care strategy of 2006 outlined that:

“approximately 10% of 5 year-olds possess half of all the decayed teeth for this age group”.

That problem is strongly related to deprivation. The link between poverty and health inequality cannot be ignored.

Moreover, the oral healthcare needs of the homeless, Travellers, ethnic minorities and others must be improved, in conjunction with dental services for the elderly. Services for people living in isolated rural communities and for people with learning difficulties must also be improved. Those are some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups in our society.

Investing for Health dental targets, following the review of the oral health strategy, were surpassed. The current targets that are included in the Department's priorities for action outlined that, by March 2008, boards and trusts must reduce tooth-decay levels in five-year-olds in the top five most deprived wards in each of the trust areas. I would appreciate it if the Minister could tell Members how those efforts are going, if he has any such information.

The Assembly must identify the links between poverty, deprivation and ill health, including poor oral healthcare. Better oral health will have an impact on self-esteem and self-confidence; it will create greater awareness of health promotion, and lead to a greater uptake in the number of people who register with their local dentist. Suggested changes to the way in which dental services are organised are cited in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

More local dentists, provision for dentists through the NHS, better registration and a greater uptake of services are all welcome. I look forward to debating this subject in the autumn, and I also look forward to discussing it with the Committee.

I thank Tommy Gallagher and Carmel Hanna for tabling the motion. I note Members' comments about debating dental treatment in the Committee. The House should not be stopped from debating a motion just because it is being discussed in a Committee. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, ever mindful of the fact that it is already doing the rounds of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. There are few things that can stop a man in his tracks, and a sore tooth is one such thing.

The sad fact is that Northern Ireland has the worst oral hygiene and tooth decay in the UK. Recent statistics from the British Dental Association show that the average number of bad teeth in a 12-year-old child in England is one, in Wales it is one and a half, in Scotland it is one and three quarters, and here in the Province it is two and a half. Why is that? Some of the problems may stem from sugary drinks and sweets.

Northern Ireland — indeed, the UK as a whole — has a serious lack of dedicated NHS dentists. Some 2,000 left the NHS last April alone. Previously, NHS dentists were paid on the amount of work done, rather than paid in general, as happens with doctors. There was a “drill-and-fill” mentality, which sometimes

resulted in fillings that were not strictly necessary, and no time was spent on preventive care. As a result, we have a generation that was not taught good oral hygiene and is suffering the result. We are passing the fear of dentists, and an unhealthy attitude, on to our children. We have the highest number of people with no natural teeth left than any other part of the UK or the Republic of Ireland. Many would say that it is small wonder.

A constituent of mine went to Belfast City Hospital recently one Sunday and found the waiting room chock-full of people in agony with dental problems, unable to see their dentists — if they were registered with one in the first place. They were praying that the hospital dentists would be able to stop the pain. As often happens, the dentists are reluctant to work on the teeth of the patient of another dentist, preferring to prescribe something for the pain and referring the patient to his dentist, which puts the patient back to square one. That is what happened to a 31-year-old lady with a tooth broken at the root. She suffered in agony for nearly a week before giving in and going to hospital. Her dentist had been struck off for misconduct, and other surgeries were reluctant to take on a young woman with a husband, and five children under the age of nine on the NHS. They preferred to tell her about a prepay plan that would have cost her a fortune, so she suffered the pain, praying that it would let up, until she could take it no longer.

Mrs Foster: I am glad that the Member is now talking about female tooth decay. I was worried that he was implying earlier that there was only male tooth decay. Does the Member agree that one of the difficulties, especially in rural areas, is that not only are dental practitioners going to the private sector, they are also moving to other jurisdictions such as, for those living in border areas, the Republic of Ireland? The Member who moved the motion will probably agree with that.

Mr Shannon: I agree with the Member wholeheartedly. Dentists are taking their practices elsewhere, and that is part of the problem.

Some Members can remember when dental nurses came to schools and gave each child a tablet. It turned the mouth blue, which showed whether a child had bad teeth, and that was the whole idea.

It has been found that middle-class professional families are more likely to have 20% less decay than those from working-class families, and that also underlines the issue.

A dentist in Ards came to me for help with getting planning approval for her surgery. She has promised to undertake NHS treatment. However, the difficulty we faced in trying to get the surgery through the planning process almost — I was almost going to say that it

almost drove me to drink, but that would be wrong — drove me up the walls.

Mr S Wilson: Sweets.

Mrs Foster: Fizzy drinks.

Mr Shannon: It would make you eat more chocolate.

Maintaining good oral health must be encouraged in schools and carried through to dental surgeries, where dentists have time to demonstrate good oral hygiene. It is important to be able to see a dentist without paying absurd amounts of money and to get emergency appointments when in agony. It is also important to be able to have teeth professionally cleaned once a year in order to stop decay and for parents to access advice on how to teach their children good oral hygiene. All those issues are important, and that is why I shall support the motion.

Of the 75% increase in spending on the NHS, only 9% went to dentistry. The dental system must be brought up to date. There is a fear that, by 2011, the current shortage of NHS dentists will have doubled. Something must be done now to ensure that that statistic is never realised in the Province.

Mr S Wilson: This debate is important, although it has been alleged that it is premature as the Bill is in Committee Stage. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile for Committee members and the Minister to hear some views from the Floor of the House on how the issue might be best addressed in the Bill.

We have listened to the usual round of Members suggesting that more money should be spent on employing more dentists, that more surgeries are needed, that surgeries should be located closer to populated areas, and that surgeries should perform a wider range of work. However, the most important thing, from the Assembly's point of view, is to focus on the fact that available resources are finite. From that standpoint, we can try to advise the Minister on how those resources might be best spent.

I am not an expert but, having looked at some of the statistics, I am struck by the fact that, in comparison with other parts of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland does not have a big shortage in the number of dentists per head of population. The problem is therefore not a case of people being unable to find a dentist simply because not enough dentists are employed. That is an important point to make, because at least three Members who have spoken so far in the debate have urged the Minister to employ more dentists.

If the Minister decides to use the resources available to him to employ more dentists, it might not actually address the issue that really needs to be tackled. If other parts of the United Kingdom, with similar population distribution, similar levels of deprivation, and a similar geographical spread etc, can provide a better service with the same number of dentists, that is

clearly not the direction in which we ought to be pointing the Minister.

Another striking aspect of the debate is that many Members have said that the problem stems from the fact that dentists are migrating from National Health Service work to private work. I assume that that happens because dentists have a degree of independence, and they use that independence to follow the market and to make the most money. If that is the source of the problem, there are only two options.

One option is to employ more dedicated National Health Service dentists, as Mr Gallagher seemed to suggest. Enough Members are of a certain age to remember when a dual system was in operation. I am not so sure that that is the way to go. Because of the way in which pay would be structured under a two-tier system, and the fact that dentists can make more money through private work, it would be inevitable that the best dentists would not be attracted to dedicated National Health Service work. If they were directly employed, the best dentists would go into private practice, with the remainder going to the National Health Service. I do not think that we want a two-tier system.

The other option would be to accept that dentists can operate independently. We can either direct them to do a certain percentage of NHS work — an option that appears to have been rejected by the proposer of the motion — or we can find a way to give dentists an incentive to do NHS work. Furthermore, an incentive to do a wider range of work avoids Jim Shannon's contention that dentists simply get paid for the number of teeth that they drill and the number of fillings that they stick in — although I think that my dentist may have worked on that basis in the past.

12.45 pm

We must be careful. If it is decided that a contract should be negotiated that pays dentists for any work that they do, that pays them to do preventive work, and, perhaps, even allows them to send out dental nurses to give advice to patients, we must ensure that — in light of what happened in England when GPs negotiated their new contracts — the contract does not give dentists a bye ball that allows them to make piles of money from the system without actually delivering a better service.

If that is the route that we decide to go down — and I notice that another Member, whether inadvertently or not, used that term also — and we decide to allow dentists to pick and choose between private practice and NHS work, we must ensure that the new contract is sufficiently foolproof to guarantee as wide a range of services as possible without hitting the public purse.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the proposer of the motion. I am grateful for the opportunity to

address the issues. I believe in a Health Service that is high quality and easily accessible. I know that access to Health Service dentists is a problem for people in many parts of Northern Ireland. My Department is addressing that problem.

Northern Ireland has the worst oral health in the UK. When compared to their counterparts in the rest of the UK, our 12-year-olds have almost three times the level of dental decay. That level of decay is related to lifestyle and to deprivation. On average, we spend more money each week on cigarettes, confectionery and sugared soft drinks than any other part of the UK. For the information of Members, those three things are extremely bad for teeth and oral hygiene. We also eat less fruit and vegetables and brush our teeth less frequently. People in disadvantaged areas are doubly affected. Health inequalities affect all areas of the population's health, including dentistry and oral health.

There are two ways to address the matter. First, I will consider the experience of the Republic of Ireland. At one time, children's dental health in the Republic of Ireland was considerably worse than that in Northern Ireland. Now, the Republic of Ireland boasts one of the lowest rates of dental decay in Europe. Five-year-olds in Dublin have less than half the dental decay of five-year-olds in Belfast. A recent cross-border study showed that 16-year-olds living in the Republic of Ireland have significantly better dental health than their counterparts in Northern Ireland.

The same study showed that oral health inequalities in the Republic of Ireland have virtually disappeared. How did the Republic of Ireland achieve those improvements? Water fluoridation was used to address the problem. In the 1960s, fluoride was added to the water in the Republic of Ireland. Improved dental health is the result.

Mr Campbell: The Minister is entering quite a contentious area: forcible fluoridation. He referred to children and young people and the considerably worse ratios in Northern Ireland. Will he tell the House whether, over the past years, the poor dental records of younger people in Northern Ireland have been statically bad or have they been improving from an even worse position, for example, 10 years ago?

Mr McGimpsey: I would have addressed that point if I had had the opportunity to finish speaking. I said that fluoridation is one instrument that has been used. Another instrument is available to us. In the south-east of England, fluoridation is virtually superfluous because of better support from dental services and a better understanding of prevention through improved oral health and oral hygiene. We have to choose one option or the other.

Mr Campbell stated that fluoridation is a contentious issue. However, providing that the support

were to exist for it, the south-east of England example could offer an alternative method for addressing the problem of poor oral health.

The delivery of dental services is the responsibility of each health and personal social services board. Dental services in Northern Ireland are delivered in two ways. The general dental service, which provides the bulk of Health Service dentistry in the Province, is delivered by high street dental practices. Dentists are paid fees for each registered patient and for each item of treatment given. Non-exempt patients pay 80% of the fees, up to a maximum amount. Dentists have a financial incentive to provide treatment, as greater volume equals greater income.

The second way is through the community dental service, which is a trust-based salaried service, dealing with individuals who are unable to use the high street dentists, such as children with learning disabilities. That service also provides oral health promotion and school screening.

Private practice is also available to patients willing to pay. General dental practitioners in the Health Service have a contractual obligation to provide out-of-hours treatment and ensure that any patient who is registered with them has access to urgent treatment. Currently, dentists are paid for each item of service and claim for those items through the Central Services Agency (CSA). There are problems with those arrangements, however; dentists have no financial incentive to improve the quality of their services or provide wider oral health promotion advice and education, as they do not get paid for that.

Since the early 1990s many dentists have reduced their commitment to the Health Service and have developed better-paid private practice work. That has resulted in a shortage of dentists providing treatment under the Health Service. Although many dentists continue to provide Health Service treatment for children and exempt adults, a growing number will only see fee-paying adults under private contract, which creates access problems.

Sue Ramsey, Jim Shannon and other Members mentioned a lack of dentists. There are significantly more dentists per head of the population in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the UK. The issue is not the number of dentists; it is about putting a proper contract in place for their services, and that is what I intend to do.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his comments. My point was not about the number of dentists, but about the people who cannot get dental services, especially in rural constituencies — it is about bringing the service to them.

Mr McGimpsey: I agree that access is the key; however, as Sammy Wilson said, the problem lies in

getting more dentists into the system rather than merely producing more dentists; the number of dentists that we already have should be adequate. Although access to Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland is better than it is in England, I acknowledge that the situation here is deteriorating. Seven hundred and eight thousand people are now in receipt of Health Service dental treatment in Northern Ireland — almost 32,000 fewer than in the figures published five years ago.

High street dentists in Northern Ireland are independent contractors. Currently, they can choose to provide general dental services or private dentistry, or a mixture of both. Dentists are not obliged to accept a patient for Health Service treatment, and they can deregister patients if they so choose. Under current contractual arrangements, health and personal social services boards cannot compel dentists to provide Health Service dentistry. The boards cannot ensure that independent local practitioners provide enough Health Service dentistry to meet all needs, nor can they prevent gap areas in which Health Service dentistry is unavailable. The Member who moved the motion, Tommy Gallagher, represents a constituency that is a gap area. The health and social services boards will try to fill that gap by employing salaried dentists.

My Department's primary dental-care strategy, which was published last November, sets out a 10-year plan for Health Service primary dental-care services. The strategy was developed around the local commissioning of services. Under the proposed arrangements, commissioners will be responsible for securing primary care dental services. Those services will be obtained from general dental practitioners, the community dental service, salaried staff, or a mixture of all three.

It is important to note that the commissioners will be able to contract for the delivery of dental services, which will give the health and social services boards more flexibility than they have in meeting the needs of their areas, and will help the commissioners to ensure that dental services are available to everyone in their locality.

It will also access problems where general dental services are not available by giving the boards the control to establish contracts with a variety of providers.

The reforms in the strategy include local commissioning of services; access to appropriate Health Service dental care for those who need it; greater emphasis on disease prevention; guaranteed out-of-hours services; and a revised payment system that rewards dentists.

Negotiations have already started between my Department and the general dental practice committee of the BDA to secure a bespoke contract for Northern

Ireland, thus enabling the recommendations of the primary dental care strategy to be implemented.

Mr McCarthy: Is there a time frame for implementing the strategy?

Mr McGimpsey: The strategy was published in November 2006 and is governed by the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. It is a work in progress.

During a debate on free personal care, which I believe was proposed by Mrs Hanna, I explained to the House that, taking into account the stages involved, the strategy's implementation would be completed by 2010 at the earliest. An amendment was proposed for implementation to be completed by 2008. However, it is just not physically possible to do so in that time frame. As I said to the House on that day, if the strategy could be implemented faster, I would ensure that it was implemented faster. However, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill governs the roll out of such matters.

The new commissioning powers to be given to the health boards will improve access to Health Service dentistry, allow a greater focus on prevention and enable the development of a regional contract with local flexibilities.

A question was asked concerning what could be done to address the drift of dentists from the NHS to private practice. Following representations from the BDA, an additional recurring investment of £2 million from 2007-08 was agreed. That will slow the drift from Health Service dentistry. The additional £2 million will assist dentists who continue to provide care for Health Service patients with the costs of running their practices. This investment forms part of the proposed new contract arrangements.

Mr Donaldson: Is the Minister aware that there have been some cases in which dentists have told their patients that they can no longer remain in their practices because they are moving to private practices, and, in some of those cases, the dentists have refused to pass on those patients' dental records to colleagues who could provide NHS care? Will the Department issue a direction to dentists in Northern Ireland stating that, at the very least, dental records should transfer with patients?

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Donaldson for that point. I am aware that dentists can deregister patients. I understood that records did follow patients, but I will make enquiries about the matter. It is a very important point.

Health and social services boards are seeking to commission salaried dentists in areas where there are problems with access to dental services. Mr Gallagher's constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone is one such area. The Northern Health and Social Services

Board supplied a business case to the Department and secured funds to employ a salaried dentist. The Western Health and Social Services Board identified the need to recruit dentists to address access problems in its area. The other two boards have also been asked how they intend to address shortfalls in Health Service dentistry in their areas.

I assure Members that all possible steps will be taken to ensure that dental treatment is available under the Health Service to those who are entitled to it and who wish to avail of it.

Mrs Hanna: I am pleased to make the winding-up speech on the motion, which was brought to the House by my colleague Tommy Gallagher and myself.

The motion highlights a very important health issue. Indeed, it will strengthen our resolve to ensure that the legislation does the business. Northern Ireland has the worst level of oral health when compared with the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Years of underinvestment have left Northern Ireland with an unacceptable National Health dental service. Like the National Health Service, dental treatment must be free at the point of need and provide a competent service to everyone who needs it. As has been mentioned by other Members, the solution does not lie with merely increasing the number of dentists but with increasing the number of dentists who work in the National Health Service and ensuring that patients have adequate access to dentists.

1.00 pm

The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is introducing changes to the way in which dental services are organised in an attempt to address the difficulties that people face in getting access to Health Service dental care. It is also introducing changes in the targeting of resources in areas of greatest needs. Provisions contained in the Bill will also enable a health and social services board to enter into a contract, under which primary dental services are provided. Furthermore, the Bill contains provisions to govern the terms and content of the new general dental services. I welcome that as an enabling amendment, and I want to talk it up. I want to ensure that it widens access to those who need it. Who would have thought that National Health dental services would be at an all-time low? Given a fair wind, the legislation will enable progress but it is also an act of faith that must be monitored to ensure that it does the job for which it is intended.

I am disappointed that some Members do not feel that this is worth further debate. As Kieran McCarthy said, the Business Committee decided that it was a priority, and it has been in the system for some time. Iris Robinson referred to fluoride in toothpaste making a difference. In the Republic of Ireland, fluoride is put in the water supply, and teeth have strengthened. That

has not been debated here, but perhaps fluoride could be put in milk so that people could choose whether to take it or not. I have no doubt that there will be a debate in the future.

I am disappointed that my colleague Robert Coulter does not consider NHS dental treatment worth further debate. Michelle O'Neill and Sue Ramsey made some good points on the impact that a lack of access to NHS dental treatment has, particularly to disadvantaged people. The fact that such people cannot get dental treatment compounds their disadvantage. Jim Shannon graphically illustrated what it is like to have bad toothache and be unable to get a dentist. Toothache has been compared to some of the worst pain. Some people have said that it is worse than the pain of childbirth, but I do not know about that.

Sammy Wilson commented on the choice of dentists. I have made the point that it is not the number of dentists that is relevant, but the number who work in the National Health Service. I agree that we cannot afford to develop a two-tier system. That trend has started in health generally, but it must be stopped and reversed.

Poor oral health has a negative impact on people's general well-being. It is acknowledged that the most vulnerable in society have the poorest dental health, often because of their diet. Young children are particularly vulnerable, especially those who are not registered with a National Health Service dentist. Those children do not learn how to look after their teeth, and that leads to major health problems in later life. It has been well documented that decay in someone's mouth can spread to other parts of the body. The elderly population is rising, and, because a larger number of them are keeping their teeth than in the past, they also need access to dental health.

The 2006 primary dental-care strategy for Northern Ireland proposes fundamental changes to the provision of dentistry. Its primary aims are to reduce dental health inequalities, to improve the oral health of all of the Northern Ireland population with a high-quality service and to ensure a rewarding career for dental professionals, the lack of which is part of the problem.

Patients are entitled to, and must have, access to a quality dental service. For emergency treatment, it is important that there is easy access to dentists; the dental hospital cannot do it all. Patients who are required to pay for dental treatment, especially those whose income is just above the threshold for benefits, are often the hardest hit. The dental-charging system must be simplified so that patients know what they are paying for. All Members know of people who have required expensive treatments, such as root canal work, but could not afford it.

Why are dentists dissatisfied and disillusioned with the National Health Service? Dentists wish to deliver

high-quality treatment and care, and the focus for the future, as in other parts of the review of public administration, must be to ensure that entire practices have the right skills and good infrastructure in place. Dentists must be encouraged, motivated and supported to work in the National Health Service, and the ethos of “drill and fill”, which demotivates those dentists who wish to stay in the NHS, must be left behind.

As has already been said, there cannot be a two-tier system; wider access must be maintained. In addition to a better working environment, more dental hygienists and nurses are required as part of an integrated approach by all dental-health professionals.

The BDA has brought many issues relating to the running of dental practices to my attention and to that of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In particular, it highlighted the rising cost to dentists of meeting legislative, regulatory and good practice requirements.

One must consider the bigger picture when attempting to improve the dental health of the people of Northern Ireland. Dental-health promotion and preventive treatments are key to the improvement of general oral health, and there must be a long-term focus on such work.

Proposals on the new contractual arrangements for dentists have been outlined. Any such new measures must be piloted before they are generally implemented. In England and Wales, there are still grave problems. Members must monitor that situation and ensure that any potential legislation does what it sets out to achieve, which is why I wished to debate this matter. It has been suggested that the new contractual arrangements are too driven by results and targets and not by oral health and patient access to NHS dentists or orthodontists. The failure to increase patient registrations has also been recognised.

To reiterate the focus of the motion, it is important that those who require dental-health treatment have access to it. The Assembly must also recognise the problems that face dentistry and identify how to attract people back to the National Health Service. Members have discussed why dentists are attracted to private practice — it is more lucrative — but we could be more creative. When dentists come out of training, which has cost the public purse so much, perhaps they could be contracted to the National Health Service for a certain length of time. That would also give them an opportunity to repay their student loans. Other areas of the Health Service and allied professions could also consider that idea.

For services delivered through contract, there are many issues to be considered. However, it is important that this matter was debated today, and I welcome the fact that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been in the Chamber for this and

every other debate on health issues and that he has taken the arguments on board. Members will closely watch the progress of legislation and, more importantly, the outcomes to ensure that it does the business.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern about the lack of availability of NHS dental treatment and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to act immediately to ensure that NHS treatment is available to all those who are entitled to it, in conjunction with a dental health strategy.

Accidents in the Construction Industry

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

Mr Cree: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure continued progress in addressing accident rates in the construction industry through the Buildsafe Northern Ireland initiative.

Many Members will have read reports that construction sites across Northern Ireland faced a sweep of inspections earlier this month. The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) stated that it was conducting inspections as part of a drive to improve the safety record. That inspection blitz was also part of a Europe-wide campaign to reduce the number of serious and fatal accidents.

The safety drive was necessary because construction workers in Northern Ireland are three times more likely to be killed in a site accident than workers in the rest of the United Kingdom. The fatal-accident rate for the construction industry is also worse here than in the Republic of Ireland, according to the HSENI. That is an alarming statement and presents a major challenge to us in moving the economy forward.

The cost to the Northern Ireland economy due to work-related fatalities, injuries and illnesses is estimated at 1.3% of the country's gross value added (GVA) or, in monetary terms, £300 million a year. In human terms, it means over 20 deaths each year, a further 60 deaths due to the legacy of past asbestos exposure, 800 major injuries and 35,000 employees absent from work at any one time due to work-related illnesses. That is 5% of the total workforce.

Let us compare the Northern Ireland fatal and non-fatal injury rates per 100,000 employees for 2005-06 with those of our near neighbours. In Great Britain, there were 281 non-fatal accidents, and 0.6 fatal accidents, per 100,000 employees. In the Republic of Ireland, the figures were 350 non-fatal accidents and 3.2 fatal accidents. In Northern Ireland, there were 273 non-fatal accidents and 1.3 fatal accidents per 100,000 employees. Among the major causes of injury and illnesses are poor manual handling; work-related distress; falls from heights; unsafe vehicle movements; exposure to asbestos fibres; and, not unexpectedly, slips and trips.

The agriculture, quarrying and construction sectors accounted for 76% of all work-related fatalities in the five-year period from 2001-02 to 2005-06. The Health Service and the education sector have contributed significantly to the 35,000 employees — 5% of the total

workforce — absent due to illness caused, or made worse, by work.

Last year, two thirds of fatal accidents in Northern Ireland were the result of falls. The Buildsafe-NI initiative was introduced in 2004 for public sector contracts only. It is a partnership between the Construction Employers Federation, public sector clients, the unions and the HSENI. The initiative has a target to reduce the 2002 accident level in the industry by 50% by 2008. I was concerned to learn that participants in the Buildsafe-NI steering group have doubts that the original objective of the initiative may be achieved within the timescale.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has said in this House, with regard to accidents and fatalities, that employment in the construction industry in Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous occupations. I agree with him, and it is crucial that the matter be addressed urgently. I also agree that legislation alone cannot resolve the problem. We must educate and enforce at the same time.

1.15 pm

Positive partnership between employers and other stakeholders must be promoted to improve radically the industry's safety record. We do not want to trivialise health-and-safety challenges or engage in non-productive, class-war rhetoric against employers. The purpose of the motion is to emphasise the need for significant improvement in the industry's health-and-safety record and to draw attention to the positive moves that the industry has already taken. Employers must work in partnership with unions and the Health and Safety Executive, which is more likely to promote a health-and-safety culture rather than just enforce an aggressive regulation.

I was interested in a recent paper from the Quarry Products Association, in which it advocated fiscal incentives as a reward for good performance. It highlighted the aggregates levy credit scheme, which has successfully promoted best practice in the industry. Perhaps a similar scheme could be developed to encourage good safety performance. The Health and Safety Executive does a good job with the resources that it has. The public procurement element of Buildsafe-NI must be extended to local government, housing associations and other bodies. The health-and-safety culture that I referred to must start at boardroom level. More must be done for young people who enter the workforce. I hope that Members of the House will support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I commend the Members who moved the motion. Safety in the building industry is of increasing importance given the growing centrality of construction to economic growth in Northern Ireland.

The recently published 'Northern Ireland Business Monitor 2006/2007' indicates favourable trends for the construction industry in turnover, profitability and optimism for the future. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's 'Northern Ireland Economic Bulletin 2007' shows a massive growth in employment in the sector, with an increase of over 75% during the last decade. The most up-to-date quarterly employment survey shows a further increase of 500 construction jobs. Members must always be mindful that although the rate of accidents and fatalities is unacceptable and must be improved, the increase in the number of people who are employed in the construction industry is a significant factor in that.

In April 2007, an Ulster Bank study concluded that construction is now the driving force behind our economy. Through the investment strategy for Northern Ireland and the work that is being carried out by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), public-sector capital expenditure here continues to grow. We hope that it will continue to grow at an unprecedented level.

I am sure that I speak for many in the House when I say that a major capital expenditure project that Members do not want the Government to be engaged in is new premises for the Assembly, a proposal for which has been reported in today's news.

One only has to walk outside the Chamber and see the Belfast skyline to see the construction boom that the city and the wider country is experiencing. I do not refer to the cherry picker that seems to have taken up permanent residence outside the Building. The Belfast skyline and those of other parts of Northern Ireland are changing. That shows centrality of construction to the growing economy. If Northern Ireland is to be transformed into the vibrant, high-tech, high-value-added economy that Members want, that must be built upon high-quality infrastructure, such as new roads, factories and office blocks. Construction is at the heart of the new economy.

It goes without saying that an industry that expects to grow in the future must be a safe industry. It is nothing short of scandalous that a construction worker in Northern Ireland is three times more likely to be killed at work than in any other part of the United Kingdom. The 44 deaths and more than 500 severe injuries that occurred during the decade prior to 2003 are tantamount to carnage in the construction industry. For those reasons, I wholeheartedly support the Buildsafe NI initiative — not least, because it appears to have had a positive impact. Since its introduction, the number of accidents on public-sector projects, on which it has been concentrated, has fallen even though expenditure on such projects has risen dramatically.

The number of accidents in which workers have sustained major injuries has dropped from a high of 27

in 2003-04 to 17 to date this year. Sadly, however, deaths in public-sector construction projects sadly remain, with two in each of the past two years.

The Buildsafe initiative is one of those rare examples of where Government action and regulation can have — and has had — a positive outcome. The imposition of a premium upon health-and-safety standards in public procurement policy has sent a clear message to construction companies about their responsibilities to their employees. However, I agree with Mr Cree who said that compliance is needed, rather than the introduction of further new laws.

For many years, construction workers have felt as if they are treated like second-class citizens when matters concerning their safety are being considered. Day in and day out, they are involved in building a better economy for Northern Ireland, and in so far as Government can provide it, they deserve proper protection. I am in no doubt that the Minister will continue to give the initiative his full support.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I commend Mr Cree and Mr McFarland for tabling it. It is especially welcome given the fact that construction workers are six times more likely to be killed at work than any other employee.

Despite the reduction in the number of construction employees suffering death or serious injury over the past decade or so, the overall rates are still too high. In 2005, seven workers lost their lives in the North of Ireland, and in 2006, six people died from injuries sustained when working on construction sites. In the 10 years prior to that, 44 construction workers were killed and over 500 were seriously injured. Those incidents also have a detrimental effect on families, friends and work associates. The figures are too high, and they must be reduced immediately.

As well as the high accident rates, construction workers are more likely to suffer from ill health as a result of their work in the industry and due to their exposure to hazardous substances and harsh working conditions. That must be borne in mind when Members are discussing the motion.

It is important that the motion is being debated at a time when the construction industry is experiencing a major growth. As Simon Hamilton said, the amount of construction going on and the many cranes that are visible in our cities show the growth in that sector, and, consequently, the number of employees in that industry is also increasing. At this time of growth, we must ensure that the health and well-being of everyone involved is safeguarded. We must bring to an end the deaths and injuries sustained on building sites by making them a safer environment for all employees to work, and

employers must be responsible for ensuring the health and safety of their employees.

We must also remember that construction hazards are not restricted to those working on sites: children and other members of the public have been killed or injured because construction activities have not been adequately controlled.

The Buildsafe initiative is an excellent idea because it brings together the public sector, the construction industry, trade unions and the Health and Safety Executive. The initiative's commendable target is, by 2008, to reduce the number of major accidents to construction workers by 50% of the 2002 level. However, the Buildsafe initiative does not have much legal status or legislative basis; therefore, sanctions are not imposed on employers who fail to meet its key aims. That must be reviewed.

Unfortunately, our most up-to-date official industrial accident statistics cover only the period until 2004, so we are unable to assess the success of the Buildsafe initiative to date. However, in recent years, the number of fatalities on building sites is on a par with the years prior to the introduction of the Buildsafe initiative. More, therefore, needs to be done. Considering that the initiative's target date is 2008, it is imperative that we reassess the initiative next year and evaluate its success, and, at the same time, consider any possible recommendations that might make the initiative more effective and, ultimately, further reduce accidents in the construction industry.

Key to reducing accidents in the construction industry is providing appropriate training for any individual before they enter a construction site. We must ensure that apprenticeships are not only effective in providing individuals with the skills of the trade through recognised bodies such as City and Guilds, but in providing rigorous health and safety training. The implementation of those measures, in conjunction with the appropriate inductions for young starts on building sites, would immensely decrease the number of accidents on construction sites, especially considering that young workers are more likely to have an accident or injure themselves due to inexperience.

We must ensure that all that can be done is done with regard to employee safety on construction sites. The construction industry must implement the Buildsafe initiative, and more legislation must be introduced to ensure workers' protection at all times. I will be supporting the motion, and I urge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to raise the profile of the Buildsafe initiative. I hope that lives can be saved as a result. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr O'Loan: I agree with other Members that this is a hugely important issue. There is an unacceptable and unnecessary level of death and injury in the construction

industry. I have examined statistics from the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland, and it appears that there is no sign that the situation will improve over the five-year target period. As far as 2006 is concerned, the figures for all types of accident appear to be up. The statistics for major accidents have increased, and although the figures for fatal accidents are a bit uncertain, on my reading of the situation, they are not convincingly down. I will listen with considerable interest to the Minister to see how he reads the situation.

The Buildsafe-NI initiative is welcome in as far as it goes, but its scope is limited. It only affects firms that are bidding for public-sector contracts. The information at my disposal tells me that the major problem exists in the private sector, and, in particular, in small firms.

My main point relates to the Quarry Products Association Northern Ireland (QPANI), which is an organisation whose firms overlap the construction industry. I commend its chairman, Mr Seamus McKeague of Creagh Concrete Products Ltd, and its regional director, Gordon Best, for adopting a highly proactive approach to health and safety. QPANI is a substantial body, with 265 member companies. It spans the quarrying, ready-mix concrete, concrete products and asphalt-plants sectors. QPANI's regional director writes in 'The Quarry Products Industry Journal 2007':

"Health and safety was again the main priority across all the sectors that QPANI represents."

I commend QPANI for saying that among the economic and many other issues that it must deal with it considers health and safety to be its main priority.

QPANI works closely with the HSENI and runs repeated safety-awareness days for its members. One such event featured 75 participants from 35 companies. It runs a safety conference and holds an awards ceremony, both of which have a large involvement. It runs county-based hard-target clubs, which bring businesses together to learn from one another, and it sets challenging targets in accident reduction.

It seems to me that the process is working, from which a good lesson can be learned. In a survey of its members, the regional director reports substantial improvements from 2004 to 2005. Those gains were made in a range of indicators, from frequency and severity of accidents to days lost to accidents.

I herald the fact that QPANI has taken a superb bottom-up approach, which makes good use of expert assistance. It looks as if it could be a model for the entire industry.

The attitude of owners and managers is right, and that is an absolutely vital ingredient in order for there to be progress. The quarrying industry is progressing towards what it calls its hard target of 50% reduction, and, from there, it intends to pursue a zero-accident goal.

That is an excellent example of good practice, which is worth bringing to the attention of everyone concerned.

I make two other important points. First, resourcing for the HSENI is not adequate. As a consequence, the HSENI is largely reactive, not proactive. In particular, the HSENI is not reaching small businesses that are often not members of any bodies and are therefore difficult to target.

Secondly, QPANI is keen to see financial incentives being attached to accident prevention, to which Mr Cree has referred. Those incentives would be similar to the aggregates levy credit scheme (ALCS), by which credit is given for environmental protections. In this case, credit could be awarded for having good health-and-safety systems in place. Although there would be up-front costs, the public purse would be saved money, because, as other Members have said, accidents cost large sums.

Credits of £20 million could, arguably, save £100 million. I know that QPANI is to meet with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I will also raise the matter in the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

I welcome the motion. This debate will give an impetus to there being real progress.

Mr G Robinson: Accident rates in the construction industry must be kept on their present downward trend in order to ensure that those who work in what is an extremely hazardous job are kept as safe as is possible. If that occurs, despite the dangers of the working environment, that will result in fewer injuries and in fewer sites being closed in order for health-and-safety investigations to take place.

1.30 pm

More importantly, it will result in fewer workers and their families suffering hospital stays, recovery time, reduced income and, in the worst cases, loss of a family member. Progress in reducing accident numbers is always welcome, but there is no room for complacency. It is vital that the Buildsafe-NI initiative continues to minimise risk to workers. It has already helped to stop injury to highly skilled workers whose skills are in great demand. It has kept them economically active and independent of state benefits, and their skills are vital to the Northern Ireland economy. At all costs, we must protect them. The Buildsafe-NI initiative helps to achieve that.

I am pleased to support this worthwhile motion.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt anseo agus ansiúd go pearsanta ar an ábhar seo. On a previous occasion in the House, I described how I received the news that my father had been killed at work — buried alive in a 15-foot deep, unshored, trench. To think of the devastation that that caused to my mother and the rest of us — my

youngest brother was only 11 years of age at the time — is still very difficult.

When I speak on this subject therefore, I am not interested in statistics, percentages or measures, but in the important human question of the safety of people at work — human beings at work, not workers.

It was difficult when news reports said simply that a worker had been killed at work. It reminds me of the song sung by The Dubliners: 'McAlpine's Fusiliers'. In the song, a man is lost in a concrete stair, but the employer's only retort is: "I'm a navvy short". Get me another navvy.

This stuff has to come from the heart. We are dealing with vulnerable people who are, as another Member rightly said, the bedrock of our economy, and will be for some time to come. We must consider how families are looked after in the wake of such an event. When my father died, it seemed — as I have already described — as if no one was interested. The company was good enough, and the employers were sorry that it had happened. The authorities were good enough, and our friends visited and all that. However, in 1970, my mother was compensated to the tune of £7,000 — a very poor price for a man of my father's status in the community. He was much more than a worker on a construction site.

Gradually, people get over these things. However, as a result of my father's death, I am very concerned about how building sites are conducted. When I last spoke about this, I made a point about corporate guilt; a similar point could be made about corporate debt. As a corporation, a company can be held responsible for a death; however, no one person has ever served a day in jail for negligence, because that guilt is spread among the directors of the company. They pay compensation, which they can well afford. Their insurance premium may rise a bit, but that is all.

The Assembly should advocate an all-Ireland Buildsafe initiative. At present, construction workers from all over Ireland are employed all over Ireland. They come from the North to work in the South and from the South to work in the North. A firm, all-Ireland, Buildsafe policy should be established so that workers are looked after properly.

As I said, nobody has ever spent a day in jail or ever really been punished for negligence towards workers. It is heartening to see that construction companies are now spending much more money on safety. It is good that local scaffolding firms now have proper scaffolding and shoring, and so on, but we must be tough on this issue, down to the last detail.

I do not like the concept of corporate guilt. The person who is immediately responsible for the negligence that causes a death or serious injury should be brought to

court and be made to carry the can. He gets paid to do his job, so he should pay the price.

There is talk of post-traumatic stress syndrome at the moment; can Members imagine how traumatic it is for fellow workers —

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

Mr Brolly: Mr Speaker, could you let me finish this point? Thank you.

When workers go to the hut for 10.00 am teatime, they chat about their families, and so on. They work in a situation in which the expectancy of death or serious injury is not high. Imagine what it is like for those workers not to talk of the family of a man who has been killed on site.

Mr Gardiner: I support the motion proposed by my hon Friend the Member for North Down.

For some time, I have been concerned about the level of death and injury in the construction industry. The Buildsafe-NI initiative is one way to develop a culture of safety on our building and construction sites, which will avoid the unnecessary level of human suffering and tragedy that has prevailed up to now.

In the Transitional Assembly, I tabled a motion that specifically referred to death and injury in the construction industry. I mentioned the need for a comprehensive corporate manslaughter Bill to be introduced in Northern Ireland, once justice powers had been devolved to the Assembly. Such a Bill is the necessary legislative underpinning of any dramatic improvement in the levels of safety in the construction industry.

My interest in the subject was kindled in 2005 when one of my constituents, a young man from the Lurgan area who was just starting out in life, tragically lost his life on a construction site on the M1 motorway. That needless death, and all the human suffering that came with it, was a watershed for me. From that day on, I was determined not to rest until I had effective corporate manslaughter legislation in place in the Province.

After my demands in 2005 for corporate manslaughter legislation, in January 2006, I also called for the introduction of a new offence of secondary liability for corporate manslaughter, where it could be shown that a company's failings were provably caused by the culpable negligence of one or more individuals in the firm. Only individual responsibility for the death of a worker because of the company's negligence will make management take this matter seriously and give worker safety sufficient priority.

Many building firms are big corporations, and they have broad backs. They may simply have to pay financial penalties, but that is not enough to change attitudes in the construction industry. For people to take seriously the death of workers on site, they will have to feel that

they will actually and individually face a manslaughter charge, if they are proven to be negligent. Juries should be asked to consider whether management failure had caused or contributed to the death. On the basis of that finding, the Public Prosecution Service should determine whether individuals in a company should also be prosecuted for manslaughter.

The average number of work-related deaths in Northern Ireland stands at 20 a year. We must keep that figure in mind when dealing with this matter. Once justice powers are devolved, the Assembly will have a duty of care to our people. In relation to the construction industry especially, that duty must be anchored in corporate manslaughter legislation with teeth. While I wholeheartedly support this motion we must move on corporate manslaughter as soon as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and apologies to other Members that I have not been in the Chamber for the whole debate — I was at an interview. I have nevertheless been following the debate.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I want to congratulate Leslie Cree and Alan McFarland for moving this motion. The Committee recently received a very competent, compelling and cogent presentation from the Health and Safety Executive, and the Buildsafe-NI initiative was touched upon then. I appreciate the fact that Members feel the need to underline the importance of that very good work.

Members have mentioned the real economic costs that arise from accidents and fatalities at work and in the construction industry in particular. Members have also talked about the human cost. Francie Brolly in particular articulated that cost in a very poignant and sensitive way. That adds, I hope, to the sense of urgency and determination about making sure that we continue to press for progress. I do not intend to rehearse the statistics comparing the rate of injuries and deaths here with those in other places, but they clearly show that there is a serious problem.

When I was Minister of Finance and Personnel in a previous period of devolution, the Department had responsibility for sponsoring the construction industry. At that time we established the construction industry forum and took early steps to set up the Government construction clients group. Both projects were aimed at trying to make sure that there was higher priority for safety issues. The Construction Employers Federation members, who work in the industry, were very alert to safety— this was not just coming from the Government or the politicians, but from the industry itself. The developments we have seen since, and the development of Buildsafe-NI in particular, prove that. Of course, Buildsafe-NI is about work contracted by the public

sector. The logic behind it is nevertheless to create a standard that will radiate out to all building work. The Committee welcomes the opportunity to confirm support for the continued good work of Buildsafe.

We must do all we can to educate young people entering the workforce and support the Health and Safety Executive's plans to launch Safe Start Northern Ireland, which aims to do just that.

When the Committee was looking at early indication bids for the comprehensive spending review (CSR) recently, it learnt that HSENI's Safe Start Northern Ireland bid is being regarded as a discretionary, lower-priority bid by the Department — it seems to be in the bottom five of the Departments CSR bids. If we want to put safety rather than savings first, that must be given higher priority.

Now, speaking in a personal capacity rather than as Chairperson of the Committee, I would like to see safety issues given a much higher priority right across the Government. When the Departments were created several years ago, the logic behind having "public safety" put into the name of a Department was to make sure that it would act as a safety auditor, examining the safety performance of all Departments. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has not been doing that job.

1.45 pm

There is a valid role still to be applied, because safety issues must be addressed, whether they concern school buses, health and safety in the workplace, road safety or farm safety. Those issues are the responsibilities of different Departments. However, there should be one authority to set stronger standards and to ensure the development of a stronger safety culture.

I agree with the Members who mentioned the all-Ireland dimension to this issue. The issue could also be addressed at a British-Irish level in order to ensure a much higher standard of safety throughout these islands. The Government's motto should be "safety first", not "savings first".

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to start where my colleague Francie Brolly finished, because he made some valid points. Families who lose loved ones in accidents in the construction, manufacturing or food-processing industries not only suffer that loss, but they often do not know what their rights are. They do not know how to move forward, because they are suddenly thrown into an unexpected and tragic situation.

The Health and Safety Executive has an awesome responsibility. However, we must define who should look after the next of kin. A properly funded service should be set up to inform family members how the investigation into the accident is developing, to assist

them in establishing their legal rights and direct to them to, or provide, counselling services.

Without going into too much detail, I know of one family that lost a loved one in a factory accident. The family only found out that there would be no prosecution six months after the decision was taken. They had to phone and ask what was happening with their loved one's case, which added to the trauma of the experience.

As I have said, the HSENI has an awesome responsibility. First, it must ensure that health and safety procedures are in place across all factories and construction sites. Secondly, it must investigate in the terrible event of a death at work, ensuring that the investigation is carried out thoroughly and properly and that no stone is left unturned.

I will communicate privately with the Minister about one case that has recently come to my attention where there have been failings. Health and safety inspectors do a traumatic job; investigating the details of any death is traumatic. However, inspectors not only investigate a death but try to ensure that that sort of incident never happens again.

If employers are found to be liable for an accident, they must be brought to book. That raises the need to introduce corporate manslaughter legislation. Sinn Féin supports the call for such legislation, which has been the subject of previous debates in the House. I hope that the Minister will inform us of a timescale for, or at least his views on, corporate manslaughter legislation.

I want to touch on another matter that concerns workers in the construction industry and other sectors. There is now a large migrant worker population, and the Assembly must ensure that all information is available in the languages of those workers. Too often, migrant workers do the lowest paid, most dangerous and dirtiest jobs, and they are therefore at the highest risk. There is an onus on us, as politicians, and on the Health and Safety Executive to ensure that all publications are available in the languages of those people.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the debate, although the Minister addressed the issue at Question Time only two weeks ago. All Members must acknowledge the growth in the construction industry in recent years. We must also recognise that the industry is employing a growing number of migrant workers who may not be aware of the law or who may be used to different working practices.

I welcome the Construction Industry Forum initiative, but I believe that it is important that we should also involve the trades unions and public sector bodies that have an interest in the industry.

There have been many accidents on construction sites over the years, but today there is a greater awareness throughout Northern Ireland of the need for

health and safety on building sites. I very much appreciate the work of the Health and Safety Executive, which oversees the safety of workers on such sites, and I also appreciate the good work that is done by buildings services departments at local government level. However, the workforce on site is not the only group of people who are affected by this issue. I believe strongly that sites must be made secure, given the many accidents over the years in which children, sadly, have sometimes been killed after straying on to building sites.

The building boom is now bringing a different type of construction to Northern Ireland. Under the proposed plans for the Titanic Quarter in Belfast, the whole skyline of the city will change in the coming years. With taller buildings, much more intricate problems will arise so training in health and safety will be vital for employer and employee alike.

Finally, I wish to make the point that the promotion of health and safety in the workplace is in everybody's interests.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I thank Mr Cree and Mr McFarland for proposing the motion, which calls on the Executive to ensure continued progress in addressing accident rates in the construction industry through the Buildsafe-NI initiative. This has been a short but useful and constructive debate, and I thank all Members who have made their views known during it.

As the Minister responsible for health and safety at work, let me confirm my commitment and that of the Health and Safety Executive to reducing the number of needless incidents on building sites that result in death and injury. I am pleased to hear the comments, which Members from all sides of the House have made, about the excellent work that the Health and Safety Executive carries out.

As Members will know, Buildsafe-NI was set up four years ago to reduce the unacceptable number of deaths and major injuries that occur in the construction industry. To give some background to the initiative, let me explain that it brings together a range of key stakeholders including Government — in the shape of the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, both of which are major clients of the construction industry — as well as contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, construction professionals such as architects and engineers, the Construction Employers Federation, the trade unions and the Health and Safety Executive.

Although its focus is on health and safety, Buildsafe is not just a departmental initiative; rather, it has broader cross-departmental ownership and is run under the auspices of the Construction Industry Forum, which, as Mr Durkan mentioned, is sponsored by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Buildsafe aims to get things done and make change happen. The representative working bodies that make up the Buildsafe working group each have an action plan through which they make their contribution to the initiative's overall aim of reducing the number of major injury accidents among construction workers to 50% of the 2002 level by 2008.

Several Members raised the issue of statistics. In 2002-03, 60 major injuries were reported. It is unfortunate — although unsurprising — that that figure climbed to 98 in 2004, before falling to 88 in 2006-07. I say that the increase is unsurprising because, as several Members pointed out, the number of people who are employed in construction rose by almost 30% during the same period. To that can be added the greater statutory reporting of accidents, and that is due to an increase in HSENI inspections.

Although those figures are a stark reminder of the high-risk nature of construction work, they should not be allowed to mask the progress that has been made. For instance, in public-sector contracts — the sector in which Buildsafe-NI has had the greatest uptake — accidents have decreased by 40%, with fatal accidents also showing a downward trend.

Buildsafe-NI exploits the power of public-sector procurement to demand higher health and safety standards on publicly funded construction projects. That has led to the situation in which all contractors seeking to tender for public sector construction projects must provide evidence of fulfilling several conditions. First, they must show that their health-and-safety management systems have achieved third-party accreditation, and secondly, they must show that their site workers, and those of their subcontractors, have completed appropriate health and safety training. The numbers of construction workers who are being trained in practical site safety — some for the first time — is truly remarkable. Of the 80,000 or so who are currently employed in construction, over 90% have been trained and hold a construction skills register card, which is effectively their passport to working in the industry.

Efforts are being made to spread the public-sector procurement model, which has been deployed successfully under Buildsafe-NI, to large private-sector developers. Early indications are that many such developers are minded to move in that direction. Although we should be encouraged by that, we cannot be complacent. Buildsafe-NI does not have all the answers, and it does not reach the many small and micro-building businesses that we know exist. It is vital to ensure that everyone involved in construction fully understands their roles and responsibilities for workplace health and safety if improvement is to be made across the board.

Several Members referred to compliance, education and enforcement. In his opening remarks, Mr Cree

talked about the need for enforcement and education. In previous contributions, I have indicated that it is critical to have both of those working in tandem and to use education to create a culture of increasing awareness. Mr O'Loan picked up on that point when he referred to the excellent work of QPANI and about the right attitude being instilled in that sector. Mr Hamilton also mentioned the work of QPANI — I know that he is not in his place, but he asked me to convey his apologies for not being present to hear the winding-up speeches.

People should not have any illusions about the fact that existing legislation requires employers and those who work in the construction industry to fulfil certain conditions. It is a matter of ensuring that the education process works alongside the industry and that everything is done to ensure that everyone involved in the industry takes the right attitude. We can have all the inspections that we like — and we need to carry out more inspections — but non-compliance should not be left to inspection alone: the industry must assume responsibility in that area.

Members will want to know that the Government intend to introduce further measures. The Construction (Design and Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007, which come into operation on 9 July, will go a long way to ensure that everyone who is involved in construction understand their roles and responsibilities. The regulations will replace outdated and over-bureaucratic legislation that was introduced in the 1990s, and they will reduce bureaucracy and paperwork; simplify the regulations and improve clarity; encourage more co-ordination and co-operation; and be more flexible in their application. They offer an opportunity for a step change in health-and-safety performance. The new regulatory package will be used to re-emphasise the broader business benefits of a well-managed and co-ordinated approach to the management of health and safety in construction.

An approved code of practice supports the regulations. In addition, the industry has developed clear and simple guidance for small and medium-sized enterprises and clients. The guidance will be crucial in helping smaller clients to address misconceptions and alleviate concerns.

2.00 pm

The Buildsafe-NI initiative has developed other ways to improve standards in the industry. These include the development of a communications plan to raise awareness of the main risks and the measures that can be taken to address them; the formation of six regional groups to communicate information and share best practice; and the provision of a mobile training unit to deliver specific training to individual sites.

In the public sector, the Department of Finance and Personnel recently held a seminar for housing associations and district councils in an effort to spread the benefits of the procurement aspects of the Buildsafe-NI initiative. A number of Members, including Mr

Cree in his opening remarks, mentioned involving housing associations and local authorities. Currently, those bodies are encouraged, but not obliged, to adopt the system. More needs to be done to ensure that all district councils abide by the Buildsafe-NI initiative's tendering rules. There are enough Members who are also members of local councils to ensure that that message is heard. There has been a good response from housing associations, which is encouraging.

The House will know that the initial phase of the Buildsafe-NI initiative is due to end in April 2008. Work is under way to evaluate and review progress and to develop plans that build on successes and address the weaknesses that are identified. Options for improving standards with smaller clients, subcontractors and the self-employed are already being discussed.

In talking about statistics and the available initiatives, we must not lose sight, as Mr Brolly stated, of the human dimension of accidents in the construction industry. We are talking about people who work to support their families, and are injured, sometimes fatally, at their places of work. In his powerful and important contribution, Mr Brolly brought home the human dimension of the issue and the human cost that he and his family have suffered. It was important for that message to be brought to the House, as it ensured that the importance of the issue was re-emphasised, particularly to the Department and me.

To those Members who mentioned the scale of the problem, none of us is complacent or thinks that enough has been done so far. The number of fatal accidents in the construction industry in Northern Ireland has remained fairly constant over the past six years. However, the number of incidents across public-sector contracts and private-sector contracts has risen. It is important to point out that, in the past five years, the Health and Safety Executive's level of enforcement has increased by over 100%.

Members also raised the issue of resources for the Health and Safety Executive. The Health and Safety Executive gives priority to construction — a specific construction compliance team was recently established with 10 field staff, representing over 25% of its entire inspector and compliance officer cadre. The Health and Safety Executive has also freed up more of that team's time for preventive work by allocating all major construction incident investigations to a specialised team.

The issue of migrant workers, which Mr O'Dowd raised, has become increasingly important in light of the level of immigrant workers arriving in Northern Ireland. The Health and Safety Executive has published a universal safety booklet that relays key health and safety messages to construction workers without the need for words. That has been widely distributed by the Construction Employers Federation and voluntary organisations that work with migrant workers.

Inspectors can also access interpretation services via their mobile phones when they encounter migrant workers on building sites. With that backup, during on-site inspections, they can ensure that migrant workers are adequately supervised and trained. Translators are now available to enable Polish and Latvian workers to undertake the safety training that allows them to be included on the construction skills register. That is an important issue and I hope that what I have said reassures Members that it is being tackled.

A number of Members mentioned the all-Ireland dimension of this matter. The Health and Safety Executive has already set up a working group with its counterparts in the Irish Republic. That group shares the expertise of those bodies, which are working on a number of initiatives together.

I cannot stress too strongly that Buildsafe-NI represents but one part of a much wider approach to improving health and safety standards in the construction industry. It is widely recognised that a key aspect of improving health and safety standards rests with ensuring that the directors of businesses take ownership of the matter, and personally take the lead in health-and-safety issues for their companies.

Mr Gardiner, Mr Brolly and a number of other Members raised the issue of corporate manslaughter. That issue is, as I pointed out in a previous contribution to the House, a matter for another place — it is not a devolved matter. It is a very important issue, and consideration is currently being given to it in Parliament. However, Members should be concentrating on what we can do as a devolved Assembly. I hope that this debate will ensure, as Mr Cree said, that attention is brought to that matter, and that it will reinforce to employers, and everyone involved in the industry, the need to actively and proactively do their bit as far as the health and safety of employees is concerned.

Although the focus of the motion is on accidents, a bigger issue, which is often ignored or overlooked, is the illness and health problems suffered by those who work in the construction industry. That issue was touched on, to some extent, by a number of Members. I can assure Members that that is also an issue that my Department will take seriously.

I thank everyone who took part in the debate. I am sorry that I have not had more time to respond to all of the points that have been raised. I look forward to hearing from Members if there are individual cases that they wish to draw to my attention. They can be assured that I, the Health and Safety Executive and the Department view this matter with the utmost seriousness.

Mr McFarland: This has been a useful debate. My colleague Leslie Cree set out the safety problems that are faced by employees of the construction industry in Northern Ireland. Statistics show that six people were killed in the construction industry last year. As the

Minister said, some 88 people suffered major injuries during that period. Furthermore, approximately 211 people were off work for more than three days due to injuries in the last year. Therefore, this is a serious issue.

The three major causes of deaths and injuries over a number of years have been falls, people being crushed as trenches have collapsed, and — strangely — electrocutions as building machinery has touched overhead wires.

Simon Hamilton highlighted increased construction in Belfast, which is much welcomed, and the need to protect workers — a group that he said had been left behind in the past and treated as a low priority. Paul Maskey pointed out that there are more people involved in the construction industry. He also highlighted the issue of children and others having accidents on poorly supervised construction sites. Furthermore, he referred to the increased risks that are faced by young and inexperienced workers.

Declan O'Loan referred to the need to expand the Buildsafe-NI initiative into the private sector of the building industry and into smaller firms. He mentioned the good work in the area of safety introduced by the Quarry Products Association and its suggestion that an incentive scheme be introduced to encourage people to improve safety.

George Robinson gave strong support to the Buildsafe-NI initiative. Francie Brolly gave a moving account of the effect that his father's death — from a construction accident — had on his family. That brought a stark reality to the debate. He mentioned the issue of corporate manslaughter. He also raised with the Minister a matter that my colleague Sam Gardiner had raised during Question Time on 18 June 2007 and during the Transitional Assembly — the issue of whether a firm that does not look after its workers can be taken to court.

Mr Brolly also raised the issue of cross-border Buildsafe and the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on workers who were present when their co-workers were killed or injured.

My colleague Sam Gardiner spoke movingly about a young man in his constituency who had been killed on a building site, and he outlined the campaign for corporate manslaughter legislation that he has waged over several years.

Mark Durkan reiterated the human cost of construction accidents. He reminded the House of his role in developing the construction industry forum. He also spoke of Buildsafe and the proposed Safe Start initiative, and called for a higher priority and proper financial support for safety issues.

John O'Dowd spoke of the need for further clarity on workers' rights and greater support for the families of those killed or injured so that the trauma of their experience is not exacerbated. He highlighted the need for a lesson to be learned after accidents so that they

do not happen again, and for sanctions against errant employers. He also spoke of the need for translation for migrant workers, and the Minister has very kindly just covered that in his speech.

Sean Neeson also talked of support for migrant workers, and he pointed out that building sites must be secure so that children do not have access. I am encouraged by the Minister's contribution that he was committed to the safety of workers on construction sites. I am pleased to see that new regulations are to be introduced in July, and I also welcome his information on increased training and other co-ordination measures.

In conclusion, we have heard that Northern Ireland lags behind other parts of the United Kingdom in keeping its construction workers safe. It could be argued that because we have a construction boom here — one only has to look at the number of cranes on the Belfast skyline to see that — a greater number of employees are involved and thus the risk may be greater. It could be argued that the increase in number of migrant workers, whose first language is not English and who therefore may not fully understand instructions given to them, might be raising the risk level. However, none of these should be a factor if employers are fully training their on-site workers and if those in charge have carried out a comprehensive risk assessment.

Good work has been done since the introduction of Buildsafe in 2004. I urge the Minister to discuss with employers, unions and the Health and Safety Executive how Buildsafe-type measures can be rolled out across the construction industry, and in particular into the private sector. It is in the interests of all involved to avoid loss of life or injury to workers; trauma to the families; and the loss to companies in fines, in downtime of workers on the site, and in PR embarrassment if they are found guilty of not protecting and caring for their workers properly.

Improvements have been made to safety in the construction industry, but more needs to be done. I support the motion and urge the House to do likewise.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure continued progress in addressing accident rates in the construction industry through the Buildsafe Northern Ireland initiative.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time will start at 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 2.14 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Free Personal Care for Older People

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to set out the timescale for the introduction of free personal care for older people in Northern Ireland. (AQO 248/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I have asked my officials to review, by the end of October, the work carried out by a group from the previous Executive that examined the potential impact of free personal care. When that review is complete, I will consider to its findings and prepare a proposal for my Executive colleagues. If the Executive are content with the proposal, and if it has the support of the Assembly, it is estimated that the earliest possible date for the introduction of free personal care for all client groups in Northern Ireland will be April 2010.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the clear will expressed by the Assembly in a debate a few weeks ago to introduce free personal care in 2008, can he give any hope that that timescale can be advanced?

Mr McGimpsey: I have covered the timescale issue on more than one occasion. I am bound by process, as much as by anything else, in progressing the legislation. Organising finances will be a major part of introducing free personal care. Guidance for officials at the end of the process will also have to be produced. Given that, April 2010 is a realistic date.

Mr Shannon: The Minister will be aware of the difficulties in introducing free personal care in Scotland. With that in mind, has he had any consultation with his colleagues in the Scottish Executive on how some of those difficulties could be avoided? That would improve the situation for us.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Shannon makes a good point. Experiences in Scotland and Wales will form an important part of the review.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I welcome the Minister's comment that he will examine the issue of free

personal care. He said that the earliest possible date for the introduction of free personal care in Northern Ireland will be April 2010. Given that that date is some three years away, what steps can the Minister take in the interim to help address the problem?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said during the debate in the House on the issue, there are certain measures that can be considered in the interim. One important step would be to make provision for disregarding the value of the family home as part of a resident's financial assessment. Another step that has been taken in other parts of the United Kingdom is to increase the capital thresholds at which a resident becomes liable to pay the full cost of personal care. My Department will look at that issue in the interim.

Increasing the personal expenses allowance to allow residents a higher level of income to spend on personal items will also be considered. The allowance is aimed at those people at the lowest end of the scale of income who rely entirely on their old-age pension. Most of their old-age pension is taken up with paying for their costs. On average, those at the lowest end of the income scale are left with £5 a week for personal expenses. That is hopelessly inadequate. We will look at how we can increase that amount of that allowance.

Hospital Car-Parking Fees

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money was raised in car-parking fees at each hospital in Northern Ireland that charges for this service, in each of the last two years. (AQO 233/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The following amounts were raised to the nearest £1,000 in 2005-06 and 2006-07 respectively: Belfast City Hospital, £627,000 and £726,000; Ulster Hospital, £508,000 and £538,000; and Mater Hospital, £108,000 and £117,000. The amount raised at Altnagelvin Area Hospital was £85,000 in 2006-07, when charges for car parking were introduced there.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that it is often elderly people, the infirm, those suffering from acute conditions, or their families, who are most frequently within hospital precincts, what steps will he take to ensure that charges are kept to a minimum? Furthermore, what steps will he take to maximum relief for people in those categories?

Mr McGimpsey: As regards frequent visitors and those who are ill, concessions are already offered to patients who attend hospital regularly.

The Member raises an important point. Car parking at hospitals was debated in an Adjournment debate on car-parking facilities at Daisy Hill Hospital. During that debate, I gave an undertaking that the Southern

Health and Social Care Trust would start a review into car parking at that hospital, and, as I said, a review on car parking throughout the hospitals estate is already under way.

There is a balance to be struck between penalising people who use hospital car-parking facilities as park-and-ride schemes — a problem faced by the Ulster Hospital and Belfast City Hospital — but not punitively overcharging people who must visit hospital. The review is ongoing and should be completed by the end of the year; it will enable me to be better informed in taking the next step in tackling the issue.

Mr A Maginness: I am interested in the figures that the Minister gave. Does the surplus money raised from car parking charges go to private companies or to the relevant hospital? If the money goes to private companies, what are the Minister's plans to guarantee that any future profits raised from car parking will go to the Health Service?

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Maginness makes a crucial point: we must ensure that moneys raised from car parking go straight into the Health Service or to the relevant hospital. The manner in which car parks are provided, and the cost and income involved, are relevant. However, surplus moneys should, as a matter of principle, be automatically returned to the relevant hospital. That is what I seek to achieve, and the review into car parking provision will help in that regard. My understanding is that the revenues that I quoted to the House are returned to the relevant hospitals.

Mr Kennedy: I congratulate the Minister on his first Question Time as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Minister will recall his very welcome announcement to the Assembly on 19 June this year that he would initiate a review of car parking in the aftermath of the Adjournment debate on car parking problems at Daisy Hill Hospital. Does the Minister agree that it is of concern that some people are still using hospital car parks as park-and-ride facilities? Will the Minister ensure that the review considers all relevant issues to ensure adequate car parking spaces at hospitals for staff and patients alike?

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Kennedy for his supplementary question. He has raised another key point for the review. It is a matter of striking the balance between charges that simply cover costs and, at the same time, providing a determinate penalty to combat fly parking. The crux of the issue is to provide car parking for staff, outpatients and visitors while penalising anyone who uses hospital car parks for convenience.

That issue is part of the review, and I am looking forward to the outcome. Park-and-ride schemes are one option to be considered. I am examining the situation

at Daisy Hill Hospital, as Mr Kennedy is aware, because of the difficulties there.

Respite Services for those with Learning Difficulties

3. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to improve respite services for those with learning disabilities. (AQO 272/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Families and carers provide the backbone of support for people with learning disabilities. A wide range of respite care provision is available throughout Northern Ireland, including residential and family settings. However, a recent survey has shown a shortfall in provision. That is not acceptable, and I am considering how those vital services can be extended and improved when setting my Budget priorities.

Mrs I Robinson: Given the high number of children with special needs and learning disabilities, what does the Minister intend to do in relation to respite provision in the Strangford and north Down areas in particular?

Mr McGimpsey: I cannot answer the Member's question about provision in Strangford and north Down specifically. However, there is a shortage in provision. There are 1,105 residential respite places available solely for people with a learning disability.

Out of that, there are some spaces for long-term care and some for respite care. The Department is also examining initiatives that can extend the nature of respite care, because it does not always have to be in a residential setting. Some of the initiatives that are being examined are: increased capacity for non-residential respite schemes; the development of partnership arrangements for children with the independent sector; residential placements for children; sharing and caring placements; supported living schemes and alternatives to traditional respite care; the development of host family and specialist child-minding; and core worker respite. I cannot be specific as to how that will impact on Mrs Robinson's constituency. However, I will write to her and provide details.

Mrs O'Neill: Does the Minister agree that it is unsuitable for children with disabilities to be placed in residential accommodation for older people?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree in principle. Residential accommodation for older people would not be termed suitable for children with disabilities. However, there has been a history that the Department is determined to get away from in relation to such placements. In the past, children were placed in unsuitable respite accommodation. The Department is endeavouring to move away from that, and strict protocols are now in place.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber for his first Question Time during this mandate of the Assembly. He has been in the Chamber quite a lot. Does the Minister agree that the reduction in the number of trusts will allow for a more co-ordinated approach in the effort to address the problem of unsuitable respite accommodation? Will the Minister seek a regular update from the trusts to ensure that progress is being made in that area?

Mr McGimpsey: The answer to both those questions is yes. Regular updates are crucial. As I said in my answer to Mrs Robinson, current respite provision is inadequate and unsatisfactory. There is a shortfall in provision, and we must deal with it. The number of trusts has now been reduced from 18 to five, which seems to have been a sensible step to have taken. That will help to co-ordinate and, to an extent, allow for some local flexibility. It will also ensure that no postcode lottery is involved in respite provision and that we can achieve uniformity of provision.

Sexual Abuse of Children

4. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what meetings his Department has had in 2007 in relation to sexual abuse of children by members of the clerical profession, with (a) the Police Service of Northern Ireland; (b) the Roman Catholic Church; and (c) other bodies. (AQO 234/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Speaker, since this is a three-part question, I ask for your indulgence when providing an answer.

To date, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has not had any meetings in 2007 in relation to the sexual abuse of children by members of the clerical profession with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI); the Roman Catholic Church; and other bodies. Previously, DHSSPS officials have met senior representatives of the Roman Catholic Church on 20 December 2005; 6 February 2006; 8 February 2006; 9 February 2006; and 8 March 2006. They have met representatives of the PSNI on 23 November 2005; 20 December 2005; 17 January 2006; and 6 February 2006; and they also met colleagues in the Republic of Ireland on 8 November 2005 and 16 March 2006.

Departmental officials have also corresponded with the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Church of Ireland and the Free Presbyterian Church to ascertain what child protection policies and guidance each has in place, with a view to bringing representatives together to confirm and agree best practice in that area. The policies and legislation currently in place to safeguard children apply equally to members of the clergy as

they do to other members of the wider community. There is a legal requirement that all allegations of child abuse be reported to the appropriate authorities — namely, the PSNI and social services — for investigation. It is important to emphasise that the safety of children remains one of my main priorities. Whatever action I consider to be appropriate to maintain their safety will be taken.

Mr Simpson: In a letter to 'The Irish News', dated 18 June 2007, Fr Patrick McCafferty, himself a victim of abuse, echoed my long-standing call for a full independent inquiry into the scandal of clerical child sexual abuse, claiming that only full disclosure will bring healing.

Does the Minister agree with that assessment, and will he join me in making that call?

2.45 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I am happy to agree with Mr Simpson. As I said, I will take whatever steps are necessary and appropriate to maintain the safety of children. Full disclosure is important. My Department has at its disposal the 'Disqualification from Working with Children List', which dates from 2005, and prevents the employment of people who pose a risk to children.

That measure will be further strengthened in the autumn by the introduction of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, which will establish a new vetting and barring scheme to put people on the disqualification list, widen the vetting range and deepen the vetting process. That will marry well with similar processes in England and Wales and produce uniformity. Scotland operates a different, although parallel, system; the Irish Republic, sadly, is some way behind. My Department is also examining the establishment of a regional safeguarding board next year, which will oversee the entire process.

It is my understanding that the Churches refer cases straight to the police. I am comfortable with that approach as long as the relevant vetting and barring processes are universally implemented. Nobody is above the law in this or in any other case.

Mr O'Loan: I note the breadth of the Minister's answer. Does he agree that the original question is highly selective in its reference to one particular Church; that the issue of sexual abuse is of crucial importance and must be addressed by all groups that involve young people; and that it is too important an issue with which to play politics?

Mr McGimpsey: I mentioned the other Churches in my answer, because this matter is a challenge for all of society, from which no one is exempt. The measures introduced by my Department are backed up by legislation, and it is important that we all work together on a common agenda. I am sure that we will.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. What meetings have he or his departmental officials had with their counterparts in the Twenty-six Counties to encourage the establishment of an all-Ireland child protection register?

Mr McGimpsey: I have had no meetings to date with my counterpart in the Irish Republic, who, because of the election, has only recently taken up her post. I had hoped to have a meeting with her this week, but the arrangements for the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council have been deferred until the autumn. However, a meeting with the Minister for Health and Children in the Irish Republic is firmly on my agenda. I will support any measure that benefits the health of people in Northern Ireland, and I am ready to co-operate with the Irish Minister for Health and Children where such benefits can be realised.

Free Prescriptions

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consultation has taken place with general practitioners concerning the review of the introduction of free prescriptions for all in Northern Ireland. (AQO 252/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Since I announced a cost-and-benefit review on 15 May, officials have been working on the arrangements to carry that forward. The review will be a complex piece of work, and I am determined to get it right. Preparations are at an advanced stage, and a range of interested parties will soon be invited to take part in the review. So far, no formal approaches have been made to any interested parties. It is my intention that general practitioners, as key stakeholders in primary care services in Northern Ireland, will be represented in the review.

That will help to inform the consideration of issues such as the potentially increased workload of GPs as a result of deciding to adopt a policy of free prescriptions for all.

Mr Neeson: I appreciate that the Minister and his Department are carrying out a cost-benefit analysis. Will he ensure Members that there will be full consultation with all GPs in Northern Ireland, and will he monitor the impact and benefits that free prescriptions are having in Wales?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes. Looking at expected costs, unforeseen costs and experiences in other jurisdictions will be part and parcel of the review. For example, the Member will be aware that, over six years, Wales moved to the position of providing free prescriptions. Scotland has been providing free prescriptions for people suffering from serious or chronic conditions, but is now, under the coalition Government of Alex

Salmond and the Scottish National Party, moving to introduce free prescriptions for all. Those experiences will help to inform our considerations. Full consultation with primary-care providers will also play a key part.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the Minister's announcement, on 15 May 2007, of the cost-benefit analysis. I encourage the Minister and his officials to look at the various models throughout the UK and not just the Welsh model. Undoubtedly, there are a number of valuable lessons to be learned from the English and Scottish models also.

Mr McGimpsey: I will take Mr Robinson's point on board. I will consider examples of best practice and I will seek to have the widest consultation possible. The Department wants to get this right and not end up with a process that is underestimated and underfunded and would, therefore, lead to difficulties. The Department wants to be accurate in every step it takes.

Accessibility of Hospital Services

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline issues relating to the accessibility of hospital services in the south-west of Northern Ireland. (AQO 283/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I am committed to providing access to safe, high quality hospital services to all the people in Northern Ireland. Hospital services for those in the south-west are currently provided by the Erne Hospital and the Tyrone County Hospital. With a major investment of £450 million, we will provide two new hospitals: a new acute hospital to the north of Enniskillen, which is due to open in 2011, and a new local hospital in Omagh, which is due to open in 2012. Those new hospitals, together with enhanced primary and community care services, will provide the people in the south-west with health services designed to meet their needs.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time, although he is no stranger to the Floor of the House.

I thank the Minister for his commitment to accessible health services in the south-west, and for his commitment to the provision of two new hospitals in that area at a cost of around £450 million. Of course, the Department for Regional Development is also involved in the accessibility issue. Will the Minister outline what arrangements have taken place, or are planned, between himself, the Minister for Regional Development and the Department for Regional Development to ensure that there is proper accessibility provision for the south-west hospitals?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree wholly that improving roads in the south-west will help to make hospital services more accessible. I see that the Minister for Regional

Development has just entered the Chamber. His officials and mine have been in discussions about priority schemes along the A32 that the Ambulance Service and Roads Service have identified as developments that would significantly improve the roads infrastructure.

I am committed to providing safe accessible services for the people of the south-west. Part of that commitment must involve improving the roads infrastructure, and the outline business case for the hospitals included a £5 million upgrade of the A32. However, it is very much work in progress and the beginning of a process. Anyone who has driven along that stretch of road knows that it has been lacking in investment for many years.

Mr Gallagher: The visit by the Minister, soon after he assumed office, to the south-west was welcome, and I am sure that he will agree that it is a sprawling rural community and that access is a crucial issue. Will the Minister ask his Department to reconsider the matter of an air ambulance that could serve the entire west of Ireland? Furthermore, will he raise the matter of an air ambulance based at St Angelo airport, given the increase in air activity and the development of servicing for aircraft and helicopters there, at his meeting with his counterpart from the Republic of Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: When I visited the south-west, we discussed the possibility of an air ambulance based at St Angelo airport. I was not aware until that visit that an infrastructure is in place there that can service helicopters. However, I must consider the Ambulance Service as a whole, particularly in the south-west. I gave a commitment that I would consider the provision of ambulances for the Omagh area, as there are concerns about accessibility, which have been, in part, addressed by the improvements that have been made to the Ambulance Service. In principle, I am happy with a helicopter-based service but not if it is at the expense of a land-based service. That is the key calculation; however, a helicopter service does have tremendous uses for remote areas. Dr Coulter frequently makes the point that such a service would be useful for Antrim, but I must consider how it relates to the land-based service.

Mr Buchanan: Will the Minister agree that people in the south-west, especially in my constituency of West Tyrone — recently reported as the most socially deprived part of Northern Ireland — do not receive equality of safe services, given that only 48% of emergency calls in that area met the rapid response ambulance target of eight minutes? What plans does he propose to put in place to address that unjustified deficiency, both in the short term and for the long-term safety of my constituents?

Mr McGimpsey: The Ambulance Service has not met its targets, and not only in Mr Buchanan's constituency. Those targets are being reviewed again. Measures have been put in place in the south-west in

order to upgrade the service. For example, an additional 24/7 accident and emergency ambulance has been operational since August 2006, for which 11 additional staff were recruited and trained. A new accident and emergency ambulance has been in operation since January 2007 to replace the spare vehicle. An intermediate-care crew has been in place since July 2006. Two paramedic rapid response units are operational from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm. Clinical support officers have been in place since March 2006, and a new ambulance deployment point at Fintona fire station has been available from March 2007. Two intermediate-care vehicles were commissioned for the Omagh area and have been in operation since early February 2007. All of that, in itself, will not do the job, but it shows that the Ambulance Service has responded to the points made by Mr Buchanan and others about ambulance provision. That was one of the points that I made when I announced the new, enhanced local hospital in Omagh. Ambulance provision was one of the other investments to go with that hospital.

Counselling and Advisory Services for Young People

7. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the availability of counselling and other advisory services to young people suffering from depression. (AQO 245/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Depression is a common disorder of varying severity. A range of counselling services in a range of settings are available for young people who suffer from depression, from self-help and peer-support initiatives to specialist mental-health inpatient services. Those are provided by both the voluntary and statutory sectors. Depending on the severity, treatment can be anything from informal befriending to more formal and intensive psychotherapy. The Department of Education funds, through the children and young people's funding package, the independent schools counselling service, which will be fully operational in all post-primary schools from September 2007.

Current resources will provide for a half-day counsellor time each week for schools that want it. Young people may self-refer to that service as well as being referred by the school or their parents.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

3.00 pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. With the rising suicide rate, will the Minister assure us that the funding —

Mr Deputy Speaker: It should be question 1 for the Minister for Regional Development. The Member is just lucky that she got two questions, one after the other.

Ms Lo: Sorry about that.

Availability of Student Reductions

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the reductions available to students travelling home for the weekend on Northern Ireland Railways or Ulsterbus services. (AQO 246/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, after that false start. Translink advises me that its student discount card provides access to reduced fares on its bus and rail services, including cross-border services. Those discounts are available throughout the week, including weekends.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the high cost of travelling — up to £20 for a return trip from university to home — will the Minister consider lowering students' weekend fares to lessen their financial burden?

Mr Murphy: I appreciate and thank the Member for her question, and I fully appreciate the financial burden on students. There are no special travel concessions for students who return home at weekends, but they have full access to the range of student discounts that Translink provides. Some of those are a special student single and return fare on many Ulsterbus routes; a discount of up to 15% on standard adult fares of £2 or more; a discount of up to 33% on Northern Ireland Railways adult single fares; and Northern Ireland Railways student day-return tickets that are available at twice the single student fare.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister agree that it is important to promote the use of public transport among young people? Many young people are taken to school by their parents and go on to employment through which they have a company car — this might be their only opportunity to enjoy the benefits of public transport. Would the Minister consider the immediate promotion of reduced fares for young people and, as the hon Member for South Belfast Ms Lo suggested, further reduce weekend discounts, when much public transport —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member nearing the end of his question?

Mr Wells: This is for the 'Down Recorder'. It is important that the Minister further reduces fares at weekends, when most of the buses and trains are empty anyway.

Mr Murphy: The primary aim of the concessionary fares scheme is to seek to address social exclusion,

which is unlikely to be an issue for most students. Extending the scheme to include them is not a priority, especially in light of Translink's commercial concessions.

Traditionally, in late summer each year, the Department for Regional Development receives requests for concessionary fares to be extended to include young people who have finished compulsory education but are remaining at school. The Department has made a bid for resources to provide half-price fares to young people aged 16 to 17. Any extension to that scheme will depend on securing the necessary resources and the successful completion of an equality impact assessment and consultation process.

Mr Attwood: I and, I suspect, my colleagues find that answer disappointing. Student debt has increased, and, in the future, students from lower-income backgrounds may not be able to apply to university. Given those circumstances, and before the beginning of the next academic year, which is only months away, the Minister should direct the relevant authorities to bring forward proposals to enable students to benefit from greater travel-cost reductions.

Mr Murphy: Thank you, go raibh maith agat. I am happy to listen to any arguments for extending those schemes. I suggest that the cost of travel is not a major element in student debt. Considering that the SDLP formerly held the portfolio for further and higher education, it was interesting that I did not hear the same concerns about student debt when there was an opportunity for it to do something about it.

Nonetheless, if the Member has any reasonable suggestions to make about how that might help alleviate student debt overall, I will be certainly happy to consider them in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Effects of Development on Surface Drainage

3. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has carried out, or plans to carry out, an impact assessment study of the effects of development on surface drainage. (AQO 265/07)

Mr Murphy: The potential impact of development on surface drainage is a material planning consideration, and it is considered both in the preparation of development plans and in the determination of planning applications by the Department of the Environment (DOE). In the preparation of a development plan, DOE Planning Service consults on drainage issues with Northern Ireland Water and other bodies with responsibility in that area. Informed by planning developments, Northern Ireland Water is taking forward a programme

of just over 100 drainage-area studies across the larger areas of population in the North. The drainage-area studies will determine the improvements required to the sewerage network in order to reduce the risk of flooding and to meet environmental objectives within a 30-year horizon.

As well as undertaking public consultation on road developments, my Department's Roads Service carries out an environmental assessment of proposed schemes, including managing any impact on the water environment. Some developments impact upon natural watercourses and flood plains. Northern Ireland Water consults the Rivers Agency about the discharge of surface water drainage into designated and undesignated watercourses. Under normal procedures developers or Northern Ireland Water apply to the Rivers Agency for volume and discharge consent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Carmel Hanna.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister state whether in areas such as South Belfast —

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I had a supplementary question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: My apologies: I call Mr Robinson for a supplementary question.

Mr K Robinson: Your apology is accepted, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. No doubt he will agree that the recent flash-flooding incidents have caused widespread distress across Northern Ireland. Has any of those events been due, in any degree, to an increase in densities in housing developments and the subsequent increase in areas under tarmac?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my response, the Planning Service considers the increase in development and the impact that it will have, not just on Northern Ireland Water and the structures that it maintains but on the Rivers Agency and any other agency with responsibility. Those factors are taken into account. However, it is generally accepted that the drainage systems could not have coped with the flash flooding. We have seen similar incidents recently in Sheffield and other parts of England. There has probably been more investment in the infrastructure there than there has been here, but it was still unable to cope with the rain that fell over such a short space of time.

When a development is considered for planning approval, the Planning Service, with strong input from Northern Ireland Water and the other agencies, looks at the impact that it is likely to have on drainage and the potential for flooding.

Mrs Hanna: Following on from that, will the Minister state if, in areas such as South Belfast, where there is a considerable amount of construction work going on, conditions are put on developers and if they

are policed to ensure that they do not overburden the system? Are those issues being properly addressed in the areas of South Belfast — Ardmore, upper Lisburn Road, Four Winds — that have already experienced flooding? I am aware that that may require a follow-up written answer.

Mr Murphy: On the areas that the Member mentioned specifically, I shall ask my officials to reply in writing.

Developers and the designs and standards that they have to meet is a planning matter. As I said in my initial answer, a determination on, and approval for, planning depends on a very rigorous examination of the drainage and sewerage provision and how it links into the overall drainage systems. The Rivers Agency and other relevant agencies are consulted, and all of their standards have to be met.

Undoubtedly, there are areas where flooding has occurred because of reasons other than housing development — in my constituency, for example. Matters that relate to new developments are, certainly, part of the planning process. The Department of the Environment assesses that and makes an approval based on the application. Standards are set in conjunction with Northern Ireland Water, the Rivers Agency and other interested agencies. I will provide the Member with specific details of the issues that she raised.

Mr Brolly: Given growing evidence of the link between urban overdevelopment and flooding, when will the Minister progress the recommendations in the Programme for Government Committee's report on the review of public administration and rural planning?

Mr Murphy: The Programme for Government Committee dealt with a broad range of rural development issues, as well as the impact on the water, sewerage and drainage infrastructure. The Member will be aware that there is an ongoing court case on the matter. The Department has been somewhat limited in the developments that it can bring about because part of the outcome of the court case, if it were successful, is that the Department will no longer have responsibility for rural planning. Nevertheless, I have sent a paper to the Executive this week for consideration. The Department will endeavour to make as much progress as possible, pending the outcome of the court case. I intend to meet stakeholders to try to develop ideas to bring forward a more sustainable and balanced rural planning policy.

Ballykelly Village: Traffic Census

4. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development when a traffic census was last completed for Ballykelly village, and at what stage he would consider a bypass for the village. (AQO 281/07)

Mr Murphy: With regard to first part of the question, I can advise the Member that Roads Service collects traffic volume data by means of 273 automatic census points that are strategically located across the roads network. The information is recorded either throughout the 365 days of the year or during one week in each quarter; an annual average is then calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's annual traffic and travel information report, which presents traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site. The nearest automatic traffic census point to Ballykelly is located on the A2 at Greysteel. In 2006, the annual average, two-way, daily traffic flow at that point was 14,590 vehicles.

With regard to the second part of the question, I can advise the Member that a bypass at Ballykelly is not currently included in Roads Service's works programme. However, the scheme formed part of the additional £400 million package of proposed strategic road-improvement schemes and was published for public consultation in 2006. Work on the assessment of the expanded strategic road-improvement programme is at an advanced stage. However, it has not been finalised. At present, therefore, I am not in a position to inform the House of the details of its content or timing.

Mr G Robinson: I appreciate that the traffic census figures that have been provided were taken in Greysteel, which is not far from Ballykelly. Does the Minister agree that a bypass at Ballykelly, which is situated at a main arterial route between Ballymena and Londonderry, is essential to alleviate the bottleneck that occurs every day in the village, and it must be considered if funding becomes available?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my original answer, census figures have been taken. The issue of a bypass at Ballykelly has been put forward for consultation under the advanced strategic road-improvement programme. It will, therefore, be considered. When the consultation process has finished, and the Executive have decided on their priorities, I hope that I will be able to give the Member a more favourable response. Unfortunately, however, I cannot comment at present.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. Can the Minister give the House an update on improvements to the A6 Randalstown to Derry road?

Mr Murphy: At present, 36% of the A6 route is dual carriageway. That will increase to 47% when the road from Randalstown to Castledawson is dualled. The 30-km section of road from Derry to south of Dungiven will also be dualled. The Secretary of State announced that £250 million scheme in December 2005. An important announcement of the appointment of two major firms of consultants to progress the scheme is imminent. It is anticipated that the

construction phase will commence towards the latter part of the planning period, which is 2015. When work is complete, 75% of the route will be dual carriageway. On the remaining section, several two-plus-one lanes have been constructed to allow guaranteed overtaking opportunities along the route between Castledawson and Dungiven.

3.15 pm

Enniskillen: Traffic Gridlock

5. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to resolve traffic gridlock in Enniskillen, in particular for through-traffic travelling to the north-west. (AQO 269/07)

Mr Murphy: The Department's Roads Service is aware of traffic-congestion problems in and around Enniskillen but not of any specific additional delays for through-traffic travelling to the north-west.

I understand that current traffic-congestion delays in Enniskillen are primarily a consequence of developer-led works at Gaol Square that aim to cater for the extra traffic that the opening of the new Asda store later this year will generate. Roads Service staff are working with the developers to reduce the congestion that is arising from those works. The additional closure of the Quay Pass approach to Erneside Shopping Centre in order to facilitate flooding-relief works at the entrance to the shopping centre has exacerbated the situation.

The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr McHugh will be aware that Roads Service is also progressing major work schemes in the Enniskillen area at Henry Street and Cherrymount Link. The Henry Street scheme, which is expected to go on site early next year, will reduce traffic delays from the south-west to the north-west of the town. The Cherrymount Link scheme will reduce delays for traffic travelling from the south-east to the north-west.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. However, none of the works that he mentioned, or his associated comments, has anything to do with the gridlock that has occurred at both sides of the town for a number of years, and neither would completion of those works resolve that gridlock.

Enniskillen is the only county town in the Six Counties that does not have a bypass, yet the previous question for oral answer asked the Minister whether he would consider a bypass for a village. Considering that Enniskillen is the gateway to the north-west, and that traffic to and from Dublin, Galway and Sligo — *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: Speech.

Mr McHugh: I will ask my question. Does the Minister agree that there is an absolute and urgent need for Enniskillen to be marked down in the long term — or even in the short term — for a bypass rather than for the simple, soft jobs that will not resolve the problem?

Mr Murphy: I travelled through Enniskillen on a bus on Friday, and I did not experience the problems that the Member has mentioned. Perhaps it was a good day in Enniskillen. The A4 Enniskillen southern bypass is one of the schemes included in 'Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015', which went out to public consultation in July 2006. Roads Service is considering responses to that consultation exercise, and I am sure that the Member's firm views will be noted.

Mr Elliott: I note that the Minister went to Enniskillen by bus and not by train — I wonder why. He mentioned the possible provision of a southern bypass. Will the Minister tell the House what progress has been made to provide a through-road on the new Tesco development site at Derrychara? Rather than have all traffic access the site from the Derrychara Road, it would be preferable to have some access from the A4.

Mr Murphy: I do not have the same knowledge of Enniskillen as the Member does, but I will inform him of some of the schemes that are going ahead. If they do not help to address his concerns, I will seek assistance from someone in Roads Service and send him a written response.

The statutory procedures for the Henry Street scheme have recently been completed. Contract procurement will take place over the next few months, and it is intended that construction will commence in early 2008. It is expected that the statutory procedures associated with the Cherrymount Link scheme will commence in the late summer or early autumn of this year. The developer-led works at Gaol Square will involve the replacement of a roundabout, while the signalised junctions are scheduled to be finished at the end of this month. Works to address the flooding problem at Quay Pass were also developer-led, and they finished recently — ahead of schedule. If none of those projects helps to answer Mr Elliott's concerns, I will ensure that he receives a written response.

Mr Campbell: What is the Minister doing to alleviate the traffic congestion that is being added to by the abject and abysmal failure of the numerous new pay-and-display machines in car parks in Northern Ireland? The machines have cost £270,000 in the past 12 months, and their failure to work has led many motorists to circle towns in order to try to find legal car parking.

Mr Murphy: Traffic congestion is not a new problem, as I am sure the Member will remember from his days as Minister for Regional Development.

Nonetheless, the Department has been working with National Car Parks Ltd (NCP) to provide car parking space, as well as metering and traffic-control measures, in major towns.

There is always room for improvement.

Mr Campbell: Those measures are not working.

Mr Murphy: We will certainly consider suggestions from the Member, and if any of them are reasonable, the Department will be happy to take them on board.

The current scheme has not been under way for long. However, many other towns are also experiencing congestion problems. I must add that not all those problems are to do with parking, as I am sure the Members is aware of from his days as Minister for Regional Development.

Road Improvement Scheme: Lower Chichester Street, Belfast

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road improvement scheme at lower Chichester Street, Belfast, setting out (a) the full costs; (b) the start date; (c) the expected date of completion; and (d) the actual date of completion.

(AQO 229/07)

Mr Murphy: The lower Chichester Street project is a street and road improvement scheme that the Department for Social Development (DSD) funds and my Department's Roads Service manages. The scheme aims to improve the street's attractiveness, introduce bus movement and enhance pedestrian and cycle routes to the river front. The high-quality building materials that are being used will complement the historical and new buildings along the street, which include the Royal Courts of Justice. The full cost of the scheme will be £1.5 million. Work on the project started on 24 November 2006, with its completion date expected in mid August 2007.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Minister not agree that, to start work on 24 November 2006 and to be finished some time in August of this year, is an extraordinarily lengthy period of time in which to complete roadworks? The street is between 100 yds and 200 yds long. I appreciate the high-quality materials that are being put into the streetscape, but, nonetheless, the scheme is taking an excessively long period to complete.

I refer the Minister to a song with which he is familiar.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question?

Mr A Maginness: In 'The Mountains of Mourne':
"there's gangs of them digging for gold in the street."

Perhaps the contractors on the lower Chichester Street road-improvement scheme do not have to dig in the street for gold, because they are getting £1.5 million for nine months' work.

Mr Kennedy: Ask your friends that helped to put down the road. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Murphy: I thank "Percy French" for his question. The Member should bear in mind that the Department for Social Development is funding the project, so if he thinks he is not getting value for money, perhaps he should take up the matter elsewhere. *[Laughter.]*

The Member will know from his time as Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development that difficulties in urban areas can arise when a contractor drills down into a road. No one is ever sure what utilities lie there. In this case, in the early stages of the dig, the contractor discovered a number of unmarked buried utility services, which belonged to NIE and BT. Those utilities had not been identified at design stage. In order to complete the construction work, those services had to be diverted. Only the utility companies or their approved term contractors could do that work, and that led to a considerable delay in the progress on site.

The phasing of the work was vital to the scheme's overall completion date, and once the contractor had been delayed in the initial phase, that had a knock-on effect for the remaining phases. Little scope was available in which to make up any time, due to the restricted nature of the site and the need to keep it open to pedestrians and vehicles.

The Roads Service and the project team are considering the optimum traffic-management arrangement for the junction of lower Chichester Street and Oxford Street, and that may result in the installation of traffic signals at the Oxford Street junction.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Part of my question has already been answered. However, who requested the improvement scheme and what are the supervisory arrangements? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Murphy: The Department for Social Development is the scheme's main sponsor. DSD is funding the majority of the works. It is contributing £1.36 million, and the Court Service and the NIO are contributing £70,000 each. The Roads Service prepared the contract, which was awarded to FP McCann (Developments) Ltd. White Young Green was appointed as senior project manager and McAdam Design Partnership as engineers for the contract, with responsibility for the site supervisory role.

The Roads Service, the contractor, the senior project manager, the engineer and the Court Service hold fortnightly meetings to discuss progress, programming, and so on. There are monthly progress meetings of the

project board, the Roads Service, DSD, the senior project manager and the engineer.

Development of Belfast International Airport

7. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the development of Belfast International Airport. (AQO 260/07)

Mr Murphy: I welcome the master plan that the owners of Belfast International Airport published. That plan sets out proposals for the development of the airport until 2030. The airport is a key economic gateway for the North, and I commend its owners for their commitment to further investment in and improvement of the airport.

Mr Burnside: At the first meeting with the former Chancellor of the Exchequer on the financial package for Northern Ireland, I suggested that the international airport at Aldergrove be designated an enterprise centre for innovation. The Chancellor committed himself to following up that proposal. After that, I had discussions with the chief executive of Belfast International Airport, and the subject has since gone nowhere.

Will the Minister give a commitment that he will speak to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and that he will also discuss that subject with HM Treasury? Belfast International Airport is a perfect location to site a centre of excellence for innovation, which should be in receipt of moneys from the innovation fund.

Mr Murphy: The Member may not be the first to be disappointed by the former Chancellor, who is now the Prime Minister. The innovation fund and associated projects are matters for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, given that the airport is privately owned and that the Department has no responsibility for its operation, if the Department for Regional Development can make any input, it will do so. I am happy to discuss the matter with my Executive colleagues. We are still striving to secure from the British Treasury the most advantageous package that we can. The Executive as a whole will want to consider the location of a centre of excellence for innovation.

Mr Ford: I am sure that the Minister agrees that the development of surface transportation infrastructure is a key issue in the development of business at the airport. Will he give a commitment that he will examine in detail any private-sector proposals for the reopening of the Knockmore railway line? I hope that he will not be doctrinaire by insisting on public investment for that project.

Mr Murphy: Given that the Knockmore railway line is the subject of today's adjournment debate, the Member knows that in a short time there will be an

opportunity to discuss it in greater detail. Lack of usage has been the problem with that railway line. The Member knows that it is generally agreed that in excess of 100 million passengers a year using an airport is the volume of passengers needed to sustain a railway link to an airport. The volume of passengers using the airport at Aldergrove is nowhere near that.

Members will have an opportunity to discuss the issue further in the Adjournment debate, and I will develop my Department's thinking then.

Dr W McCrea: Is the Minister aware of the enormous economic benefits that will accrue to South Antrim if Belfast International Airport further develops its 900-acre holding?

Will he give an assurance that, if that welcome development proceeds, his Department will carry out the necessary infrastructural improvements? I speak especially of the provision of a railway link to the airport and of dualling the road from Templepatrick to the entrance of the airport.

Mr Murphy: I repeat the answer that I gave to Mr Ford. The volume of passengers that uses Belfast International Airport falls far short of that required to sustain a railway line. The economic case for that link is not strong enough. That is not to say that the issue cannot be revisited in future.

With respect to the road network, I presume that the Member is referring to the Templepatrick bypass. I will note the detail of his comments, and we will attempt to respond to him. A series of strategic roads is planned under ISNI II. They are designed to enhance key economic drivers in the area, including seaports and airports. Part of that plan is to develop the strategic transportation network. I am unsure which of those link roads is relevant to Aldergrove airport, but I will respond in greater detail to the Member's question.

Rail Stops: New IKEA Store

8. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to provide additional rail stops at Holywood Exchange and George Best Belfast City Airport, following completion of the new IKEA store. (AQO 207/07)

Mr Murphy: There are no immediate plans to provide additional rail halts at Holywood Exchange and the George Best Belfast City Airport following the completion of the new IKEA store.

Planning permission for the IKEA site was granted on the condition that public transport facilities based on bus services linking Holywood Exchange to the centre of Belfast would be enhanced. The airport is served by a dedicated service to Belfast city centre every 20 minutes. However, the Belfast Metropolitan Transport

Plan includes a longer-term proposal for a new railway station at Tillysburn. If that goes ahead, it would serve the Holywood Exchange and the George Best Belfast City Airport.

3.30 pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Co-ownership Housing Associations

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate what plans she has to expand the operations of co-ownership housing associations in Northern Ireland. (AQO 266/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The co-ownership scheme, which is operated by the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association, is the only scheme of its type in Northern Ireland. Sir John Semple, in his report on the review into affordable housing, stated that there is scope for the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association to expand its business. That recommendation will be addressed as I take forward action on all of Sir John's recommendations. Coincidentally, the first meeting of the interdepartmental affordability review implementation group will take place this Thursday.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer and for ensuring that the group will meet fairly quickly.

Will the Minister undertake to develop a range of equity options for first-time buyers that are more flexible than the current 50:50 arrangements and that might allow first-time buyers to take equity options as low as 20% of the purchase price?

Ms Ritchie: I will consider that matter as part of the implementation of the affordability review, and I will raise it at the first meeting of the implementation group.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The NIHE has indicated that it will release land worth approximately £250 million for sale. How much of that land will be used by the Department to provide affordable social housing?

Ms Ritchie: That is another issue that I will consider in the affordability review. We must ensure that we have as much as land as possible and that we are given the money to build houses, which is the most important priority. Only last week in Washington, I took the opportunity to discuss with various groups other possible options for the acquisition of funds. The bottom line is that I inherited a woefully inadequate budget. I fully realise that I need more money. If I am given the money, I will build the houses. If I can get land released, I will do that, too.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has consideration been given to raising the

upper price limits for eligibility under the co-ownership scheme?

Ms Ritchie: An in-year review will be conducted this September. Under the co-ownership scheme, price limits for properties are currently set at £225,000 in 12 district council areas, and at £180,000 in the remaining 14 district council areas. Given the rise in house prices, the price limits will be reviewed at the end of August or in September. If necessary, the limits will be increased, subject to approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel, and any increase would be effective from 1 October 2007.

Even though the average house price is close to the £225,000 limit, there is still a steady flow of applicants for the scheme. Sir John Semple's final report on the review into affordable housing has recommended that consideration be given to abolishing the price limits and replacing them with eligibility criteria. I will ensure that the implementation group fully considers that issue and the other issues that have been raised today.

Pension Credit Advisers

2. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what plans she has to review the number of pension credit advisers employed through the Social Security Agency. (AQO 203/07)

Ms Ritchie: My Department has recently reviewed the number of pension advisers required to deliver its outreach service for older people, and it has decided that 20 pension advisers will be employed throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: I must express concern that the number of those advisers is decreasing from 35 to 20. That will have a detrimental impact on pensioners. Given that 35 people are currently employed in that service and that there will be only 20 posts, what criteria will be used to select the 20 successful applicants for the post of pension adviser?

Ms Ritchie: I fully appreciate what the Member for North Down Mr Weir has said. I will give him some background details. I want to ensure that those 20 pension advisers will cover every part of Northern Ireland. I hope that in the selection of those criteria, the areas that have the greatest levels of deprivation and disadvantage will be taken into account. However, it is important that every area is taken into account. The review used historical information from the established outreach service along with forecasted demand arising from the agency's changes and service delivery. It concluded that 20 advisers geographically dispersed throughout Northern Ireland could provide a fit-for-purpose outreach service for older people. I insisted that all areas of Northern Ireland be properly

and adequately covered. It is anticipated that the new arrangements will be in place by September 2007.

The agency intends to write to all MLAs to inform them of the new arrangements and locations once they have been finalised. However, I confirm that all areas of Northern Ireland, including North Down, will have a dedicated adviser. I hope that all issues, including deprivation and disadvantage, can be addressed and that the criteria that are used for the selection of those people will conform to the best possible employment guidelines.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister think that the forthcoming pensions Bill will be of benefit to all, or just some, pensioners?

Ms Ritchie: Obviously, that is a matter that I will have to consider further. However, my primary aim in all this is to ensure that everyone who is entitled to benefits — particularly, as is the case here, the elderly, the infirm, or those who suffer from one or more disabilities — is able to access the benefit to which they are entitled. I hope that any future legislation will reflect the needs of the people in Northern Ireland and will be capable of tackling disadvantage and deprivation.

New Social Housing

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate whether proposals existed to enable the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to build new social housing. (AQO 238/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive now manages the social housing development programme and provides grants to housing associations to develop newbuild social housing. Housing associations deliver the newbuild programme. That approach is based on value-for-money considerations. Housing associations, unlike the Housing Executive, can attract private finance without it scoring as public expenditure.

Therefore housing associations can deliver more social housing for a given amount of public funding. Since the introduction of private finance, housing associations have raised some £340 million in private funding, which means that they have provided the equivalent of about 5,000 new homes at no cost to the Exchequer. The Housing Executive maintains its role as a provider of last resort, but currently there are no proposals to enable it to exercise a direct-provision role. I fully understand where the Member is coming from, and I pay tribute to the Housing Executive and the housing associations for their current and previous roles.

Mr Ford: I appreciate that the Housing Executive's new management and co-ordination role is in its early stages. However, will the Minister assure me that if she does not have any proposals to return new-build respons-

ibilities to the Housing Executive, she is absolutely certain that the housing associations can provide the between 2,500 and 3,000 social houses that are needed in Northern Ireland every year?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with Mr Ford that I have been given an inadequate budget for this year; I inherited it from the direct rule Administration. As part of the affordability review implementation group, I want to ensure that we are provided with enough land release and sufficient resources to ensure that a large number of social houses can be built for the people of Northern Ireland.

Members are in no doubt that the housing crisis in Northern Ireland is characterised by a large number of people on waiting lists throughout Housing Executive district office areas and the inability of young people to get on the first rung on the property ladder. The latter is part of the affordability crisis caused by the appreciation in value of most houses and land. I want to address that with my Executive colleagues, and others on the expert panel, so that the best recommendations on how to resolve the crisis can be made.

Mr Burnside: I was watching RTÉ 2 last night — it is not often that I do — and there was an interesting programme about affordable housing in the South of Ireland. First, are there any lessons to be learnt from the problems that the Republic has faced? Secondly, what discussions has the Minister or her Department had with private-sector developers to try to create a partnership to address affordable housing needs?

Ms Ritchie: I firmly believe that much can be learnt from the housing crisis that has bedevilled the South of Ireland. Indeed, I hope to visit Dublin soon to look at social and affordable housing projects and to find out how the Government has tackled the issue there. I have already set in motion plans to meet my opposite number in Leinster House.

The Member also asked about the role of private developers and builders in solving the affordable housing crisis. Sir John Semple's 'Review into Affordable Housing' stated that developers have an important and varied role to play in solving the affordable housing crisis. The review's recommendations included building a range of housing types, from affordable to executive homes, and ensuring that 20% of houses in any housing development granted planning permission under article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 are affordable houses. The review also recommended building relationships with housing associations, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association to assist with that.

The review also suggested working with the Planning Service and other key partners to develop a better relationship in order to assist in the planning and development process. The review also recommended

developing more sustainable buildings that incorporate modern methods of construction and renewable energies, and working with others to help develop the necessary skills in labour forces to deliver new homes.

I reassure all Members that I will consider all of Sir John's recommendations through the interdepartmental implementation group that I am chairing and which will be convened this Thursday.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that it is grossly inadequate for her to have the finances to build only 611 new social houses?

Ms Ritchie: I fully agree with the Member for South Antrim Mr Burns. As I said, I inherited a totally inadequate budget from the direct rule Administration. I have made that clear in the several debates on affordable and social housing in the Chamber. I hope to gain the support of my Executive colleagues to ensure that a significant budget is obtained to deal with the most serious issue in Northern Ireland, which is the provision of social and affordable housing.

I have always said that the most important things that will improve a person's health, social and mental well-being are the ability to access a house, as well as good training and job opportunities and to have food on the table.

Homeless Levels

4. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate how many people presented themselves to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as homeless in the last year. (AQO 222/07)

3.45 pm

Ms Ritchie: The number of households presenting as homeless in 2006-07 was 21,013, of which 9,744 were accepted by the Housing Executive as statutorily homeless.

Tackling homelessness is a major priority for me. I recognise that homelessness is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader issue of social exclusion. I am impressed by the considerable developments in the provision for homelessness in recent years but, if we are to promote social inclusion successfully and comprehensively, much more needs to be done. I have therefore developed a strategy to promote the social inclusion of people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Through collaborative partnership working, the strategy aims to achieve various specific objectives, including preventing or minimising homelessness wherever possible, making accessible effective safe provision for those who are homeless and supporting, wherever possible, the homeless person's progression to independent living. The strategy has

been endorsed by my colleagues. My Department will take responsibility for managing its implementation.

Mr Simpson: What impact does the Minister expect that her current policy and initiatives, as outlined, will have on the number of homeless people in the Province over the next 12 months?

Ms Ritchie: I assure the Member that my intention — and that of my Department — is to ensure prevention. Everything surrounds the issue of bringing people in and ensuring that each has full access to a roof over his or her head. We need to prevent or minimise homelessness wherever possible, to make accessible effective, safe provision for those who are homeless, and to support the progression to independent living where that is possible. As Minister for Social Development, I fully recognise the problems that beset people who find themselves homeless. I want to ensure that the impact on them, and everything that is associated with that, is minimised.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister elaborate on the exact status of the strategy, and on when it will be published, to assure us that the issue is being addressed urgently?

Ms Ritchie: The strategy was adopted by the Executive at its most recent meeting. I hope to launch the strategy on Monday 9 July.

Village Area

5. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on her visit to the Village area. (AQO 284/07)

Ms Ritchie: My visit to the Village was extremely useful. Talking to local people and their representatives was very informative. I found a mix of sound, terraced housing and housing that was certainly unfit for habitation. My Department is carefully examining proposals from the Housing Executive and others for renewal work. I am committed to ensuring that the housing problems are addressed as quickly as possible. There is no clear consensus on the way forward at the moment. We need all groups to reach such a consensus that, ideally, should strike a balance.

I stress that there is more to reviving a community than simply providing new houses. It is important that we are able to put together a regeneration strategy that includes action to revitalise the entire area, its economy and facilities. I, and all Members of the House, must take on board the fact that we talk about the lives and the future of the people who live there. I want to be able fully to reflect that.

To move things forward, the Belfast regeneration office has, since 2004, invested almost £2 million in community development and physical regeneration projects in the Village area.

Dr McDonnell: Can the Minister indicate the timescale in which the unfit housing in the Donegall Road area of the Village will be addressed?

Ms Ritchie: We estimate that work is needed on approximately 400 of the dwellings. The vast majority of those are empty, and, roughly, 80 are blocked up. The Housing Executive continues to promote its grant improvement scheme to owners.

About a dozen houses in the area have only external toilet facilities. Previous efforts to upgrade those houses could not get the owners' or tenants' agreement. Some of the residents did not want to leave their houses for the length of time that the improvements would have taken, and others were concerned about a possible increase in rent or rates if the houses were improved. In view of that, I have asked my officials to meet the people who live in those dozen houses to see whether ways can be found to address their concerns.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): Given the extent of the chronic deprivation that we have seen in the Village area over the past few weeks — deprivation that most of us thought was a dim and distant relic of the 1960s — and the fact that it proves that such deprivation is not the exclusive preserve of any one community, what plans does the Minister have to ensure that, during this Assembly mandate, good quality housing is provided for communities across Northern Ireland?

Ms Ritchie: As Minister for Social Development, I firmly believe in and subscribe to the principle of equality. I also firmly believe that houses should be allocated on the basis of need and that everybody should have access to good quality accommodation and have a roof over their heads. Such were the chronic housing conditions that I saw in the Village area, I felt compelled to deal with the matter. Consequently, there will be a planning day for the Village area in the Wellington Park Hotel on 9 July. All the key players from that area will be invited to that event. The Housing Executive, housing associations and the private sector will give presentations to illustrate the potential future for the area.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans to visit other areas, such as rural communities west of the River Bann, that suffer as a result of social deprivation? Those communities have poor access to services, high unemployment levels and lack affordable housing. The Minister could perhaps suggest to them how their problems could be addressed.

Ms Ritchie: As I said from the outset, I am happy to visit any area to which I have been invited, whether that is an urban area, west of the Bann, in Belfast or in the south-east. In fact, tomorrow morning, I am visiting areas of north Belfast, including the long streets, St Joseph's, St Patrick's and Carrick Hill.

Financial Support for Town Centres

6. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the criteria on which financial support is allocated to town centres in Northern Ireland. (AQO 268/07)

Ms Ritchie: My Department can help in the regeneration of town centres in four ways: by assisting better planning and marketing of town centres; by tackling dereliction and market failure; by supporting comprehensive development projects on large sites; and by improving the streetscape. When deciding on the use of its resources, the Department will support projects that will deliver the aims of locally agreed town centre strategies. Decisions on individual projects are taken on the basis of some key tests, including the availability of funding; the evidence of the need for regeneration work to be carried out in a town; the likely impact that the project will have; and its compatibility with planning and other policies.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Minister will be aware that in the past there has been a large discrepancy in the grants that have been made available to different towns for town centre development. What steps will she take to ensure that the process for allocating funds is transparent and that all the stakeholders have a role to play in formulating the criteria by which money is awarded?

Ms Ritchie: My answer will cover several issues, and I will deal with each one. Subject to budgets and the following criteria, the Department for Social Development will support projects that have been identified in locally planned and supported city and town centre strategies. The project must be compatible with the town's designation in the regional development strategy and the relevant area plans, and the long-term economic role of the town or city centre must be clear, with broad consensus about that among stakeholders. A town or city centre integrated regeneration plan must have been produced, and health checks must have been carried out. Any proposed project must make a significant contribution to the town or city centre.

The intervention should assist in achieving long-term structural change, which may initially include slowing decline. There must also be demonstrable evidence of the need for regeneration work to be completed in the area. The intervention should contribute to public-sector objectives on social inclusion and improving community relations. There must be evidence that the intervention will not seriously undermine or damage another development in the same town or merely displace activity from a neighbouring town. The intervention should also be co-ordinated by an effective city and town partnership of stakeholders.

Furthermore, delivery mechanisms must be in place to ensure effective completion of projects and programmes.

Financial leverage, using public funding, must be clearly evidenced and secured up front. The potential impacts of wider Government policy developments must also have been considered, in addition to the potential impact of demographic change on physical infrastructure.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that there has been huge underinvestment in the greater Castle Street area of Belfast for many years? Will she consider commissioning a master plan for the area?

Ms Ritchie: I will consider the issue that the Member raised and write to him accordingly.

Mr Durkan: The Minister outlined the four policy pillars that inform her Department's approach to town centres. Will the Minister keep those policy pillars under review to ensure that her Department is doing its utmost to support town centres that are under pressure, that need their fabric upgraded and their commercial viability restored? Are there plans to consider remodelling urban development grants?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan that town centres need to be continually revitalised and that any retail establishment or town that is subject to pressure receives assistance. My Department's mission statement is to build communities and to tackle disadvantage. To do that successfully, a continuous review is needed so that the four pillars of assessment are up to date and complement the requirements of any area. I will ensure that the urban development programme is subject to further investigation so that all towns in Northern Ireland that are under pressure receive the support to which they are entitled. Continuous assessment is required to tackle deprivation.

St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena and Use of Military Sites

7. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate if her department has plans to bid for the land currently occupied by St. Patrick's Barracks in Ballymena, when it becomes available, for the purpose of social housing development.

(AQO 201/07)

11. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the use of military sites by her department. (AQO 277/07)

Ms Ritchie: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall answer questions 7 and 11 together.

My Department has already acquired the vacant military site at Girdwood Barracks in north Belfast and is preparing an integrated master plan for it and the adjacent Crumlin Road Jail site. Master plans have been, or are being, drawn up for the Clooney, Fort George and Ebrington Army bases. Master planning for the

latter two sites is being handled by the ILEX, the urban regeneration company, on behalf of the Department for Social Development and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The Ministry of Defence has indicated that it intends to vacate further sites across Northern Ireland over the next two years, one of which is St Patrick's Barracks in Ballymena. My Department has registered an interest in acquiring a number of those sites for regeneration. Affordable and social housing will be part of the regeneration of many of those sites — for example, the proposed creation of a mixed background, mixed tenure housing development on the site of Grosvenor Barracks in Enniskillen.

Departmental officials are working on option appraisals for several sites, as required under Government accounting rules. My Department has also agreed to facilitate the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's interest in Forkhill Army base.

4.00 pm

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What will the Minister do to alleviate the high level of housing stress in Ballymena, and has she identified the need for new provision for the homeless in the town?

Ms Ritchie: I hope to address the issue of housing stress in all areas, whether in Ballymena, Derry, Newry or Strabane. To do so, I will be working with the interdepartmental affordability review implementation group. I hope that the prime issue of social inclusion will be addressed through the rolling out of the homelessness strategy.

Commission that the new uniform was chosen with comfort, appearance and durability in mind.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given what the representative of the Assembly Commission says, what steps will the Assembly Commission take to improve communication with all members of staff to ensure that grievances and disputes are resolved through trade union and staff representatives rather than on the Floor of the House?

Mr Neeson: The Assembly Commission believes in good employment practices and is committed to staff at all times. The Commission will ensure that, when required, appropriate, practical uniforms are provided to staff so that they can carry out their duties in comfort.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Staff Uniforms

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Assembly Commission to outline what steps it has taken in relation to the uniform of the Assembly cleaning staff to make it more comfortable and more practical for working in.
(AQO 218/07)

Mr Neeson: The provision of catering and cleaning services is contracted to Eurest under the support services contract; the cleaning service is subcontracted to Resource. It is a matter for Eurest and Resource to provide uniforms for the staff that they employ. However, under the terms of the contract, the Assembly Commission meets the costs of such consumables. Resource recently took delivery of a new uniform for cleaning operatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Resource has informed the Assembly

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Antrim to Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Burns: I am delighted to introduce this debate on a topic that is of great interest to my constituents and which I know will have the attention of Members for South Antrim, Lagan Valley, South Belfast and further afield.

Many Members will recall that, in the face of public opposition, the rail service on the Antrim to Lisburn branch line — commonly known as the Knockmore line — which passed through the stations of Crumlin, Glenavy, Ballinderry and Knockmore, was stopped in June 2003.

At the time, Translink said that the Knockmore line would be retained as an emergency diversionary route for the foreseeable future. The line has now been mothballed, and a replacement bus service is now in place for former rail passengers. However, strong public support remains for the reintroduction of the rail service. I am glad to be able to put that on record today.

Outside observers looking in on Northern Ireland may well ask themselves why a relatively small, but well populated, area, so close to a major city is without a proper rail service. They may ask how, in these days of intense interest and common concern about the environment, there can be such a glaring gap in public transport provision, and why many hundreds of people have no choice but to make private car journeys on increasingly congested roads rather than letting the train take the strain.

My fellow Assembly Members will be aware of how such a situation arose. In March 2000, the ‘Strategic Safety Review of Northern Ireland Railways’, which was undertaken by Arthur D Little Ltd of Cambridge, reported to Translink that £183 million was required to operate and maintain the existing network safely.

The NIO set up the Northern Ireland Railways Task Force to examine its strategic options for the future of the railway network in Northern Ireland, which it did partly through public meetings. In September 2000, the interim report of the task force was published. It stated that the Troubles had led to underinvestment in the network and to the breakdown of it; that progressive closure was inevitable unless investment was made for operational safety; and that political decisions were needed to end the uncertainty about the network’s future.

In the wake of the Little Report and the setting up of the task force, there were real concerns that the whole local railway network would be closed down. I remind Members that the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ mounted a splendid “Save Our Railways” campaign with the support of Translink, community leaders and local representatives. After a while, it appeared that a consolidation of the network seemed to be the preferred path for the NIO. Unfortunately, the Knockmore line was earmarked for closure.

Many voices united behind efforts to save the line. Friends of the Earth pointed out that a bus substitution service would not work because evidence from England where branch lines had been closed indicated that many passengers would simply transfer to private cars rather than buses.

I recall David Ford talking of the “bizarre situation” of a railway line running a few metres past a major airport but not being connected to it. That is a key point for us all to dwell on. Aldergrove is one of the few international airports in Europe without a rail link. There have been calls for the creation of a rail shuttle service from Aldergrove to Antrim station at least. As we look to enhance our regional economy, should we not consider making gateways such as the international airport more accessible through a better connection?

In April 2003, the NIO Minister Angela Smith MP told the House of Commons that she had decided to give her consent to the discontinuation of rail service on the Antrim to Lisburn line from June 2003 onwards. She said that she did so against the backdrop of competing transportation priorities in Northern Ireland, financial feasibility and a wider economic consideration. Minister Smith also stated that Translink had estimated that to obtain regular services on the line would require track maintenance costs of about £565,000 per annum and, in due course, £13 million to modernise the line. Some people may think that a reasonable decision was made, but I do not. A short-sighted, short-term decision was made that was detrimental economically, environmentally and socially to the people of Northern Ireland in the long term.

I am not an economist, but I raise a query on cost. Considering the environmental agenda, population targets and carbon footprints, what has been the cost to the local environment of the thousands of additional car journeys that have been made since the Knockmore line closed? What has been the cost to public health? I do not know — perhaps someone may.

Apparently, among the NIO’s reasons for closing the Knockmore line was the then lengthy travel time to and from Belfast via Knockmore junction. Until 2003, travel from Antrim town to Belfast took up to 45 minutes, as the train took a U-bend down through Crumlin, Glenavy, Ballinderry, Knockmore and then on through

south Belfast. There is no doubt that members of the public living in Antrim town and further north are delighted that travel from Antrim station via the Bleach Green line now takes only 25 minutes.

However, what about those who were left behind after the 2003 closure? The triangle area of Antrim town, Ballinderry and Lisburn, which is close enough to Belfast to be factored into growth considerations for the Belfast metropolitan area plan 2015, has witnessed increased demand for new homes due to the population overspill from Belfast and local young people who wish to remain in their hometowns.

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

My hometown of Crumlin has grown from a small sleepy village of 2,400 people in 1992 to a small town with a population of around 8,000 in 2006. In 2000, a report to Antrim Borough Council noted that there could be an estimated 70% population increase in Crumlin over the subsequent five years. Likewise, the nearby village of Glenavy, which in 2001 had a recorded population of 1,800, has experienced enormous growth. The draft Belfast metropolitan area plan noted that Glenavy's proximity to Lisburn and good A-class road links, along with the nearby M1 motorway, made it an attractive option for future housing settlements.

Crumlin and Glenavy have not only experienced population and housing increases, but huge developments from multinational companies such as Tesco, which is building a 30,500 sq ft store in Crumlin. A discussion on housing and retail development is for another day. However, my point is that population growth and any resulting development will require an adequate transport infrastructure.

Adequate transport infrastructure, such as the development of the Knockmore railway line, can be beneficial to the economy of Northern Ireland by linking Lisburn and Antrim and, therefore, linking major shopping outlets such as Sprucefield and Junction One, which would provide an attractive shopping trip for people here and in the Republic of Ireland. There is also an opportunity to provide transport links to the Maze development if the national stadium is sited there. The Knockmore railway line would be an infrastructural link facilitating a new concept of the three main shopping hubs of Belfast, Lisburn and Antrim.

I have outlined some background details and highlighted points for attention and concern. I will now flag up some thoughts on what could form part of the possible solutions to satisfy existing demands and meet future growth.

In April, I attended a reception in the House of Commons with my party colleague Dr Alasdair McDonnell MP. One MP from each of the three main British parties co-hosted the reception for a community

railways group that examines the feasibility of restoring old disused railway lines to offer services for local passengers and freight. The Minister with responsibility for railways and his counterpart from the Opposition Bench addressed the event. Some 100 people attended. Therefore, it was clear that the community railways idea attracted great interest and attention from public policy figures.

The British Government are keen to increase passenger numbers on local and rural lines, and a community rail strategy has been in place since November 2004 to help advance that desire. Community rail is seen as a cost effective means of increasing investment and maintaining infrastructure. Apparently, it is a great success story, with over 50 designated community rail lines helping Whitehall to meet various departmental and cross-cutting policy priorities on the environment, regional development and social inclusion, among others.

4.15 pm

From that evening's discussion, I learned that Whitehall's community railway development strategy had been reviewed to include an additional objective:

"Enabling local rail to play a larger role in economic and social regeneration."

I have not examined the full details of the strategy in Britain, and I do not suggest that it can be directly imported because the economies of scale are different. However, those at the reception talked about the reopening of various lines across England — a total of hundreds of miles of track. In contrast, the track from Antrim to Knockmore is less than 20 miles long. That evening in London, I was greatly impressed by the energy and excitement of those who talked about the new possibilities for railways, and I left full of hope that the reopening of the Knockmore line could be more than a mere wish.

No Member will produce all the answers in this debate. However, we should promote suggestions and proposals for further consultation, discussion and debate. Members should take a few matters into account. Population growth is increasing the demand for housing in every locality. More people place greater demands on the existing infrastructure and require an increase in its provision. Traffic congestion is increasing in every city, town and village, and climate change means that more sustainable, modern public transportation is required. County Antrim's mothballed railway line has great potential.

The 'Interim Report of the Railways Task Force' sets out strategic options for the future of the railway network. Members should examine how rail transport could reinforce other public policy objectives and consider the prospect of 250,000 new local households over the next 25 years. Public transport initiatives by

the private sector, such as those that operate in many parts of Europe, are another option.

As the Assembly examines and discusses Northern Ireland's productivity, stability and growth in the context of a firm commitment to sustainable development, I am interested in the views of the Minister for Regional Development on the strategy and its suggested options. What future does he envisage for the mothballed Knockmore railway line?

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am in favour of the debate, and I welcome the presence of the Minister for Regional Development. I ask him to consider the change in circumstances in the years since the original decision to close the Antrim to Knockmore line. The populations of Crumlin, Glenavy, Ballinderry, and so on, which are serviced by that line, have grown immensely and add to the already heavy traffic congestion. The case for additional infrastructure flows from that, which is an inescapable conclusion.

The Assembly should consider the case for reinstatement of that line in view of how it would develop infrastructure, assets and resources. Members must formulate measures to encourage commuters to leave their cars at home and to switch to public transport. However, a continued approach of downgrading rail links will never achieve that objective. Such evidence as is available from other areas where buses have replaced rail services demonstrates not only the unacceptable costs to the environment and public services but the fact that the vast majority of rail passengers will switch to using their cars rather than bus services. That is true even in areas where the demographic and population levels are relatively stable.

In those circumstances, we should be considering the very significant — some might say phenomenal — growth that that area is currently experiencing, and which is expected to continue.

Rather than downgrading rail services, we should be considering how to improve the quality of rail travel and exploring additional sources of passengers. The Antrim to Knockmore railway line runs past Belfast International Airport and, although the Minister will be obliged to point out that passenger numbers currently passing through the airport will not meet the criteria for a direct rail connection, we should not wait until all the conditions are met to act.

If the proper standard of infrastructure is put in place, economic and population expansion will continue and follow. Measures can be deployed to attract the necessary increased passenger numbers, and that will expedite the desired levels that the criteria set out. If we wait until we have the passenger numbers first, we will always be playing catch up.

There is fairly intense competition for new air routes into the region at the moment, and there is

speculation that the management and the owners of Belfast International Airport are competing to attract Aer Lingus. I hope that the Minister will consider an opportunity to discuss that bid with his counterpart in the Irish Government, because the potential economic benefits not just to the constituency, but to the region, are obvious.

If there were a possibility of a rail link between the international airport and Belfast, I have no doubt that that would increase and enhance the case for Aer Lingus, and the attractiveness of the region to other carriers would also be enhanced.

The case for reinstating the Knockmore line is strengthened by consideration of the benefits of the anticipated infrastructure requirements that will arise from the development of the Long Kesh site.

All of those considerations provide a compelling case for an active review of current policy, and a proactive approach to future transport needs.

The previous Member to speak referred to the innovative and community-based approach to rail reinstatement in England and in Scotland, in which I was very interested and intend to explore further. I urge the Minister to take steps to inform himself of that particular approach, which has significant potential to resolve the conundrum of where to apply — and what priorities to attach to — resources. All things considered, the case exists for the reinstatement, and I urge the Minister to act. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr W McCrea: I congratulate my colleague the Member for South Antrim Thomas Burns on the opportunity that he has given the House to debate a very important issue. I paid tribute to Members of the House when this issue was debated previously. Then, another hon Member for South Antrim, Mr Ford, was also actively engaged in the issue of reinstatement, as was I. Therefore, I am absolutely delighted to wholeheartedly support what has been said in the debate.

This is an important community issue because, as Mr Burns has rightly said, there are very important needs in an area that has grown dramatically over the last period. Crumlin, Glenavy and Ballinderry have grown in a way that is unprecedented in other areas. Crumlin has gone from being a small village to a small town in a short period of time.

The demand for housing in that area has been increasing dramatically over a short period and continues to increase. We must ensure that there is a proper transport infrastructure in place to deal with that demand. Everyone knows that the present infrastructure is not adequate to meet the demands of that community. Traffic congestion is experienced in a lot of other towns and villages throughout the Province, but in this case it is the result of the dramatic increase in housing in the Crumlin area, and so there is a tremendous need to

reopen the Knockmore railway line. Those who were actively engaged on the issue were disappointed when the line was mothballed.

The area is privileged in many ways, and it is privileged by the fact that a line is already there. In many other areas of the Province over the years the lines have either fallen into disrepair or disappeared completely, and it would be well nigh impossible to open them up again, given the many other competing demands on finances. However, the area in question already has a railway line. The people of the area are disappointed that, tragically, the Department has not got the vision to move the situation forward and reopen the railway line at a time of so much growth.

It is easy to tell people in the community to leave their cars at home and take alternative transport. However, the options are to walk to Belfast, Sprucefield, Junction One or to work — or to get on a bicycle. That would be nonsense.

The area is a triangle, comprising Lisburn, Antrim and Belfast, and keeping the railway line open should have been taken forward with vision and vigour, making it a focal point for the transport of the people in the area. Instead, it was put into mothballs.

It should also be borne in mind that the international airport is nearby, and, tragically, it never had a railway line. Therefore, whatever else is done, there must be an imaginative way to ensure that the railway line connects to the airport. For example, had there been a connection to the airport on the railway line from Antrim to Crumlin to Lisburn to Belfast, we would have immediately attracted certain groups of people to using the railway instead of buses and cars. That service should be developed. Members should be proactive and ensure that there is a proper connection from the international airport to our major city and to our other city, Lisburn. Perhaps Antrim will be the next city. They could all be connected together. My hon Friend Mr Wells should not look so discouraging. There must be a vision for the future.

Antrim is a growth area, as are Lisburn and Belfast. Why not have a proper connection? If we are asking people to get out of their cars because we mean business, there must be an alternative. The Knockmore railway line could be opened up again, and, with a little finance and a clear vision and hope for the future, it could work. On one side there is the international airport and Junction One, and on the other side there is Sprucefield shopping centre with its major retail outlets. Why not reopen and develop the railway as a strategy for success? The people of the area would be greatly encouraged.

4.30 pm

Aer Lingus was mentioned, and I wholeheartedly agree that we should ensure that we have a base at the Belfast International Airport and that we attract not

only Aer Lingus, which would be a valued component of the airport's success, but other international operators and routes, such as the successful one that is operating from Belfast International Airport to New York.

Many people want to come from North America to Northern Ireland. It is the time for them to do so. It is a time for vision and action. We must be proactive, and that is why I am delighted to support the motion. I hope that the Assembly will give its full backing to the motion and I trust that the Department for Regional Development will be able to take the idea forward.

Mr B McCrea: I have taken time away from talking to several school groups in the Long Gallery because of the importance of this issue. I commend Mr Burns for his foresight in bringing the matter to the Chamber. I agree, totally, with the comments that I have heard so far.

Several practical issues must be faced. Dr McCrea mentioned that many people have talked about the issue at length and that some of the figures that had emerged will have to be addressed if we are to move forward. I was not a Member of the Assembly at that time. Nevertheless, there was a frank and full discussion of the issues. It appears that, at that time, it would have required between £12 million to £13 million of capital expenditure to upgrade the line. In addition, the rolling stock might cost several more millions of pounds.

The situation is that the Assembly and the Department for Regional Development have considered the issue in the past, and at that time, a case could not be made. Part of what the Assembly must do, is work out what is different and why the situation has changed. Is it a case of vision, which I wholeheartedly believe that it is. It is something that we must do differently. If we look backwards and say that that did not work, then we will not look forward.

I am sure that if we were to invest in an up to date, state-of-the-art commuter system that we would develop an entirely new economic corridor; one that would not only provide opportunity for our young people and those people living in the Antrim to Knockmore area, but would take considerable pressure off the social housing situation and other issues.

When I last spoke to the Deputy Speaker, in the Chamber, I told him about where my father had been born. Now I can tell him that my mother came from Glenavy. Therefore, I have a particular connection with the Lisburn to Antrim area. I know it very well. I recall that when — we lived in north Belfast — we went to Glenavy, it was a half-hour trip. It was like one was almost leaving the country.

The benefit of putting an infrastructure in place is that land that, hitherto, was on the periphery of economic development, is brought to the centre. As Dr McCrea, Mr Burns and Mr McLaughlin have said, if that infrastructure is put in place it will link the growth centres

of Antrim, Crumlin and Lisburn, and create something of real value. The people of Northern Ireland expect that type of vision from us. It says: "Look not at what we had before, but at what we could have in the future."

I realise that these are early days and that we have to consider where we might find the capital funds for the project. However, that should not put us off what is imperative. I am happy to join with the hon Members in seeking some form of cross-party mechanism as a way of facilitating and attracting in the investment that is necessary in order to make the project work.

I realise that the Executive have many different budgetary pressures to consider, but that does not mean that we cannot act. Indeed, we should, as one, creatively examine how to move forward.

I could, as other Members have, repeat many of the arguments that have been put so eloquently before me. However, there is no point in doing that, save to say that the re-opening of the Antrim to Knockmore railway line is the right thing to do in the light of issues such as the environment, carbon footprints, housing and economic opportunities. It is a project that provides a vision for Northern Ireland. I commend the comments made in the debate to the House.

Mr Ford: I congratulate my constituency colleague Thomas Burns on securing this Adjournment debate and, on behalf of William McCrea and myself, welcome him and others elected to the new mandate to this meeting of the South Antrim railway supporters club. The clear view in the Assembly is that there are serious issues to be addressed. Although this is simply a debate on the Adjournment on one particular railway line, it is important for the infrastructure of the entire region. In welcoming Members to the debate, I apologise on behalf of Trevor Lunn, the southern wing of the Alliance Party's Knockmore line group — he is on duty in the Education Committee.

Fifteen or 16 years ago, I stood on the platform at Crumlin railway station with a senior Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) official who was the then infrastructure manager. It was while talking to him that I first heard the term "the circle line". Realistically, we should not treat the Knockmore line as a small branch line connecting two places, but as a key part of the development of a line to run from Antrim to Whiteabbey, Belfast, Lisburn and back to Antrim to provide for the growing economic activity and population in the south Antrim area.

Other Members have spoken about the designation of Antrim and Lisburn as key growth towns and, indeed, Crumlin as a secondary growth town, yet the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has made only half-hearted efforts to consider the issues surrounding the railway network. Given the problems of the daily commute from the north-west and the south-west into Belfast, it is time that we recognised

that no other city in Europe the size of Belfast, or most that are rather smaller than Belfast, would consider that building for private cars meets the needs of a commuter travel service. Unfortunately, the DRD — the Department of Roads Development — continues with the likes of widening the M2 purely to move a traffic jam from Sandyknowes to Greencastle and will not examine the key issues that might properly address the problems of a commuting population.

The logic of the regional development and transportation strategies dictates that Antrim to Lisburn is a key transport route. It is provided for, in certain respects, by improvements to the A26; yet the railway line, along virtually the same route, has been closed. To mothball a railway line along a key transport route seems to be a contradiction, given that the regional transportation strategy is a policy of DRD, which is also responsible for the support of the railways.

As well as the population areas that Members have highlighted for growth, the railway line passes an area of significant growth at Knockmore, on the north-west side of Lisburn, and the international airport, with its associated business park. With the prospective arrival of Aer Lingus, which was mentioned by Mitchel McLaughlin, those are the key economic drivers in the area. Only the railway can provide sustainable transportation for those types of development.

At Question Time earlier today, the Minister for Regional Development stated that 100 million passengers a year would be needed to justify building a railway link to an airport. If he wishes to correct that figure I will happily give way to him, because I suspect that he is out by a factor of at least 10.

However, we are not talking about building a new railway line to the airport. We are talking about using a railway line that runs past the airport boundary. The distance from the terminal building to, for example, the station used by the RAF during the Second World War in the townland of British, is less than half a mile down the road. However, facts such as that are not mentioned when discussing major new developments and completely new railway lines into airports. On that basis, we must be realistic about what is possible. The suggestion that a vast number of travellers are required to justify such a project — far more than are currently using the airport — completely fails to recognise the contribution to that railway line that is made by the two towns at either end and by the villages in between.

In that sense, the line should be used to provide a station for the airport; and not simply a line that should end at the airport. That makes a difference.

For years, Translink in general, and Northern Ireland Railways in particular, has been starved of investment. It was only the strong push that the Assembly made in its first mandate that ensured that 23 new trains were

provided. That is why people now use the line between Portadown and Bangor, and, to a certain extent, the line to Ballymena, Coleraine and Derry, in greater numbers. However, more investment is needed to ensure that there is a better timetable. Investment is needed in all kinds of other areas.

I could ingratiate myself with you, Mr Deputy Speaker, by pointing out the need for investment in the line and track north of Ballymena, past Coleraine, and on to Derry. Investment in the line between Whitehead and Larne is also needed, as is investment for the proposed rail and bus park-and-ride scheme at Ballymartin, outside Templepatrick. Earlier this afternoon, the House heard about the need for a new station at Tillysburn to serve Belfast City Airport. Additional rolling stock is necessary, both to replace some the outdated stock that the Enterprise service to Dublin uses, and to improve the timetable for other services.

Faced with all that, I can understand why the Minister may not regard the Knockmore line as a key instant-investment decision. Perhaps there are too many other priorities. However, that is why the other possibilities must be considered. Thomas Burns highlighted the possibility of private investment, similar to what is being done with community railways across the water. Such a possibility is a long way from a costed business plan, or even a formal proposal, but those are the issues that must be considered in order to make developments possible. Given the constraints of public finance, the urgent environmental problems that have largely been created by the levels of commuting in the Belfast area, and the potential economic benefits, the Minister has a duty to examine seriously any proposals for the development and reopening of the Knockmore line. I hope that he will listen seriously to any proposals that are put to him. I congratulate Thomas Burns for raising the matter in this Adjournment debate, and I trust that the Minister and the civil servants will be listening to us all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Ford — especially for the plug for the Belfast to Derry line.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad that David Ford raised this point, as I wish to correct a figure that I gave during Question Time. I inadvertently said that the number of passengers that needs to come through an airport in order to sustain a railway link was 100 million when, as Mr Ford has correctly pointed out, I should have said 10 million. I am happy to correct that slight slip, and I will return to that issue later.

I thank Thomas Burns for bringing the discussion to the House. I know that the Knockmore to Antrim railway line featured in discussions in the previous Assembly, and even during the Transitional Assembly. Various questions have been asked on the matter,

which I was aware of before I assumed responsibility for it as Minister for Regional Development.

I am committed to the development of our transport infrastructure and to the improvement of public transport systems. When I spoke during the debate on a private Member's business motion on the development of rail network on 14 May 2007, I referred to the many benefits, both economic and social, that can flow from reliable and efficient public transport arrangements. I am keen for more resources to be made available for that purpose. I hope to see the continuation of the reversal of the decline in railway services that we experienced in years gone by and continued investment in the network in order to make good the historical underinvestment that undermined the viability of our railway network. Recent developments have been positive. Rail patronage is growing, with passenger numbers up by more than 31% between 2002-03 and 2006-07.

On 14 May 2007, I referred to the work that was undertaken by a DRD-led steering group, which was assessing options for the future development of rail services. I said that I would examine that group's findings and consider the case that I could make for resources in the Priorities and Budget exercise and in the investment strategy. I have now looked at the steering group's findings and have registered major bids for capital funding for railway services through the measure of investment proposals in the investment strategy. That funding would allow for substantial improvements to the commuter network around Belfast, to the services on lines north of Ballymena and Larne, and on the line between Belfast and Dublin. Those are the developments for which the strongest case can be made at present, and I know that they will be welcomed by many of the Members who spoke in favour of such developments on 14 May 2007.

Several Members also spoke in that debate in favour of the Antrim to Knockmore line, and today's debate is focused more closely on restoring that line to passenger service.

4.45 pm

As I indicated on 14 May, the steering group examined the options for the future development of the railways, including an assessment of the case for the reintroduction of passenger services to the Antrim to Knockmore line, as well as for the commencement of the greater Belfast area circle line that was envisaged in the regional development strategy.

Low usage was the circumstance that led to the withdrawal of passenger services in 2003. The Railways Review Group reported in 2000 that passenger activity on that line accounted for no more than 0.82% of the total usage of NIR services. By 2003, Translink estimated that no more than 70 passenger journeys a day originated or terminated on that line.

Costs were also high. Track maintenance costs of more than £500,000 per annum were being incurred and £13 million would have been required to modernise the line. I understand why the line was taken out of passenger operation.

The steering group's findings do not make a strong case for bringing the line back into service. Reopening the line would involve substantial costs, but would bring relatively few benefits because the number of additional passengers that would be attracted would be too low to justify that cost. Passenger projections were made in the context of increases in railway usage, which I referred to earlier, and not on existing figures. Even in that context, the increased numbers fall short of making a case for the required investment. Consequently, when the possibility of the reintroduction of passenger services was examined, a large, negative net present value (NPV) emerged.

I must take account of the strength of development cases and consider affordability. Funding that can reasonably be allocated to railway services is limited, and I must hold a view on priority areas. At this stage, I could not make a credible case for the necessary resources to reinstate the line.

It would not be wise or prudent to close a railway line in this day and age, and I do not propose to do so. The fact that I do not see a case for investment at this time does not mean that there is no future for the line. The line has been mothballed — not closed. It has been maintained to a standard that allows it to be used for NIR training purposes and for passenger services in an emergency. Abandonment is not a course that I would consider. That means that the option to take a fresh decision is always there if circumstances change and if the costs can be justified and given priority.

Many such circumstances were raised in the debate. Mitchel McLaughlin and Thomas Burns spoke of population increases in that area, and such considerations could and should be taken into account. Mitchel also suggested that rail travel should be improved and spending on it prioritised, and Basil McCrea, who has left, put the case for real-terms increases in spending. He, along with David Ford, recognised other priority demands such as the Belfast to Derry line, the Belfast to Dublin line and other commuter lines in and around Belfast that carry much higher volumes of passengers. Through a straightforward stacking up of case arguments, unfortunately, the Antrim to Knockmore line comes quite low on the list of priorities. That is not to say that we cannot examine the level of population increase.

As for Aer Lingus, I welcome the attraction of any new services that will bring economic benefits locally and across the island. Aer Lingus is currently deciding between Belfast and Birmingham as its preferred hub for a base unit of three aircraft. Belfast International

Airport has not approached the Department for Regional Development for assistance to attract Aer Lingus. Assistance for attracting airlines is a matter for Air Route Development (NI) Ltd, which is administered by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Unfortunately, the fund is no longer accepting new applications due to pressures on resources. Nonetheless, I am not aware of any approach from the airport. Members will welcome the involvement of Aer Lingus, or any other airline — that is good for business generally.

Mitchel McLaughlin, David Ford and Thomas Burns mentioned community-based approaches that people are developing in England and Wales. Officials from my Department always argue the case for railways, and we would be happy to consider new and innovative areas in which that case may be advanced. Dr McCrea suggested that the Department must have a vision, and I share the vision of increased rail traffic, passenger journeys and an alternative to the car that he and many others outlined.

I, certainly, share that vision. The system that has been inherited is very much skewed towards roads. However, much public transport travels by road; buses, for example. Therefore, investment in roads does not necessarily preclude improvement in public transport. Roads improvement is necessary to help stimulate the economy.

The vision must be long term. The debate, and others that have been held in the Assembly, will help to enhance that vision of investment in rail and in other forms of public transport, and of providing cleaner forms of transport. The difficulty with investment in rail is that it is the most costly of any form of public transport, and has the least return. Nonetheless, investment in rail should not be considered in pounds, shillings and pence, but in the contribution that it can make to the environment, regional development, spatial development, and for the ability of trains to make people's journeys to work quicker and more comfortable, which will mean less congestion and trouble on the roads.

I welcome debates on the future of rail services and on investment in inter-rail services because they help to develop the discussion, not only in the Department but in the Assembly as well, and will help to shape the Executive's future priorities. If the ideas, energy and enthusiasm that Members have shown in both the debates on railways that I have attended can be imparted to the Executive, that will help to make the case for investment in railways when they discuss budgetary requirements.

Although the line has been mothballed, I appreciate that people in the area want it to be reopened. I have outlined the Department's competing priorities and the substantial investment that is needed in railways. The Department and I are willing to consider any future

arguments. Therefore, on a more positive note, the possibility remains that the line could be brought back into service. Members suggested various options for it — for example, it could be part of a Belfast, Lisburn and Antrim passenger circle line that was envisaged in the regional development strategy. Circumstances might change to the extent that that proposal becomes more viable.

It has been suggested on several occasions, including during today's debate, that the line could be extended to serve Belfast International Airport. However, any proposal would have to demonstrate that it would be a worthwhile use of resources. The study that was carried out in 2006 estimated that the cost of upgrading the line for that purpose would be £35 million — to relay the track and to resignal the line. A further £1 million would be needed to provide a halt. David Ford suggested that the line should be able to deliver passengers right into the airport, which would, of course, require further investment. That provision is called a "spur line", and would give trains access to the terminal building. It would increase the costs substantially.

I am pleased that so many clear arguments have been put forward in the debate and that Members, when they put their cases, took account of the competing priorities and costs that are inherent in investment in public transport, particularly in railways. Debates such as this can help that type of investment to be prioritised in the future. I have already indicated that I have not ruled out the possibility that one or all of those options could prove to be viable future uses of the Antrim to Knockmore line. At that stage, I will be ready to support any case that is made for its reopening. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 4.53 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 3 July 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Racial Equality Strategy

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

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 for the winding-up speech.

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to ensure that the second Implementation Action Plan of the Racial Equality Strategy fully and rigorously addresses issues of racial equality for minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland.

Racism is not a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland. A couple of years after I arrived here in the 1970s, I was kicked in Belfast city centre, in broad daylight, while walking to catch a bus home. When legislation was extended to Northern Ireland through the introduction of The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, a comprehensive survey of the three main minority communities here found that one in 10 minority ethnic residents had experienced physical racial violence. One in two Chinese people had had their properties damaged, and two thirds of them had experienced verbal abuse. A social attitudes survey in 2001 indicated that racial prejudice is twice as significant as sectarian prejudice in Northern Irish people.

Racism is on the increase in Northern Ireland, and police recorded more than 1,000 racially motivated crimes last year. Under the New TSN promoting social inclusion (PSI) initiative, the idea of a racial equality strategy was first mooted in 2000. After several years of deliberation, the Office of the First Minister and the

Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) published 'A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010' in July 2005, which was to be a sister document of 'A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland'. The five-year strategy sets out a vision of:

"A society in which racial diversity is supported, understood, valued and respected, where racism in any of its forms is not tolerated and where we live together as a society and enjoy equality of opportunity and equal protection."

The strategy has six aims: the elimination of racial inequality; equal protection; equality of service provision; increased participation; promotion of dialogue; and building capacity in minority ethnic communities. The racial equality strategy is the first Government policy to acknowledge the changing cultural diversity in Northern Ireland and the need to tackle racism. It fosters an attitude of zero tolerance of racism in all its forms.

However, given the dramatic increase in inward migration over the past few years, the delay in publishing the strategy has caused concern that it is already out of date. There was also disappointment that the strategy commits only Departments, and not all strategy bodies and the wider community, including the business sector, to maximising the strategy's effect in promoting racial equality. Implementation of the strategy's aims therefore relies heavily on Departments producing annual action plans. The first annual action plan was published in April 2006, but we still await the publication of this year's plan.

There is no doubt that the strategy offers the potential to make Northern Ireland a better place for minority ethnic communities. However, last year's action plan, as a first attempt, was criticised by many as a mere mapping exercise by Departments to list their existing initiatives, many of which were commitments that amounted to meeting the minimum requirements under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Many of the 200 actions in the plan were process-orientated rather than outcome-focused and with measurable targets, so there was concern that, even cumulatively, the actions proposed last year would not effect change.

In a piece of academic research that I conducted, several Departments agreed that the process of formulating the plans was mechanical for them. Although they say that racial equality is important, many Departments still have a limited understanding of the depth of change that is required. However, many Departments stated that, from now on, they must do more and must engage with minority ethnic communities to identify needs. It is therefore important that the next action plan contain a radically reduced number of actions, and that those actions must focus on improving service provision and dialogue with communities. Those actions

must be matched with appropriate funding for building capacity in minority ethnic groups.

The Racial Equality Forum, which was established to develop and monitor the strategy, has been welcomed and supported by minority ethnic communities. However, it has grown to include all Departments, minority ethnic communities, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI), the voluntary sector, Churches and the trade unions. Although that wider involvement is appreciated, the forum has become too big to allow members to engage meaningfully or to exercise fully their role in monitoring implementation.

Moreover, information that the forum secretariat has provided in the past has been insufficient to enable members to scrutinise progress adequately. I appreciate that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is reviewing the forum, and I urge it to consider those concerns.

Northern Ireland is a divided society that for decades has been dominated by the conflict between, and the politics of, two major traditions. Anyone who is non-white, non-Christian or non-English-speaking can feel excluded from public participation or public-service provision. The long-awaited racial equality strategy sets out a vision for racial equality that should benefit all who live in Northern Ireland. As Lord Rooker stated, there must be an improvement in the quality of life of minority ethnic people. The realisation of the vision demands a change of hearts and minds, and the strategy is a tool that must be sharpened if it is to be effective.

Mr McHugh: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “to” and insert

“review, as a matter of urgency, progress on implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010 and the First Annual Implementation Plan; and to bring forward proposals for its own detailed plans for the period 2008-2011 to achieve racial equality and an inclusive society for our increasingly diverse community.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate. The amendment addresses more effectively than the motion the issues that are involved. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have clearly signalled their commitment, and that of the Executive, to achieving racial equality and an inclusive society for our increasingly diverse people. Indeed, that is not an issue. The motion is poorly phrased and refers to:

“issues of racial equality for minority ethnic communities”.

However, we seek racial equality for everyone. Racial equality is not divisible, and we do not want to send the message that we are giving preferential treatment to, or are positively discriminating in favour

of, ethnic minority communities. We simply want to ensure that they get what they are entitled to. It is not about integrating the immigrant but about creating an integrated society that encourages inclusion and participation. Everyone must be given a real chance to participate in all aspects of our society and to avail themselves of all services, including education and health provision. Integrated education is a service that presents a tremendous opportunity to assist in creating an integrated society. Children can be educated together, and, through such education, some of the nastiness that is created by ignorance of each other and of people who have moved — recently or earlier — into our society can be avoided.

The racial equality strategy and the first annual implementation action plan are legacies of direct rule. The strategy provides a firm basis on which to tackle racism and racial inequalities. It was developed in partnership with minority ethnic representatives.

10.45 am

It is right and proper that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Assembly engage fully in mapping out the implementation of the strategy and in developing action plans. Those might take longer to complete, but it will be important to get it right rather than get it done quickly.

As the previous Member who spoke said, minority ethnic groups and their representatives have criticised the first implementation action plan as being only what Departments were going to do in any case. For example, lots of translated leaflets were published. That is good, but it only scratches the surface. Departments need to plan properly to deal with racial equality and not just reach for what they have in stock. Racial equality must be factored into departmental planning; proper financial provision should be made; and needs should be aligned with the business-planning cycle.

Migrant workers are often exploited, and although legislation is in place to stop such exploitation — including housing legislation and section 75, which councils and Departments are responsible for enforcing — it is often not implemented. In general, it suits society to turn a blind eye, and that is especially the case among those who are making vast sums of money at the expense of ethnic minorities.

In my constituency, I have seen cases in which employers insist that migrant workers rent property from them at extortionate rates. Those rents are then taken directly from the workers' wages. Such workers are moved to properties across the border when complaints are made. That example highlights the need for co-operation and an all-Ireland strategy to stamp out such racial abuse.

Recently, I spoke out against racially motivated attacks against Asian families in south Belfast, Enniskillen and in other areas of the North. We want to stop that type of attack, and I encourage the PSNI to take all racially motivated attacks seriously and do everything that is necessary to bring the perpetrators before the courts.

Ireland's history shows that often its biggest export was people who looked for work and a better way of life elsewhere. Today's immigrants are no different. They come to this island looking for a better way of life, and many of them are entrepreneurial in spirit and in work ethic. They bring a lot of good ideas with them, which we should support. Such people have made an effort, perhaps in their own countries where there was no work, to do something about their situation. We should welcome them. They will be very useful to an economy — North and South — that is growing very quickly when compared to those in other countries.

Migrant workers have a great deal to offer our society. They fill the skills gaps, especially in the construction industry, and they can teach us new ways of looking at life. We should do everything possible to welcome them, and it is the Assembly's responsibility to implement strategies to achieve that. As my party's spokesperson on ethnic minorities, I welcome the motion, and I urge everyone to support my amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy):

I join with others in warmly welcoming the motion, and I congratulate and thank those who tabled it. It is important to debate equality. Unfortunately, I may not be able to be present for the entire debate due to the meeting of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and I apologise for that.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has received a general briefing on the work that is being undertaken by OFMDFM's equality directorate, including its work on racial equality. The Committee has indicated its desire to be updated on progress so that the second implementation action plan can be developed properly early in the next session.

The aim of the racial equality strategy attracts widespread support. However, the key issue will be to ensure that there is effective action to provide racial equality by Government, wider society and the communities in which minority ethnic groups live and work.

I make the following remarks on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. As tensions between the two main communities in Northern Ireland have eased, new forms of prejudice are becoming apparent, and they are racially and ethnically based. Our society is in transition, and

we are modernising, but perhaps more slowly than expected due to the conflict we have endured. It would be useful, and convenient, to underpin our rejection of racial prejudice and discrimination with a legal framework, but that must not be the whole story. A process of information and education is also needed, and that will take time. However, it should be embarked upon urgently.

Economic reasons, or perceived economic reasons, can cause racial and ethnic prejudice. This is particularly the case in areas of multiple deprivation where there may be a history of educational underachievement or where unemployment is high and job skills are low. Such areas probably exist in all countries — they certainly exist in England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The problem is not unique. Nevertheless the situation is unacceptable and must be dealt with urgently.

It is clear, therefore, that there is a correlation to be made between economic deprivation, racial tension and attacks, and we all rightly condemn such attacks.

There have been indications that members of the British National Party (BNP) will try to actively recruit in Northern Ireland over the Twelfth celebrations this year. I condemn such efforts, and I welcome indications from the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland resolutely condemning and opposing such a move. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I say to the BNP that we do not want, or need, imported hate mongering in Northern Ireland.

Low educational achievement, coupled with the fear of negative economic impacts due to new nationals gaining jobs at the expense of locals, and a general lack of knowledge about ethnic minorities can feed the fears that stoke racial prejudices leading to attacks. The task confronting the Assembly is as much about putting those wrongs to right as it is about legislating against race hate itself. I, and my party, support the motion.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the motion and I thank the Member for South Belfast Ms Anna Lo for tabling it. I also welcome the opportunity to bring to light the integral role that ethnic minorities play in Northern Ireland: our society has become richer as a result of the cultural diversity and expertise that they contribute.

The ethnic minority workforce has also made a difference to local industries, such as food-processing, and to the nursing profession. Those who bring their talents to this country are very welcome, especially as they are contributing so much to our local economy. In this day and age, it is disgraceful that there is still such small-mindedness and ignorance leading to attacks and intimidation of those who come here to work, live and belong as part of Northern Irish culture.

Although it is a minority of people who are responsible for such attacks, attacks of any form cannot be tolerated by society. I echo the call to urge OFMDFM to continue its work of ensuring that the racial equality strategy is implemented to the benefit of all members of our community. We should be proclaiming the message that Northern Ireland is open for business and that it welcomes visitors as well as those who are interested in living here and contributing to the economy. We cannot afford any sort of racially motivated attacks, and no one should have to put up with such atrocities.

It is worrying to read that 'The Guardian' has termed Northern Ireland the "race-hate capital of Europe". We must take strong action against antisocial behaviour and see to it that racism will end, not only on our streets, but, most importantly, in the mindsets of our people. I call upon local community workers and representatives to tackle the issue head on, and the courts must be seen to deliver tough sentences to perpetrators.

We have seen how effective awareness of racism has been at other levels, especially in football where the "Show Racism the Red Card" initiative has been introduced and has had positive results. Further implementation should involve effective marketing in areas most affected with the publication of helpline numbers and names of local representatives who can be contacted in the event of racial abuse incidents. The scourge of racism must be stamped out quickly. We cannot let it lie any longer, nor can we sit back while people from ethnic minorities feel as though they are being left alone and that no one is interested in helping them. I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the motion, as amended. All too often, Members talk about lack of resources. At last, we are debating a strategy that will, if implemented, bring cultural and more immediate riches. We are beginning to see peace dividends through the diversity of those who choose the North as a place in which to settle or work. Many people who work in this Building are from the new enlarged European Union, and I welcome that. The Member for Upper Bann Stephen Moutray mentioned the number of people who are choosing to work in Northern Ireland, and, as he said, many of our hospitals and many industries within the agrifood sector would be unsustainable in the short to medium term if that labour force were not available.

Migrant workers also contribute to the economy by spending their wages in Northern Ireland, and some of them are choosing to bring their families and children to be fully integrated here and to attend our schools. It is, therefore, imperative that the strategy is implemented and that it does not become just another strategy that merely lies on a shelf. That will require a focused piece of work by OFMDFM, plus the necessary resources.

The racial equality strategy, on which the action plan will be based, aims to allow all members of society here to participate fully in their communities. In combination with the implementation of 'A Shared Future', the action plan will bring about a future without the segregation and intolerant hatred that has blighted us in the past. The implementation plans are about building a prosperous economy on an inclusive foundation. It has been said that all communities have something to offer; not to take advantage of that would be foolish and insulting.

The first action plan brought with it some noble ideas — some of which have come to fruition. For instance, the publication of 'Your Rights in Northern Ireland: A Guide for Migrant Workers', in association with the Human Rights Commission, was a welcome and useful step.

I note that some local authorities, through their good relations policies, have invested in material welcoming people to their boroughs. I am pleased to say that Craigavon Borough Council — in which I must declare an interest — has taken the lead on that. However, there is much more to be done, and there is an urgency upon us to do so.

As Europe grows and we prosper, there will be more at stake as regards how we maximise the contribution of a migrant workforce. One may look back on the experiences of the first Caribbean immigrants to Britain, or the Irish to America, and see how well they fared. We must not make the same mistakes.

The experiences of Manjet Sadu, which came to public attention last week, showed how far we have to go. It is a shame that swastikas have been displayed in Belfast in 2007. The SDLP has been working with Manjet for months and will continue to do so.

We will continue to offer our help to anyone who suffers that type of sickening hatred, until it is finally eradicated. I welcome the stated aim of the racial equality strategy to eliminate racism and racial inequality and hope to see it clearly reflected in the action plan.

11.00 am

I welcome the comments of other Members on their hopes for the eradication of racially motivated crime. I particularly welcome the comments of Mr McHugh of Sinn Féin, who urged the PSNI to bring to justice all those who perpetrate race-hate crime. We all recognise that we need the help of the community to do that. I hope that Sinn Féin's aspiration on hate crime extends to all crimes. Specifically, Mr McHugh and his party must do all that they can to assist the police in bringing to justice the murderers of Robert McCartney.

There is a clear need for all arms of Government to work properly to make the racial equality strategy work. The Housing Executive, social services, and the

Equality Commission must all be at the top of their games if the strategy is to succeed.

The strategy provides a great chance for Members to learn about co-operation and the success that that can bring. Let us remember that the racial equality strategy is not aimed only at the new Irish; it is also the means by which we can return to Travellers some of the opportunities that are currently denied them. I call on the Executive to examine preschool and childcare provision for minority ethnic people, and the Travelling community in particular, as places begin to become available. That investment will pay off not only culturally, but financially. We must bear in mind the morbidity rate in the Travelling community, and its particular healthcare needs.

I shall conclude with a quotation from the racial equality strategy, and a quick thought. Remember that this matter, including funding, is entirely in the hands of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The strategy states that all Northern Ireland Government Departments commit themselves to:

“recognise and appreciate diversity within minority ethnic communities in terms of, for example, age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religious observance and life choices, and take account of it”.

Mr Weir: I support the motion and I welcome the debate, which allows Members the opportunity to flesh out with practical measures the good message signalled by the Assembly on this matter during the early days of its current mandate. It was of great significance that one of the first actions of the Assembly after devolution was to host a reception for the various ethnic groups of Northern Ireland.

My constituency of North Down is home to a wide range of people from various backgrounds. Many communities in North Down pre-date the immigrant arrivals of recent years. As a result, there is a number of very active groups in North Down, such as the Oi Yin Chinese women's group and the World Wide Women. Recently, Assembly colleagues Mr Stephen Farry and Mr Brian Wilson and North Down Borough Council colleagues joined me in holding an evening of cultural celebration with a group from the Malaysian community.

Generally, community relations in North Down are good. In particular, the council and a range of other groups have done good work. However, during any casual conversation with people from various ethnic backgrounds, the same message is heard: although the vast majority of people enjoy good relations, unfortunately, a small minority still indulges in casual latent racism. Some might say that whenever the drink goes in, the wit goes out. Unfortunately, sometimes, when the drink goes in, the true attitudes of certain people come out.

Let me make it clear that the DUP recognises racism as a problem in Northern Ireland and has consistently sought to do what it can to help to eradicate it. It has been mentioned that the focus in Northern Ireland has been so heavily on sectarianism — not unnaturally, given the events of the last 30 years — that the issue of racism has tended to be ignored.

I echo the remarks of Danny Kennedy about the BNP. As someone who has been publicly criticised by the BNP, I believe that the Assembly must send out a clear signal that there is no place in our society for the racial hatred that the BNP promulgates.

I trust and hope that when the BNP carries out a recruitment exercise, it will fall on stony ground. The vast majority of Northern Ireland people are hostile to its behaviour. However, we must realise that a level of racism is endemic in our society. That is demonstrated at a practical level by the high levels of racially motivated attacks that take place each year.

We must ensure zero tolerance of such attacks. People can be educated to move away from such attitudes, but we must also make it clear that racism cannot be tolerated or excused.

It is difficult to see how the Province could function without immigrants from eastern Europe and other parts of the world. Many work in our Health Service and deserve our immense gratitude — many hospitals could not manage without them. We benefit greatly from the presence of people from other parts of the world. Individuals from more than 60 nationalities now contribute to our economy and society. In towns such as Portadown, Dungannon and others throughout Northern Ireland, they make a vital contribution to industry.

With respect to practical measures, there must be awareness and adequate provision made for people from other parts of the world. It will be difficult for them to adjust to life in Northern Ireland in some respects. Simple tasks such as sending letters or filling in forms can prove difficult for those whose first language is not English. Employers should run induction and training programmes. Helpful advice relating, for example, to landlords and employment should be made available, as well as information on driving offences, car insurance and DVTA vehicle-test requirements.

Today, the Assembly must send out a clear signal that there must be no toleration of racism. We should all aspire to an inclusive society.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin. I support the motion. A state or country must be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable people: the weakest, poorest, most disadvantaged, most marginalised and most excluded. That is the core of Members' work in the Assembly — addressing the inequalities that have

characterised decades of British direct rule. Among the most vulnerable are migrants and asylum seekers.

Nothing points more clearly to the way our society cares — or does not care — for its most vulnerable than our failures to deal with the indisputable growth of racist attacks and hate crimes. During the year 2006-07, the PSNI recorded 936 racial incidents. That is more than twice the number reported in the two previous years. A decade ago, it might have been possible for the police, the housing authorities, politicians and others to conclude that racism was not a problem in the North. That smug conclusion is no longer tenable. We must recognise reality.

In the North, racism has its own history. The Six Counties statelet has been subordinated to British rule. Britain has notable race problems, which the British state was obliged to recognise with the death of Stephen Lawrence. The report of the Macpherson Inquiry identified institutional racism. We in Ireland have been a part of Britain's colonial history; and, with partition, an institutionally racist state was established: a Protestant state for a Protestant people.

There is much evidence to suggest that some loyalists are behind a significant proportion of racist incidents, and, despite what Peter said, there has been a failure on the part of unionist parties to address that. This state, now branded the racist capital of Europe, has its own autonomous racist logic, which we now have the chance — and the obligation — to address through the Good Friday Agreement, the Assembly and our work on a bill of rights. Through those, we can move forward to a society that respects all traditions and that values all human beings simply by virtue of their humanity.

We have a long way to go. The notion that we have all moved on, purely because some of us aspire to live in a non-racist society, and that a post-sectarianism, post-racism shared future awaits us, is false. Aspiring to create such a society does not make it a reality.

We live in a state that hides its incapacity to address rising levels of racism and sectarianism under the fig leaf of good relations. It is a state that refuses to confront racism and holds to a useless, outmoded community relations model. It is a state that imprisons its asylum seekers, who come to seek sanctuary from persecution. It is a state that teaches the population to fear others, and denies basic rights to migrant workers who have come from other lands to contribute, through their work, to our prosperity.

A most glaring example that shames each and every one of us is the case of the Ukrainian lady whose leg had to be amputated because she developed frostbite as a result of sleeping rough. She had lost her job, and no one took her in or cared for her when she became destitute.

Last year, a report by Dr Robbie McVeigh on racism and criminal justice in the North, which was commissioned by NICEM, documented numerous interviews in which people talked of the police failing to act rigorously in cases of racist trouble; not dispersing attacking mobs; losing victims' statements; and urging victims not to pursue a matter for fear of retaliation. The problem is not merely that there is evidence of failures to pursue prosecutions or to achieve convictions, but that the prosecution service does not even keep a record of the processes involved.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion proposed by Ms Lo. It is an appropriate motion for the Assembly to debate.

As other Members have said, the 2001 census showed that just under 15,000 people from an ethnic minority background live in Northern Ireland. However, it has been established that the true figure is probably double that, and is in the region of 30,000. It should be noted that the census figures do not include people from eastern Europe. Tony Blair's open-door policy on immigration, combined with the peace that we have enjoyed in Northern Ireland over the past years, has resulted in an unprecedented number of asylum seekers, refugees and eastern European migrant workers coming to Northern Ireland.

I shall focus on eastern European migrant workers. Over the past few years, Strangford, like areas such as Dungannon and Ballymena, has experienced an influx of eastern European migrant workers. They have shown themselves to be incredibly hardworking and, on the whole, have adjusted well to life in Northern Ireland. They have sought to integrate themselves into our society.

My constituency has the largest Bengali population in the Province, and it is also home to a very active Chinese community — not for nothing is Ards called "Little China". Those people have moved into the area, married, started businesses and created jobs. They have provided an economic boost for everyone in the area and they clearly contribute to society.

Of course, there are some people who refuse to accept outsiders and lambaste the Government for allowing them to enter the country, and, as they put it, "take our jobs". I want to make one point clear by using the example of Willowbrook Foods, a food-processing company in my area. The work at the company entails standing all day and sorting through fresh vegetables, which migrants and immigrants do without complaint, and without taking sick days.

The business has large contracts with supermarket chains in Northern Ireland, in the Republic and on the mainland. The owner of the firm has told me that, due to the contribution of migrant workers, productivity

levels have increased and that he can rely on his workforce to work hard and to get the job done.

11.15 am

That is another example of how important and integral those workers are to the overall process in Willowbrook Foods. Before Willowbrook Foods began to employ people from eastern European countries, the owner found it difficult to recruit local workers who were prepared to stay with his company. Some locals found the work to be particularly unsuitable.

As the company's productivity has increased, so have the numbers of migrant workers that have been hired. Indeed, the owner recently hired more workers and his business is increasing. Those people work hard. They come into local towns to buy their bits and bobs, and they greet locals with a smile and a wave. They are integrating themselves into local society.

Last year, I attended a meet-and-greet event in Newtownards town hall, which was designed to allow locals to get to know the people who are involved with ethnic minorities in the area. I had a chance to talk to some migrant workers who told me that they have a happy life here and that they are content with their jobs and welcome being able to send money home to their families.

Not only are migrant workers in the Ards area employed in firms such as Willowbrook Foods, they work in nursing homes and similar establishments; often they speak amazingly fluent English. Therefore their integration is progressing, and Ards Borough Council is keen to promote their abilities and to help them to integrate further into local society.

Obviously, some of the people who come to Northern Ireland have different values and backgrounds. By no means can we endorse those who come here to carry out illegal activities; such people should have their licences to live here revoked and they should be sent back home. There is no space for those who wish to prosper through nefarious means and to the detriment of their countrymen who have migrated with them and of those who live in the Province.

That minority of opportunists and con men should not be allowed to reflect badly on the majority of good workers who want to use hard work to provide better lives for themselves and their families. That is why I urge not only the further endorsement of the racial equality strategy, but further consideration of the place in it for those from eastern European backgrounds. Many of those people come to my advice centre in Newtownards to ask about housing, benefits and other issues, and we are happy to point them in the right direction.

People who come to work here deserve to be accepted and integrated into our society. It is the

Assembly's responsibility actively to promote good relations with those who want to live and work peacefully in the Province. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: It would be unfortunate if I did not respond to some of Ms Anderson's comments and her misrepresentation of Northern Ireland's unionist and Protestant communities in their attitudes to racial equality. Of course, although the Ulster Unionist Party has been proactive in its attempts to address racial hatred through membership of the Policing Board and the district policing partnerships, her party failed to take on those challenges for several years. At the same time, I am pleased that her party has decided to support a racial equality strategy, particularly after many years of ethnic cleansing throughout the Province.

Members from various parts of the Province mentioned how much we owe to our ever-increasing racial diversity, and that applies to my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone as well. In my constituency, several successful businesses would fail to operate without the input of many hard-working migrant workers.

Racially motivated crimes reflect an underlying lack of awareness of the benefits of racial diversity and flag up the existence of barriers between the various communities. It is right that the Province is experiencing increasing racial diversity and that the Assembly addresses the racial inequality problems that can present themselves.

The police must not allow crimes committed as a result of racial intolerance. Discrimination and harassment on the grounds of race, whether in employment or the provision of public services, such as health, education or housing, are also unacceptable. However, it is unlikely that Government are always best placed to use rafts of legislation to impose changes.

Research suggests that legislating to reduce racial inequality does not always work. Work on the subject, which was published in 2005 by Middlesex University with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, pointed to the inability of many policy initiatives to address the underlying attitudes and beliefs that form the foundation of racism.

'Tackling the roots of racism: Lessons for success' drew several pertinent conclusions, including:

"few organisations have any real evidence of what interventions reduce racism."

and:

"Anti-racist legislation, including action against racial harassment, has not significantly improved workplace conditions for people from black and minority ethnic groups".

As one might expect, such harassment frequently goes unreported by employees.

Successful interventions on tackling racism are largely education-based. Improving communication

and mutual understanding through education has a huge impact on many of the preconceived ideas that one community holds about another. Education will lead to increased knowledge of the diversity of cultures and beliefs that exist in the Province. More importantly, addressing prejudices through improving knowledge will highlight what the different groups have in common.

The book also noted the important role that schools, universities, museums, and arts and sports venues play in reducing occurrences of everyday racism. Most importantly, it states:

“there is no one cause of racism or one solution to racism.”

Sport and recreation is one of the best forums for people — be they young or old — from differing backgrounds to integrate and build friendships across perceived divides. We in Northern Ireland have come to recognise that over the past 40 years.

The Irish Football Association (IFA), through, for example, its successful Grassroots programme and ‘Football for All’ community-relations campaign, is diligently working against sectarianism in sport, and that has a major knock-on effect for the wider community.

Sport and youth clubs have a part to play in improving racial integration and multiculturalism. Prejudice and misconceptions surrounding race are more likely to be eroded through voluntary and, dare I say, fun initiatives than through the imposition of more rules and legislation.

A strong element of individual responsibility is necessary if there are to be real and lasting improvements in racial equality. I am glad that that requirement has been noted in the racial equality strategy for Northern Ireland.

‘Tackling the roots of racism’ also calls for an honest debate on the issue.

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

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion and the proposed amendment to it. An attack took place in South Belfast last Saturday morning on a house in Dunluce Avenue in which seven Asian people live. Whatever the motive was for the attack, it was potentially murderous and could have had awful consequences. Those who carried it out must be brought to justice, because there can be no justification for, or understanding of, such behaviour.

The people who live in the house are professionals who came to Northern Ireland to contribute to our society, and we can benefit from their expertise. It is a shame that they were attacked by those who have nothing to offer society.

Dunluce Avenue is in the Windsor ward, which has seen significant demographic change in recent years. Its proximity to Queen’s University and Belfast City Hospital makes the area a magnet for immigrants, who

bring new cultures, religions and life experiences to our society.

The latest demographic information available comes from the 2001 census, which is six years out of date. Northern Ireland is not in the same situation as the Irish Republic, where 10% of the population is foreign-born. However, that statistic may apply to the Windsor ward, but we simply do not know.

There is a lack of vision and strategy on migration and integration policy. There is also a lack of statistical data, which must be centrally collated before proper planning can be undertaken for schools, housing, health services and infrastructure.

I was shocked at the viciousness of the attack on the house in Dunluce Avenue. When I stood in the rain looking at the mess, I felt angry and depressed, so what must the victims have felt? I saw the burnt frame of a couch that someone had deliberately pushed up against the house and set on fire. All the windows were broken, and smoke had filled the house.

In light of the events of the past few days in London and Glasgow — indeed, we know a little bit about terrorism here, too — what must it be like for strangers to our land who are feeling deeply uncomfortable and isolated, especially in a society such as Northern Ireland, which is not exactly a byword for tolerance? To put it in common parlance, we do not do difference well.

We know, however, that economic and social well-being is tied to our success. That means that we must engage with all newcomers so that we get the best from one another. We could have a win-win situation, but we desperately need statistics to allow us to plan ahead as part of an immigration and integration strategy that anticipates future needs.

I am personally concerned about the people who sell the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ at road junctions. I do not see them selling many papers, so I assume that their pay must be very poor, and they suffer fumes from all those cars. And what about asylum seekers and illegal immigrants? We have responsibilities towards anyone who lands on our shores, especially those who are fleeing persecution. I have a moral concern for their welfare. We may be in danger of creating more poverty here unless we deal with those issues.

We need to get to grips with the issue. First, we need to implement fully the racial equality strategy. We in the Assembly and Executive need to get our act together in the form of an action plan. We must have a vision for a better place that can, and will, be enriched by new cultures, new religions and new experiences.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome today’s debate and am grateful to Members for the many constructive contributions that they have

made. I have listened to Members very carefully indeed, and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, in its plans for implementing the racial equality strategy, will be guided by what they have said. In the time that is available to me, I will try to respond to as many as possible of the points that have been made, but I will follow up later any points that I have not had time to cover today. In particular, I thank Anna Lo, who obviously has a very particular interest in the issue. She brings a wealth of experience to the debate that we disregard at our peril.

I remind Members that work is well advanced on the second year's implementation action plan. At the request of the NI Council for Ethnic Minorities and other minority ethnic representatives, OFMDFM has allowed additional time before publication for discussions to take place between minority ethnic representatives and Departments about departmental contributions to the plan. We are convinced that those discussions will lead to a more strategic, focused and long-term action plan for racial equality across all Departments. I am also conscious of the point that was made by the Member for South Belfast about the need to extend the scope of the action plan beyond the Departments and into every section of society.

There are five key action areas that we can move on. We have asked officials, as a matter of urgency, to consider, in consultation with the Equality Commission, how we might introduce a system of minority ethnic monitoring. The two junior Ministers will also attend the next meeting of the Racial Equality Forum and report back to us in light of the criticism that has been made that the forum has become too big. NICEM will be asked to continue working with all Departments to deepen their understanding of the actions that are required to support racial equality. We will review progress on the strategy and the first action plan, and, in consultation with the Committee, we will bring forward a new three-year action plan for 2008-09 to coincide with the first year of spending after the Priorities and Budget exercise. The action plan needs to focus on a small number of important actions in key policy areas that will make a real impact on the lives of minority ethnic people.

11.30 am

Gerry McHugh compared emigrants from these shores in past centuries with our recent immigrants. All Members know the history of Ireland and how many Irish people, including people of Ulster-Scots origin, had to emigrate and make lives for themselves elsewhere. We would all do well to learn from the experience of those emigrants. Gerry McHugh also spoke about immigrants being made welcome and called on the PSNI to be more robust in tackling racism. He considers the contributions made by immigrants to be vital to our

economy. I subscribe to that sentiment, which was a theme in most of today's contributions.

Danny Kennedy made pertinent and important points about the racial equality strategy attracting widespread support. I agree that that is the case, both with the public and in the Chamber. He spoke about legislation not being enough to deal with new forms of prejudice and also about the important role of education. He alleged that the British National Party (BNP) is trying to organise here in the North over the Twelfth of July period, and I particularly welcome his condemnation of the BNP.

Stephen Moutray was absolutely right to say that our society is becoming richer because of the contribution that immigrants make to our economy, and I welcome his condemnation of attacks on immigrants. He rightly said that we are open for business; a recent visit by some Executive Ministers to the United States of America, where cities such as Washington, DC and New York have very diverse societies, underlined the importance of that message. I agree that we cannot afford to sit back.

Dolores Kelly pointed out that many of the staff in Parliament Buildings are new immigrants. Members have daily contact with those workers, who make a vital contribution to the running of this important establishment.

The Member for North Down Peter Weir rightly praised the organisation of ethnic minority groups in his constituency, and he referred particularly to the Malaysian group. I am pleased to hear that MLAs from a range of parties attended the evening event to which he referred. I welcome his criticism of the BNP and agree that it is to be hoped that its hate-filled words fall on stony ground. He is absolutely right to say that it is hard to imagine how we could function without the contribution of our new arrivals. He also said that the Assembly must send out a strong signal; all Members who have spoken in the debate have done that.

The Member for Foyle Martina Anderson said that the PSNI had received 900 complaints about racist behaviour. In 2006, there was a 60% increase in reports about racist attacks. The position of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is clear: we demand zero tolerance. Everyone should take on board Robbie McVeigh's report on racial violence and criminal justice.

Jim Shannon made a particularly important contribution when he spoke about eastern European immigrants who live throughout the North and work incredibly hard. They, as well as the Chinese community and other groups, make a huge contribution to our economy, not least in the food-processing industry.

The Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, regards racial equality as a priority. He wants to ensure that we have a modern and effective employment rights infrastructure to provide protection for workers and immigrants. The Department for Employment and Learning is consulting on a range of measures that are designed to protect workers' interests.

The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Tom Elliott appeared to argue against the need for legislation; I cannot accept his argument. However, legislation alone will not solve the problem.

Martina Anderson and Tom Elliott had a bit of a tiff about their contributions. However, I stress that no section of society has a monopoly on racism. We must act to eradicate racism as quickly as possible.

Carmel Hanna spoke about the recent attack that took place in South Belfast. Whatever the reason for that attack, I agree with her condemnation of it. Mrs Hanna also spoke of a lack of statistical data. To address that problem, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has set up an indicators working group in which representatives from relevant Departments and other external stakeholders participate.

The First Minister and I deliberately decided that the first public event after devolution would be a reception for minority ethnic people and migrant workers. Indeed, the Member for North Down Peter Weir referred to that event. The aim of that reception was to celebrate the contribution that those people make to life here.

In the past number of years, increasing numbers of people have arrived here to visit, work and settle, and they have provided us with their valuable skills. The Health Service and many of our industries — particularly agriculture, food manufacturing, leisure and tourism, and construction — now rely heavily on the skills and labour of our new communities. Previously, the flow of international labour passed us by, but now we are definitely in the mainstream of that vital economic resource.

Thankfully, we no longer export so many of our brightest individuals, who once left because of a lack of employment, opportunity and a future. In the past, our outward migration enriched communities and strengthened economies elsewhere. Our community is now being enriched — and our economy being strengthened — by our new arrivals. If the economy continues to grow, as we intend it to, we will become increasingly dependent on workers from other countries. That will result in more businesses being owned by people who have recently come to our shores.

The talent, innovation and new perspectives that immigrants bring to us create enormous economic, social and cultural benefits for our society. However, we must acknowledge that the arrival of significant

numbers of migrant workers has profound implications for existing — and planned — public services. The challenges of those implications will increase significantly as the planned investment in infrastructure takes shape both here and in the South. Inevitably, many of the workers that we need to help to renew our infrastructure will come from eastern Europe and further afield. The development of the Titanic Quarter is an example of that renewal. For instance, how many workers will be needed to regenerate that historic brownfield site? Where will they come from? Where will they live when they arrive? Will they bring their families with them? Where will their children be schooled? What about the availability of GPs and other medical services? Perhaps the most important question is: how do we support the host community?

When Dublin's Croke Park was refurbished a few years ago, a roof was built on part of it. The GAA president told me during a match that all the workers who built that roof came from Russia and European countries. That highlights the challenge that we will face as we develop the Titanic Quarter.

All those questions — and many more — need to be addressed. The answers to those questions must become the foundation of our forward planning and policy making for the North. We cannot, therefore, avoid seeking answers. Such planning will be a significant and pressing issue for the Executive and the Assembly to deal with. A great deal of hard work is in front of us.

Many Members will be aware that a Ballynafeigh family suffered a horrific onslaught simply as a result of the colour of their skin. The House has heard of other similarly sickening stories from across the North. Minority ethnic people and migrant workers are too frequently subject to violence and hate at the hands of a small number of bigots. The tiny minority of perpetrators may feel threatened by difference and target those who they perceive as vulnerable. However they seek to justify their actions, their activities are shameful. They have nothing to offer, and they have no place in modern society.

The police and criminal justice agencies are at the front line of tackling racist thugs. The Executive have pledged to do all in their power to combat racism and sectarianism, and they will continue to work with the police and criminal justice agencies to do so.

However, as Jim Shannon rightly said, it is vitally important that communities and neighbours take the brave step of standing alongside victims to demonstrate that it is not just rhetoric; but a cause that moves us all to action.

As I speak today, Niall Ferrin — a 15-year-old child from north Belfast — is critically ill in hospital as a result of a vicious attack in north Belfast on Friday

evening, in which he was beaten unconscious. The House must stand united — and I believe it is united — in condemning that terrible assault as totally unacceptable.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, widespread violence is thankfully a thing of the past. However, sectarianism, racism and intolerance are still all too evident and continue to mar our reputation and blight our economic prospects. Unless they are tackled, they will poison the body politic. There is a need to be clear-sighted about the nature and scale of the challenges that our increasingly diverse society poses to all of us — Government, wider civic society, communities across the North, and to each of us individually.

I am proud that there are numerous examples across our society where individuals, church groups, community associations, trade unions and others have extended a friendly and helping hand to minority ethnic people and migrant workers who have come here to throw in their lot with us. Councils are also carrying out some excellent work. I have been privileged to see some of that work at first hand; the recent opening of the Multicultural Diversity Centre in Derry, where local people have come together with those who are new to our shores to work to ensure that their integration is satisfactory for them and everyone else.

In one of his first engagements as a junior Minister, Gerry Kelly was last week involved in launching an excellent report at the Jethro Centre in Lurgan, which set out how the Southern Health and Social Services Board intends to rise to the challenges posed by our increasing diversity.

Therefore, we have to act on the lessons that were all too painfully learnt elsewhere. The issue is also every bit as much about how we provide services, or fail to provide services to minority ethnic people and those who hold different beliefs. Therefore, the services provided by the Executive and its agencies must — and will — promote racial equality. If they do not, those services risk creating or reinforcing racial inequalities.

The racial equality strategy was developed in partnership with representatives of minority ethnic people, including the Member for South Belfast Anna Lo in her former job. Therefore, the actual plan was also developed with the involvement of those representatives.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Thank you. I call Mr Gerry McHugh to give the winding-up speech on the amendment, and I remind him that he has five minutes to do so.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I was wondering if I would get up to 15 minutes — I would actually need that amount of time to cover the issue. The motion as amended would show that the Assembly is keen to deliver something that is

focused as regards the first annual implementation action plan and other plans.

It is important that the Assembly is specific about that and that it is open to doing things differently. Peter Weir talked about sending a positive signal from the Assembly. We can act differently — like the Scottish Parliament, which has been a role model in how to act differently — from our direct rule predecessors. Direct rule Ministers, although talking about this issue, may not have delivered much that would make a difference to the people involved.

I thank everyone who spoke on the issue plus the Committee members, Chairpersons and the Minister. Everyone seems to be taking the same line in condemning attacks. Members from all sides of the House are saying that we should be moving towards zero tolerance of any such attacks.

Carmel Hanna pointed out the effect that such attacks have on the victims — and that they are not just statistics. That is important. Communities need to make it clear that they will no longer tolerate just talking about the issue; being against what is happening, and standing idly by while their neighbour is attacked — as happened in Enniskillen. I ask communities to support that family and show the local thugs that such attacks are not going to happen in the future.

That that happens is important. MLAs who have spoken in this debate must show leadership. We also need leadership from members of the community, who should stand up, be counted and show that such attacks are not to be tolerated.

11.45 am

Danny Kennedy said that education is urgently needed in order to deal with the situation. A sense of underachievement and how they perceive themselves can lead people here to misread what is happening. Those who have moved here fill very important jobs, which often cannot be filled by anyone else, so they have a powerful contribution to make to the economy.

We remember the Celtic tiger economy, as it is known, in the South. I go so far as to say that the growth rate here in the North could not be sustained without the input of all those who have moved here. People need to know that, and they need to know that our continued growth will very much depend on everyone in society.

If only we would embrace those who come in. If only we would embrace people from ethnic minorities. It is a bit like the argument from years ago, when many societies did not embrace women for decades, or even for centuries. How much stronger would a society be were it to embrace all those people who contribute to its daily running? It is important that people realise that.

Stephen Moutray referred to mindsets, and that is an important factor. Community groups and others, including the political people here, can break those mindsets down.

Too many points were made by Members for me to refer to them all, but condemnation of the British National Party was certainly one that stood out. It is important to condemn that party. It is unacceptable that the BNP should be allowed to operate in any society.

Martina Anderson probably made the toughest speech, given all the points that she made. She talked about people who are marginalised, deprived and vulnerable. Hate crimes and attacks simply cannot be tolerated, no matter what the religions involved are. Figures show that Fermanagh has had no such attacks in recent years. The reality, however, is completely different.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate and ask Members to support the amendment.

Dr Farry: I thank Anna Lo for proposing the motion on what is a very important matter. The debate has been very useful, and some important issues have been flagged up. I am sure that this is the first of many debates that the Assembly will have on the racial equality strategy in the months and years to come.

It is important that we look at the reason behind our tabling the motion and focus on its substance. We are trying to get across the message that the racial equality strategy and the first associated implementation plan, although in place, are, in some respects, deficient. Much good work has been done, and progress is being made, but the voices that we are hearing in ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland are telling us that gaps and deficiencies exist that must be addressed. It is important that we focus on what Anna Lo said at the start of the debate about that. She said that we are too process-orientated, when we should be concentrating on what can be delivered. Racial equality has become too much of a tick-box exercise, and it is overly focused on our 11 Departments. It does not place sufficient obligations on the different statutory agencies that fall within those Departments' remits.

We must move from a situation in which we are supplying more and more information leaflets in different languages to one in which training is provided for those people who must deliver services. That includes their learning languages so that they can deal with all the people who want to avail themselves of those services. We want to ensure that people, irrespective of their background, have full and equal access to the services on offer. We need to deal with participation in public and private life from the top down. Although Anna Lo has broken the mould in politics — not just in Northern Ireland but in Europe — she must be the first

of many. Many people need to follow in her footsteps in politics and in other aspects of public life. We must ensure that there are voices in all the public bodies across Northern Ireland.

Education must be addressed and our information-gathering improved. Carmel Hanna made reference to the information from the 2001 census being badly out of date. Another census is not due until 2011, four years from now, and that simply will not do with regard to making good, sound, public-policy decisions.

Those considerations should be mainstreamed throughout our policy. Historically, public policy in Northern Ireland has been based around the notion of two communities: a British, Protestant, unionist community, and a Catholic, nationalist, Irish community. Insofar as those models were ever relevant, with the growing diversity in Northern Ireland, they are certainly not now. We must think very carefully about how we address public-policy issues, and change our mindset to reflect a much more diverse society, including not only the traditional, indigenous population, but those who have come to join us.

Much has been said about the importance of diversity. It is important that we do not simply tolerate, but actually respect, difference, and appreciate the value that diversity brings to our society. Integration must be considered, as well as diversity. People who now live in our community want to join it. We do not want an "us" and "them" situation, in which we try to break down barriers to improve services but retain that mindset. We need to move from "us" and "them" to "we". We are all part of the same community in Northern Ireland, a community that is becoming much more diverse, and we should value that. Under that umbrella, we respect and recognise the richness of the diversity, not just from our own traditionalist cultures, but from the new cultures that have joined ours.

The Deputy First Minister referred to the experience of the United States. I have spent considerable time working there and recognise the huge progress — especially in the large cities — in building an integrated society, and that the service sector is based, fundamentally, upon a large number of people who have come to live in the United States in recent years.

With regard to the scale of the problem, we must be clear that racist attitudes are more deeply ingrained in our society than even sectarian attitudes have been, and research from the University of Ulster bears that out. Members have made reference to the BNP, and it is important that we soundly condemn their activities. I have no intention of giving any further oxygen to that organisation, except to say that if its members ever raise their heads from the shadows and put themselves forward for election, I would like to think that the

people of Northern Ireland, through the ballot box, would tell them, in the strongest terms, where to go.

There has been a very high level of hate crime in Northern Ireland, not only based on racism, but on sectarianism and homophobia, and we should appreciate that it is a very wide issue. There is a higher rate of incident per head of population in Northern Ireland than in England and Wales. Some improvement has been made in the services. For example, the PSNI is to record such offences and deal with the victims; however, a lot more work needs to be done.

I have great concern about the failure of the courts, so far, to employ legislation, that was passed in 2004, that allows for a racist motivation to be considered as an aggravating factor in sentencing. That is based upon the same legislation that applies in England and Wales, and in Scotland. To my knowledge, that legislation has not been employed by our courts. That is a major omission. Through that failure, we do not send out the message that a hate crime is not only an offence targeted against the individual victim or his or her family, it is an offence against all of society and the notion of a diverse, multicultural Northern Ireland. In order to get the proper deterrents, we must send out, through the courts, and in the strongest possible terms, a tough message that such actions will not be tolerated.

Martina Anderson referred to the British state as being institutionally racist, and that those from a Protestant background are more inclined to engage in racism. We must be extremely careful in what we say. Racism is a problem right across our society; it is not unique to any one section of society. Moreover, with regard to the British state's being racist, yes, the British State has been institutionally racist —

Ms Anderson: I remind the Member of what I said. I did not talk about the Protestant community. I said that loyalists — and people in NICEM support that view — have actually been involved in such attacks.

I was challenging the unionist parties, which I and many others believe have not done enough to address that matter. I was not talking about the Protestant community; I was talking specifically about loyalists who are involved in attacks, and there is evidence to suggest that what I have said is correct.

Dr Farry: There may be clear evidence of an association between loyalism and racist attacks, but that is not the only source of racism in our society. There has also been racism from republican circles. Therefore, we must ensure that we take a balanced approach to this matter.

The British and Northern Irish states have been institutionally racist, and the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry bears that out. However, that is not unique to the British state, and we must be careful to prevent this debate from becoming a Brit-bashing exercise. All

states around the world, including the Republic of Ireland, have problems with institutional racism. The French even refuse to acknowledge that there are racial differences in their society — that highlights the scale of the problem. We must address what the state is doing, but let us not say that the British state is guilty in isolation of racism.

Some Members have stressed the importance of diversity and the important contribution that migrant workers have made to our economy. Danny Kennedy made the point that they are not here to take our jobs, but that we need more people to work in our economy for it to grow. We all know that Northern Ireland has a small private sector compared to the public sector. We cannot fill posts from our levels of potential workers — we need more people to come, so we should be open to that. The recent economic strategy, flawed as it is in many other respects, recognises that.

Members made other points about the importance of good relations at council level and about taking on board issues that relate to a more diverse society. Members also pointed out that the phraseology of “community relations” has now become “good relations” — it is no longer a case of Protestants versus Catholics.

Mr Deputy Speaker, can you clarify whether I have another minute to speak?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I can clarify that you do not have another minute.

Dr Farry: The amendment does not add much to the motion, but we are prepared to accept it, rather than divide the House because it is important to send out a united message.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to review, as a matter of urgency, progress on implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010 and the First Annual Implementation Plan; and to bring forward proposals for its own detailed plans for the period 2008-2011 to achieve racial equality and an inclusive society for our increasingly diverse community.

Respite Provision

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

Mrs I Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly demands improved respite provision for those with special needs.

It is my privilege to propose the motion, which is timely because a report has just been published which confirms what we all knew: that expenditure per child on personal social services in Northern Ireland was £287, compared with £513 in Scotland, £429 in Wales and £402 in England.

Respite care is vital to ensure that families are equally and fully supported. Respite care allows for much needed breaks for carers, but also provides the opportunity for children and adults with disabilities to have a change of scene and a change of carer, which can be a positive and welcome new experience for the individual.

12.00 noon

Only last week, the Assembly unanimously passed the motion:

"That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that all carers, formal and informal, can access services and support to maintain their own health and well-being, to recognise financially the vital role they play and ensure uptake of all entitlement benefits." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p42, col 2*]

Respite provision is a major problem for carers, many of whom are the sole caregiver for a family member. Eight out of 10 families provide more than 15 hours of care every day. Such a high level of constant and intensive care, without pay or holidays, places an enormous burden on the carer. Family relationships often suffer, and time spent with other family members, including other children, may be severely limited. Without adequate respite care, a carer's physical and mental health is at risk, as the endless pressure of providing care takes its toll.

Yesterday, I spoke to a woman who highlighted one of the many problems that she and her family face. I, and many others, had not fully appreciated the problem, and it is one that most in the Chamber would not tolerate. She told me about her inability to plan for breaks or holidays because confirmation that respite care will be provided is not always forthcoming. Having submitted a request for respite care in February, to date no decision has been made that will allow her to make arrangements for a well-deserved holiday for her and her family.

There are an estimated six million carers throughout the United Kingdom and a staggering 200,000 in Northern Ireland. Eight out of 10 families have reached, or come close to, breaking point because of the lack of respite care services. As of December 2006, 19 adult patients across Northern Ireland had been waiting for over a year, and 52 for between six and 12 months, to receive respite care.

There are concerns about the provision of services and facilities for young adults with special needs or learning disabilities, particularly those who are profoundly disabled and have complex needs. There has been a lack of age-appropriate respite care in Northern Ireland for many years. When young adults with special needs or learning disabilities turn 18 or leave school, they are moved from children to adult support services at an average age of 18 or 19.

That often causes young adults with special needs to lose contact with their social workers from child support services. Such upheaval can cause considerable distress to a young adult who has established a relationship with a particular social worker only to be assigned a new one who may not have the same skills and experience of working with young adults with special needs.

There are considerable gaps in the provision of adult support services. There is a lack of appropriate facilities for young adults with special needs. There is a particular lack of age-appropriate respite and/or day-care facilities to provide the support and assistance that young people with special needs require.

Several weeks ago, Mrs Margaret Butler from Bangor, whose 19-year-old son has severe learning difficulties and requires 24-hour care, contacted my office. Stephen and his parents have been assessed as requiring 72 days of respite care each year. Since Stephen turned 19 in April 2007 and is no longer able to access care in a children's unit, the family has been unable to access age-appropriate respite care facilities. The Law Centre (NI) has also assisted the Butlers to try to get their case examined in more detail. However, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust advised the family that in the Bangor area, young adults aged 19 and above are generally offered respite care in a range of registered residential or nursing homes. The majority of residents in such facilities tend to be older people. Young adults would have no peers to communicate with.

The Butler family has been offered respite care at one facility, but that option is not only age-inappropriate but unsafe, as Stephen loves to crawl and would be unable to do so safely there.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust proposed a new four-to-five bed respite unit at Stewart Memorial House. That was originally planned several

years ago. The building was completed — but remains vacant. The trust has put a proposal to the board for funding for the unit. I urge the Minister to pursue that matter with the utmost urgency. As I am sure Members will agree, that is a scandal, never mind the cost incurred for a building sitting idle.

A further problem is the lack of gender-appropriate facilities for people who require respite care. That is particularly evident in the provision of respite care for women with brain injuries. As most road traffic accident victims tend to be men, there is a lack of appropriate facilities for female victims who require respite care for brain damage.

Day-care facilities do not provide residential care, but they do provide a welcome change of scenery for an individual with special needs, and a break for his or her carer. Once again, there are insufficient day-care facilities available, and places are strictly limited.

The Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 gives carers the right to request an assessment of their individual needs and places an obligation on trusts to meet the needs of carers as assessed, including the need for respite care. The Act contains a duty to provide the services — yet no extra funding was earmarked to meet its requirements.

Carers represent one of the most socially excluded groups of people. To date, the Government's inclusion policy appears to have failed. Many carers remain unaware of their rights under the Act, and further awareness raising is required regarding the right to an assessment of need.

The health and social care trusts must consider the allocation of resources to ensure that when assessments are completed, funding is in place to carry out the recommendations, including any need for respite care.

The right to assessment for people in need of respite care is contained in section 4 of the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989. Section 3 of the Act contains a duty to make written statements if requested; to specify the need as assessed; and to specify how the assessed needs will be met. The section was never enacted in Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, no equivalent provision was enacted for carers' assessments. Instead, a good practice guide was issued by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in 1999, but was largely ignored. Section 3 of the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 must be enacted. An equivalent section could be enacted within the Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002. If enacted, those sections would ensure that both carers and those in receipt of care have the right to request a written statement. That would clarify the extent of assessed need and how it should be met and would also create a more open and transparent system.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend Iris Robinson for bringing this important topic to the Assembly. One of the first debates that we had in the new Assembly was about the lack of services for children and young people. It is ironic then that one of the last debates before the summer recess is dealing with similar issues. I thank the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, for attending the debate. I look forward to what he has to say.

As children's spokesperson for Sinn Féin, I am particularly concerned at the impact on children, young people and their families of the lack of provision of respite care. However, the picture is not an unfamiliar one. When it comes to children's services, there is not enough provision for all the children and families who need it. This puts substantial pressure on existing provision.

The reason why the Assembly so often raises the difficulties and issues faced by families and their children is due to the underfunding of children's services. I commend the Department of Finance and Personnel and OFMDFM, and I commend the Commissioner for Children and Young People who is launching a report on the lack of spending on children and young people in the Six Counties.

As well as the overall lack of provision, the range of services required is not sufficient. That is why young people — particularly once they reach 19 years of age — are put into services that are not designed to meet their needs but the needs of older people. The proposer of the motion has covered the stark statistics involved, so I will not repeat them.

I thank Mencap for its recent report outlining the effect of respite provision on families, and I recommend it to all Members, as it makes for stark reading. We need a more individualised package of care and range of services, which would enable us to wrap a package of care around the child or young person to support them in having as full a life as possible. Respite provision should not be about papering over the cracks or holding a family back from breaking point. It should be about the kind of experience that will enable a child or young person to enjoy a more fulfilling life. For instance, it might be more appropriate for a young person aged 15 or 16 to have a mentor or peer support worker who could accompany them to an inclusive facility for a planned weekend, rather than simply having a residential-based service that cares for a range of children with complex needs.

Sometimes there is tension between the experiences of young people and the needs of their carers. If we only take a family-support approach to respite provision, then the danger will be that the views of young people will be isolated and sidelined, which is something that

we do not want to happen. There can be tension between the parents' need for support and the children's and young people's needs for normal experiences. Therefore, it is vital to listen to the families and young people involved before developing the kind of service that will allow the needs of both to be met.

There is also the need to address the policy and legislation involved. Some respite-based services are regulated and inspected on the basis that they provide a service for looked-after children or children in care. Other services are regulated and inspected on the basis of a private residential system. Trusts can sometimes be viewed as the corporate parent, and children can be treated, in policy terms, like children in care, but that approach is not appropriate and does not work.

In Scotland, the policy is much clearer: disabled children needing respite care are not treated as looked-after children. It is essential that legislation and policy on respite provision be reviewed to clarify the regulation of services and the responsibilities of trusts, providers and parents.

Further services must also be developed. For example, a range of accredited organisations has been developed to provide services directly to families. As the previous Member said, parents should receive direct payments and have direct contract with such services, rather than always having to go through the trusts. As things stand, the current services are mixed and are not flexible enough to meet the needs of young people who reach 19 years of age and therefore fail to get the type of response they need.

If we are to improve our response to the children and young people with special needs who need respite care, we must maintain the current level of provision while providing extra investment to develop new services and the clear policy and legislative framework needed to sit alongside that. Our children and young people deserve no less. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr B McCrea: This is about the third time that I have spoken on this important subject. I want to speak on an issue for people with severe learning disabilities — what they themselves would refer to as the “mentally handicapped”; and that is something that can be said without fear of contradiction. There is a danger that when learning difficulties are talked about, people think that it refers to dyslexia. However, some people have severe problems from the day they are born. It is not something that will get better or that they will grow out of, and those who look after them must do so for the rest of their lives.

12.15 pm

That does not detract from the other issues that hon Members raised. Jim Shannon and I agree on the issue and have talked about it at length.

Imagine the peculiar and awful situation in which an 83-year-old is expected to look after someone who is 60 years of age. At that time of their lives, people are supposed to be retired or getting some help. However, those carers feel that they alone must take up the strain because of the very special needs of the person for whom they are caring. A person who has special needs requires 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week care. It is almost impossible to comprehend what dealing with that situation is like for someone who is aged 83.

I look forward to hearing the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's comments. His attitude and approach to the issue are commendable. One of the first things that he did when he took up his ministerial post was to meet some carers from my constituency in Lagan Valley.

I mentioned that meeting because people who care for those who have special needs bring practical assistance to the situation. A little bit more thought and planning would make life so much better for those people. I note that during Question Time yesterday — which, unfortunately, I was unable to attend — the Minister accepted that current respite provision is inadequate and unsatisfactory. Undoubtedly, he will address those issues.

When I read through the Hansard report and saw the range of ways in which respite provision might be addressed, it was clear that one size does not fit all. Indeed, I know that from my own experience. Very properly, the Members who spoke before me have mentioned the need for gender- and age-appropriate facilities. It is a problem that someone who has severe learning difficulties may be aged 25 but has a mental age of a six- or seven-year-old. If such people are put together, en masse, there may be occasional inappropriate behaviour, and that causes all sorts of tensions. We must find a way to resolve those issues. Although I fully support the suggestions on gender- and age-appropriate respite provision, we must also make special provision for those who have learning difficulties.

Quite often, people who have learning disabilities present with multiple problems. As a result, nursing home staff and those who might otherwise be expected to provide respite care run a million miles from those people because they do not have the specialist skills and facilities to look after them. That makes it even more difficult for the carers to get the respite that they require.

I talked about some very good examples of respite care that works; for instance, people who have learning difficulties may be housed together. However, just like the rest of us, people who have learning difficulties do not necessarily get along with everyone else. There

must be flexibility in order to get the right people together in the right rooms. Otherwise, there will be tensions.

I am encouraged that there are examples of good practice, albeit limited. I encourage the Minister to have a look at those examples. His doing so will inform our thinking on the way forward. I am hopeful that he will be able to provide some reassurance on the matter. It is important to discover what works and what the practicalities are. Let us not be grandiose. Let us take them in the order that gives the maximum benefit for the minimum investment: so little would do so much for so many people. I would just like to finish —

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

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion. The spectrum of need is very wide, and it must be remembered that each person — the carer and the cared-for — has his or her individual needs and personalities.

Organisations that work in the interests of people with special needs — and their carers — have carried out research that demonstrates a shocking lack of available, accessible and appropriate respite services in Northern Ireland. There has been a failure to prioritise and to meet the needs of people with disabilities and their families.

Respite provision is the most important service for people who have dependents with special needs, yet it is the most difficult to obtain. Carers are sometimes forced to refuse offers of respite because the service is so unsuitable for the needs of the person who is being cared for, or because of the system's impossible restrictions on time and availability. Carers who are seeking respite are often made to feel that their request signifies their inability to cope with their responsibility and that only those who speak up forcefully and threaten court action are likely to receive attention.

Carers often have to face excessive bureaucracy — there are meetings after meetings, from the front-line manager to the programme manager to the multi-disciplinary team, and still no decisions are reached, month after month. Carers cannot plan, yet the person who comes into the home to lend a hand can chat about their impending holidays. It should be the same for the carer; they deserve respite, need it, and are entitled to it.

I spoke to a woman who graphically compared her life as a carer to Nelson Mandela's time in prison. She said that she spent the same number of years caring. Stuck in isolation as a carer, she has had a great deal of time to read the equality strategy, the carer's strategy and about her human rights. She asked about her rights: where was the evidence-based practice? Carers do a job out of love and responsibility that would cost the Health Service a fortune.

Research has shown that fear of a postcode lottery exists because of inconsistency; in care assessments across health trusts; in the processes of assessment and evaluation; and in informing carers of the services that are available. There have been instances in which carers have been discouraged by social workers who, because there are insufficient resources to support the identified need, demonstrate the pointlessness of the assessment exercise.

According to a 2006 Mencap survey of families with dependents with disabilities in Northern Ireland and England, only one in 13 children with a disability receives a regular support service in the form of a break or direct payment to their carers. That situation has to be considered alongside the fact that seven out of 10 families of those surveyed provide more than 15 hours of care every day. Five out of 10 families of those surveyed provide care during the night. The lack of carers' assessments is the main element of the paucity of provision. Half of the families surveyed had not been subject to a carer's assessment, and half of those who had been assessed had still not received any services at the time of the survey.

Other Members have mentioned the growing number of ageing carers in Northern Ireland whose children with special needs have left the school system, entered adulthood, and have developed more acute levels of need due to deteriorating mental and physical health. Currently, 37% of carers of adults with a learning disability are themselves aged 65 and over. Indeed, if the carer dies, it is often the case that no emergency bed is available for their dependent. Think of the worry for those ageing parents —

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

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion — I note its use of the word "demands", in relation to the provision of respite care for those with special needs. The motion expresses the urgency of this matter, and I hope that, after resolution of the motion, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will act immediately to carry out the will of this democratically elected Assembly.

Speaking from experience, I can assure the House that respite care to provide a break for people who look after someone with a severe or profound learning difficulty, or even with mild special needs, is a lifeline. The service must be expanded across Northern Ireland without delay.

I pay tribute to all the professional people in specialist-care settings who do an excellent job caring for special-needs people, whether young or elderly. Even if only for a few days, those members of staff, who are trained to a high standard, face the same complex and behavioural problems as the families of people with special needs. On behalf of those of us

who need that service, I thank those people; we are extremely grateful. However, more must be done in the provision of respite care.

The people who need respite care are also grateful to those members of staff because the care takes them out of their homes and allows them to get used to new staff and different environments. That can only be good for everyone concerned.

Unfortunately, respite-care facilities are grossly underprovided for in Northern Ireland. As a public representative, I am continually being asked, or told, to campaign for more respite-care places. Therefore, I take this opportunity to inform the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — who I am glad is here today — of what is happening in our communities. Yesterday, in an answer he gave to a question on the inadequate level of respite facilities in Northern Ireland, Mr McGimpsey recognised that the shortfall in those services is unacceptable.

I am also informed that another attack on the most vulnerable in society has been thrust upon carers by the health authorities. People are now being charged for the provision of such necessities as incontinence pads and sheets. How low can the health authorities stoop? Those items are essential requirements for many people, particularly those with special needs and learning difficulties, and our elderly. They are necessary to keep people free from skin infections and bedsores, to increase hygiene and to keep them out of hospital. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that all essential items that are required to enable all our people to enjoy good health are provided through our National Health Service, whether at home or in a respite-care facility. Any question of charging for those items must be abolished immediately.

I fully support urgent action to provide extra respite care throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig: I commend my party colleague Iris Robinson for bringing such an important issue before the House. The debate provides a good example of the benefits of devolution and the real changes that can be made to people's lives. It shows that our own Health Minister can make real decisions that affect real people.

Members are all too aware of the concerns and fears that carers have about the provision of care for their loved ones who have learning disabilities. Anything and everything that can be done to help carers to look after their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters or close family friends should be done to ensure that help is at hand, where and when it is needed. That is why quality respite provision is essential if we are to help carers to continue to deliver the loving and professional care that they are deliver every hour, every day and every week, and, in the case of most carers, every year.

In many cases, care is not provided by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or by the trusts: it is delivered solely by family members and close friends.

Carers have other commitments that the rest of us take for granted. Whether those are family or work commitments, or simply mundane tasks such as going to the shops, it can be a real struggle to find someone to step in to provide much needed help.

12.30 pm

If one considers the lack of provision of respite care in my constituency of Lagan Valley, one can clearly see the job of work that lies ahead for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In Lagan Valley, 830 people require respite care, and 18·2 beds are available to provide it. Last year, 145 people used those beds, which means a startling figure of 689 individuals did not receive respite provision. Unfortunately, those numbers are replicated throughout Northern Ireland. That leads carers to feel isolated and without the necessary support and help.

The new Assembly faces many challenges. If Members are to make a difference to the quality of the lives of people with severe learning difficulties and their families, we must act, and act now, to provide proper respite care throughout Northern Ireland.

I commend the Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for meeting carers from my constituency. Those carers were deeply moved by the interest that was shown in the issues that they raised. I appreciate that this debate is just the start of a process that will bring to the fore issues that affect people with learning disabilities in the Province, but I look forward to developments.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I agree with what has been said about respite care. It is vital in order to ensure that everyone in families is supported equally. Respite care provides those families with opportunities for much-needed breaks and the disabled person with a potentially positive experience.

The provision of respite care must be accessible, appropriate and adequate. That has not been the experience for many families, and there appears to be a common theme occurring. A family from Mid Ulster who have a 19-year-old son with severe physical and emotional needs recently contacted me. Throughout those 19 years, the family never sought help or assistance from social services. However, due to her being diagnosed with cancer, the young man's mother, who is the primary carer, asked for respite care. That lady was told that there was no appropriate local provision and that the nearest facility in Magherafelt could not cater for her son's needs. As an alternative, the family were offered

a place in a respite facility in Bangor or three days a week in an adult day-care centre. The family felt that both those options were inadequate. After weeks and months of speaking to social services, the family sought support from their elected representatives, and it was only then that they were made aware of the availability of the direct payment facility. They are now proceeding down that route, but, nonetheless, that is an example of a family in great need who were let down by the system.

I also have concerns about age-appropriate facilities. I met with a group of disabled young adults in their twenties and thirties who were forced to accept respite and/or day care in residential accommodation that was designed for the older population. That is unacceptable and the Assembly must address the matter as a priority.

I welcome the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's comments in response to my question in the Chamber yesterday about unsuitable accommodation for young people with disabilities. He deemed accommodation designed for older people not to be acceptable for people with disabilities; however, he recognised that there has been a history of that being the case in the Department. He also suggested that the Department is endeavouring to move away from such practices and that strict protocols are now in place. Despite those comments, I still have concerns that the Department continues to display the same mentality. The case that I have mentioned is a prime example of that.

As elected representatives, Members have a responsibility to the people to ensure that proper respite care is provided and that those with disabilities, and their carers, are not marginalised further by the Department's policies and practices. With that in mind, I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I support the motion. I concur with the majority of comments made by other Members. A big concern of mine is how lack of respite care can affect the health of carers. Almost 21% of carers who provide over 50 hours of care each week say that they are in poor health, compared with 11% of non-carers. Respite care is critical because the last thing that anybody wants is for carers to fall into poor physical or mental health. I am delighted that the Minister is present to address the issue.

Some Members, such as my colleague Mr Basil McCrea, mentioned cases in their own constituencies. As a member of the Health Committee, I am pleased that we had the opportunity to meet and have lunch with carers and hear first-hand accounts of their experiences. I hope that the Committee will avail of the opportunity to visit them and see some of the work they do.

Carers play a vital role. Mrs Hanna and Mr McCrea mentioned situations in which an 80-year-old is looking after a 60-year-old. Carers have additional worry and stress from thinking about what will happen in the future and who will look after the disabled person when

they are gone. The Assembly must overcome those hurdles and endeavour to alleviate the added stress that carers experience.

Mr McCarthy mentioned the need for more respite-care places. That might be an option. However, the Assembly must consider all options in order to decide the best way to deal with the issue. Mr McCrea spoke about best practice. The Assembly must consider the options and the areas in which respite services work better and aim to replicate that across Northern Ireland. That is vital.

Ms S Ramsey: My point was that the answer is not simply to throw additional money at services, but to consider the circumstances of individuals and their families and design the services to meet those needs.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I have no difficulty with her suggestion. I agree wholeheartedly with her view that cases must be considered individually in order to establish how best they can be dealt with. There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. Nor should it be assumed that provision of more respite-care places in certain areas is the answer. The Member is absolutely right: a broader approach must be taken in order to tackle all the issues. I support the motion and look forward to the Minister's comments.

Mr O'Loan: Like other Members, I want to consider the situation from the point of view of families who are directly affected. Let us put ourselves in the position of the main carer of a child with severe learning difficulties — in this case, that person is the child's mother. The child is a teenager who needs constant care every waking minute. There must be 24-hour vigilance and readiness to respond, which continues seven days a week, 52 weeks a year and has been the situation since the moment the child was born.

As is so often the case, the parents are trying to maintain a normal life for themselves and their other children. We can only begin to imagine the pressure of such a regime. Although everyone in the household loves the child, the demands on it are colossal.

In families such as that, respite care is needed. We should consider the reality of such a situation. Parents are told that a local centre can provide respite care for their child, but demand for its services is huge. In practice, the centre can offer very few overnight stays. When offered, respite care is cancelled repeatedly, often hours before their child is due to be admitted. The parents might be advised that because the centre's other clients have behavioural difficulties, its facilities would not be suitable for their child. The parents are then offered a place at another centre, thirty miles away — it is not ideal, but they accept that place. They are offered two weekends a month, but, shortly afterwards, they are told that because the centre is short-staffed, it can only offer one weekend a month. Their

child attends the centre for one weekend's respite care. However, a few days before the second weekend, the centre tells the parents that that place is no longer available. Can Members imagine the parents' desperate need for the break that that weekend of respite care would provide? Can they imagine the let down felt, and difficulties faced, by those parents, who may have booked a much-needed weekend away?

The parents begin to look to the future: their child will soon enter adulthood. Everything that they know suggests that facilities for adults are even worse than those for young people. The local day-care facility is a prefabricated building in an industrial estate, with inadequate resources. Is it any surprise that those parents feel a sense of dread about the future?

I have raised this scenario with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, the management of which I hold in high regard. The following quote is from a letter that the management sent to me:

"The Trust acknowledges the need to modernise and reform daytime support to adults with learning disabilities and to this end has reviewed current arrangements and produced a strategy for future provision. This strategy covers the period 2007-2011 and sets a challenging agenda for the Trust".

Members know what a trust is really saying when it states that it "sets a challenging agenda". Although I have much confidence in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's management, what confidence can we have that the strategy will produce results over that period?

The example that I outlined earlier highlighted the real problems that exist at the delivery end of the healthcare system. We must do better. At the crux of the issue is a lesson that the Assembly must learn in all aspects of its work: if public-expenditure funding is higher here than in other parts of the UK, we must find ways to better use our resources. That is the fundamental challenge for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on respite care, and for the Executive on all issues.

Mr Savage: I thank Mrs Robinson for tabling the motion. I am delighted to join with fellow MLAs to debate respite care in Northern Ireland. Respite care is important. It is essential to thousands of people in families across the social and political spectra of our community. We must work together to identify ways to provide appropriate respite care for the elderly, the sick, our fellow citizens with mental-health problems, the disabled, and, in particular, our young people.

For a long time, the Government have relied on the generosity of the silent — almost invisible and forgotten — army of carers, who have taken on work and responsibility, and given their own time to care for loved ones. Do we even know how many people care for family members who have Alzheimer's disease, an elderly parent, or, more increasingly, a family member with a

mental-health issue? In response to a question from Lady Hermon, Paul Goggins stated that:

"In 2007-08 the Government will invest an additional £11.5 million in community care services designed to help vulnerable people to live independent lives."

Do Members believe that that is enough money? Where is it being spent? How much of it will be swallowed up by administration? What are the benchmarks of success against which we will be able to measure the effectiveness of how the £11.5 million has been spent in helping those in need and in assisting the army of carers who have to carry out the same tasks every day while discussions are going on and plans are being considered?

12.45 pm

I have long been associated with the Buddy Bear Trust Conductive Education School in Dungannon, which specialises in helping children who have cerebral palsy. Many Members met the school's chairman, Mr McConville, and one of its students, Daniel Murphy, when they were invited to sign the pledge of support photograph — which had been signed by the leaders of all political parties. The parents and children at the Buddy Bear Trust school hope that Members will be able to help them.

The parents of children who attend that school said that they realised that their lives would never be the same again when they discovered that they had a baby with a disability or with special needs. Those parents claim that their child's disability was compounded when they saw that family members were nervous about babysitting. That is when the social isolation began. The absence of a babysitter and respite care means that parents are not able to go out together to social events, functions or even weddings or funerals. As their child develops, parents have to make alternative arrangements for their other children so that they can accompany their disabled child to meet consultants, principals and psychologists. There is a time delay in the statementing process, so the parents and child will be lucky to see those professionals.

Those parents complain that education and health services did not provide them with a comprehensive pack of information including full details of the education options and the available health and social care provision. They are particularly angry and disappointed that the education boards did not inform them about the availability of special care schools. The parents of some of the children who attend the Buddy Bear Trust school are planning to raise those and other issues with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Patricia Lewsley; the Chief Commissioner for Human Rights, Monica McWilliams; the Health Minister; and the Education Minister. Those parents want good-quality respite-care provision and well-equipped accommodation that is well staffed by qualified

and caring professionals who can meet the various needs of their children.

In the Upper Bann constituency, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has stated that the dermatology and respite care facilities at Lurgan Hospital will close. That is a serious matter, because that hospital provides valuable facilities and care. That closure was reported in the press earlier this week. I do not believe everything that appears in the press, but I urge the Minister to put people's minds at rest.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mrs Robinson for tabling this important motion. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is aware of the statistics, which have been well rehearsed. There are an estimated 16,500 people with a learning disability, and 4,500 of them have a severe or profound learning disability.

I acknowledge that respite provision has, historically, been underfunded. There is not enough respite provision available, particularly for those with complex needs. Those individuals with special needs are living longer, their needs are becoming more complex, and the demand for respite provision is increasing. That is the challenge that is facing us.

There were 400 children awaiting respite at the end of March 2007.

Let me be clear: waiting times are not acceptable under any circumstances. I am seeking to address that issue in order to ensure that needs are met. I am also examining ways in which respite services can be extended and improved when setting budgetary priorities — that is one key way in which progress can be made.

Mrs Robinson mentioned the report of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People on expenditure per child. In comparison with the rest of the UK, spending per child in Northern Ireland is very poor.

Declan O'Loan mentioned the levels of funding and public expenditure. Health and social services in Northern Ireland are underfunded to the tune of £400 million — and I am not the only one to say so. That is the amount that would be required to provide parity of provision with England, Scotland and Wales.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People, Mrs Patricia Lewsley, made comparisons between health and social services provision here and in England, Scotland and Wales. As citizens of the UK, the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to exactly the same provision as people in England, Scotland and Wales.

It is a fact that health services are underfunded to the tune of £400 million. That figure was arrived at as the result of an exercise that was carried out by the previous direct rule regime and it was accepted by the

Department of Finance and Personnel, and by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That exercise was spearheaded by the then Secretary of State. An independent expert was appointed to assess needs and examine funding. When examining public expenditure against the entire block grant, one might be able to make an argument on the per-head figures, but one must also examine need. However, the assessment exercise was carried out specifically on health.

That does not explain under-provision, but it does, to an extent, explain why priorities are crunched. Sometimes priorities are crunched in a way that is not universally acceptable — certainly not to those in this Chamber.

Health and social care trusts provide a wide range of respite care throughout Northern Ireland in residential and family settings. Respite care can take many forms; it can be delivered in a person's home or through day facilities and residential care homes. Many Members will be aware that respite care can be provided to meet a client's personal needs or the needs of carers and their families.

In answer to Ms Ramsey's point about family care, respite is based on a family-care plan. That is the key building block that has been adopted in the provision of respite for carers and their families. Respite care offers valuable time for carers and families to alleviate the stress that comes with always being on call, and it offers learning-disabled people opportunities for a change of environment and stimulus. That important point was raised by John McCallister.

Mrs Hanna mentioned the Mencap campaign 'Breaking Point', which specifically argued for short breaks, and followed a campaign in the rest of the UK that examined the value of such breaks.

There are many ways in which the Health Service is striving to improve and develop respite care services, including: increasing non-residential respite schemes for children, such as after-school clubs; developing respite services that are provided in a family setting by specially trained host families; and specialised child-minding services to provide parents with a break from caring.

I am aware of the constantly changing needs and trends in respite care and of the continual increase in costs. Further resources will always be needed for care, and we must seek innovative ways of delivering services. Several trusts have appointed a manager to act as a co-ordinator for residential respite for adults with learning disabilities. I am disappointed that Mr O'Loan's experience in interaction with the trusts has not been as positive as it should have been.

That has already had a significant impact on improving efficient use of respite beds across the statutory and voluntary sector and in providing parents, carers and professionals alike with a better access to the service.

In 2007-08, my Department will invest a further £11.5 million in community services across Northern Ireland that are designed to support independent living for everyone with a disability. Respite care will be an important element of those additional services.

There are many plans to develop learning disability services across board areas, and I will offer some examples: there are plans to provide additional respite beds for adults and children, many in new purpose-built facilities; a new eight-place respite unit is due to open in January 2008 in Dungannon, and there are further proposals for similar units across Northern Ireland; work is underway to reduce reliance on hospital-based respite for adults and to provide it in more informal, community settings, and new tailor-made services are being designed and introduced by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board associated with the caring break service, which provides individually designed day and evening respite and is complemented by the Southern Health and Social Services Board's "Wraparound" scheme.

Despite Member's reservations about provisions — and I have already acknowledged that there is not enough provision — efforts are being made. It may also be possible to make direct payment to people who need help from social services but who want to arrange and pay for their own care and support services instead of receiving them from a trust. That would be a more flexible way of approaching the problem, and a growing number of people are finding that that option provides the independence and flexibility that they require.

The Bamford report entitled 'Equal Lives: Review of Policy and Services for People with a Learning Disability in Northern Ireland' is a key document in helping us to improve learning disability services. I am committed to its objective of enhancing and strengthening the community response to and support for people with learning disabilities — not least because its recommendations point clearly to the need for cross-departmental co-operation.

Mr McCrea and others made the point about the need for age-specific respite provision, and that approach must be adopted in the provision of respite places. Mr McCrea is correct: one size does not fit all. Some 150 age-appropriate day-care places were created in 2006-07 using moneys from the funding package for children and young people. Those places also cater for the needs of young people who are in transition at the age of 18.

Voluntary and community sectors also have a vital role to play in providing quality and responsive services by working closely with family groups. They are better placed to identify needs and to respond in constructive and innovative ways. I have already referred to the successful "Wraparound" scheme developed in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area, which

involves partnership working between statutory, voluntary and community groups. It includes outreach services to families in their own homes, and the emphasis is on a creative and flexible approach. I want to see greater innovation and creativity in the development of those services. The ideas are there: the problem is in finding resources.

Mr McCarthy said that Members are demanding better respite services and that my Department should therefore provide them. I would love to be able to respond in that way; but resources play a key part. Families desperately need high-quality respite provision to give them the break they need; and I recognise the benefits that respite can provide for a family that has to cope with extra pressures. In my budget-bidding process, I will seek to address under-provision for carers and respite care.

1.00 pm

Mr Buchanan: I commend Mrs Iris Robinson for proposing such a worthy motion. Many of the families across Northern Ireland who care for children and adults with severe and profound learning disabilities find themselves at breaking point because of a severe lack of respite provision. It is estimated that 2% of Northern Ireland's population has some form of learning difficulty, which amounts to more than 33,000 people. As the Minister mentioned, 4,500 of those people have a severe or profound difficulty, and caring is therefore an essential part of their lives. However, that puts a lot of stress on the family members and loved ones who care for them. It is thanks to their dedication that many of those being cared for are able to retain some form of independence and can continue to live in their own communities.

My brother and uncle are disabled and are being looked after by elderly parents, so I know something of the difficulties and the stress that caring places on family life. It must be recognised that carers have a right to a life beyond their caring role. A range of respite care must be provided to suit the needs of the carers and the people who are being cared for. That should not be seen exclusively as alternative residential care. It is most important for carers to know that, when they take a break, the person for whom they usually provide care is being well looked after and is secure. Carers' needs should be considered on an individual basis, and they should have a choice about the type and timing of services available to allow them to take an appropriate break.

As the proposer of the motion said, it is unacceptable that eight out of 10 families have come close to breaking point because of the lack of short-break services. According to figures from the Commission for Social Care Inspection, only one in 13 disabled children receives a regular support service from their local authority. Further research from Mencap found that, despite the

influx of legislation for carers enacted since 1995, half of all carers who have had an assessment of their needs still receive no service. New figures have exposed the long delays that patients across Northern Ireland face while waiting to be admitted into respite care.

In my constituency of West Tyrone, it is alarming to see that the Western Health and Social Care Trust has the worst record of all trusts for respite care provision and that many who have already been assessed as requiring care provision have to wait over 12 months for that provision. That is unacceptable.

I commend Mrs Iris Robinson for proposing the motion. She highlighted the lack of finance over the years and the gaps in appropriate funding for young adults. She has worked tirelessly over the years, lobbying for respite provision and care for mentally ill people and those with learning disabilities.

Many other issues have also been highlighted. For example, Sue Ramsey mentioned that services must be designed to meet families' needs. Basil McCrea mentioned best-practice models, which the Assembly should examine. Carmel Hanna mentioned that 37% of carers are over 65 years of age, which is an alarming statistic. The big difficulty is that those carers are well on in years, and they wonder who will care for their relatives when they are gone. That huge concern must be urgently addressed.

Jonathan Craig mentioned the work that lies ahead for the Department, and, obviously, the Department has much work to do to address all those issues. I was encouraged that the Minister said that he will give a lot of attention to respite provision when he sets out his budget priorities. I welcome that.

The Department must ensure that respite provision for people with special needs is afforded urgent priority.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was rather disappointed that the Minister did not reject the proposal to charge people for essential equipment to keep the good health of their —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McCarthy, that is not a point of order. It is an issue for the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly demands improved respite provision for those with special needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet as soon as the Assembly suspends for lunch. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the motion on victims will be debated.

The sitting was suspended at 1.05 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm

Victims

Mr 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 make the winding-up speech. Other Members will have five minutes each.

Two amendments have been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposers of the amendments will each have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make their winding-up speeches.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Executive to implement the recommendations of the final report by the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, entitled 'Support for Victims and Survivors: Addressing the Human Legacy'.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. However, I must attend a Committee meeting this afternoon, and I may have to leave during the debate. I hope that Members appreciate that, but I will stay for as long as possible.

Over a generation, many horrific events occurred in Northern Ireland, and they have had an impact on the lives of many thousands of people in the Province. The ripples of those events, some of which happened decades ago, are felt to this day by the bereaved, the traumatised, the injured and the lonely.

Over the years, I have been in regular contact with victims and survivors, all of whom suffer in different ways — physically, emotionally, financially and psychologically. Unfortunately, the common denominator among many victims and survivors in Northern Ireland is that they feel that they have been forgotten. To many, the neglect of the past is a serious impediment that prevents them from moving successfully into the future. When talking to victims and survivors, the words "angry" and "frustrated" often arise. Who can blame them for having such feelings? Many victims and survivors have lived through the terrible pain of losing a loved one or of being injured.

There is some substance to the argument that no one who lived in Northern Ireland through the unhappiest period of its history will have escaped some damage. Many people who, fortunately, escaped death or injury have been exposed to threat and danger. Certain localities have experienced an enduring atmosphere of tension and menace. Social life has been constrained, and economic progress has been impeded.

Nevertheless, we must aim our efforts at considering the needs of a coherent and manageable target group. I define that group as the surviving injured, those who

care for them and those close relatives who mourn their dead.

On 24 October 1997, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, announced that a commission was to be established:

“to look at possible ways to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence arising from the troubles of the last 30 years, including those who have died or been injured in the service of the community.”

Compared to the darkest days of the Troubles, the decade since that announcement was made has, thankfully, been relatively free from violence. However, the victims issue is still in limbo. To the community's collective shame, it has been allowed to drift.

The report that stemmed from that announcement almost 10 years ago was Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's 'We Will Remember Them'. One of that report's 20 recommendations was that:

“victims must, as the barest minimum, be as well served as former prisoners in terms of their rehabilitation, future employment etc”.

That clearly separates prisoners from victims. I strongly suggest that many victims would agree with that ideal, but it is still far from reality. Members only have to look round the Chamber to see many people who are victims or ex-prisoners.

The victims community had to wait until 2005 for the next significant development, when the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, Bertha McDougall, was appointed. That was a belated but positive step in the right direction; I hope that the community will not need to wait another eight to 10 years for the next significant progress on this issue.

Bertha McDougall's subsequent recommendations were formed after she and her team consulted a wide range of survivors, victims and groups representing victims' interests. Those 36 recommendations are therefore based on the needs of genuine victims and survivors. It is vital that the measures that she outlined should come into effect as soon as possible so that the needs of victims, which have hitherto received minimal attention, can be addressed.

I use the term “genuine victims” because the very definition of a victim is a difficult matter. No doubt some Assembly Members will have a definition of “victim” that is widely different from my own. Even Bertha McDougall indicated that there is no consensus on the definition in the community. I strongly urge that the interpretation and definition of the term “victim” is clearly defined. The real victims who have suffered at the hands of terrorists should not be merged into the same category as the perpetrators of violence, murder and mayhem. That would be a travesty of justice for those who have already suffered. Indeed, it would involve a re-traumatisation process for victims.

I have grave concerns that, during a recent meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the First Minister stated:

“The new Commissioner will not, of course, be bound by Mrs McDougall's recommendations”.

I believe that it has been proven that the complex nature of the role requires not just a commissioner for victims, but a commission for victims. That role requires a small group of people; such matters should not be left to just one person.

I will be interested to hear from the proposer of amendment No 1 how the role of a commissioner — or, indeed, of a commission — would fit in with the bringing forward of proposals from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister as soon as possible after the recess. I wait to hear that with some anticipation, as I must put on record my serious concern at allowing the process for dealing with victims to be left in the hands of people such as the Deputy First Minister and the junior Minister from his party, both of whom have a record that clearly speaks for itself.

Returning to the report of the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, I believe that the time lag that would be involved in further consultation would be unacceptable to the many people who are in need of immediate help and who are long overdue meaningful, tangible support. The fact that we are, as yet, unable even to put an accurate figure on the number of victims and survivors in the Province shows how poorly advanced we are in providing for victims and survivors.

The Interim Commissioner's recommendations are divided into the three main areas of services, funding and the victims and survivors forum. I am pleased that dealing with trauma is at the top of the list of service priorities. The suggestion that the work should be done in conjunction with the recommendations of the Bamford Review can only be positive. We also need to be careful that we do not, as I mentioned earlier, end up with a process of the re-traumatisation of victims.

The issue of funding is, in many respects, self-explanatory. One need only listen to the personal stories of many victims to understand the extent to which many of them were poorly financially treated. Many women who became widows when their husbands were murdered had to take on extra employment to help to raise their young families. I know that money can never repay for the loss of a loved one, but that situation should never have happened.

I pay tribute to the many genuine groups in our community that carry out a positive role by helping victims. The South East Fermanagh Foundation deals very positively with victims in the County Fermanagh area.

The question of the forum outlined in the recommendations is an emotive one. If, or when, victims are ready to move to that position, they will need time and

space, and I urge that they are not forced into something of which they do not wish to be a part. A key step to building a future that is more at ease is to acknowledge the past and address issues that have impacted on countless families in the intervening years.

Many victims are amazed that so much money can be spent on a small number of inquiries, with little or no effort being made to address their pain and suffering. Many victims have a different method of dealing with the past and the way in which they wish to proceed to the future. Some people want to expose everything from the past, and others want to move on with their future quietly, remembering the past in their own private way.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “urges” and insert

“the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals, after the summer recess, for a new policy for victims and survivors, having due regard to the recommendations in the Interim Commissioner’s report ‘Support for Victims and Survivors: Addressing the Human Legacy’.”

The way in which we deal with victims is an emotive issue. Many victims exhibit a range of emotions, which is testament to their enduring problems. A reading of the Interim Commissioner for Victims’ report highlights the problems that she faced. Nonetheless, she has produced a commendable report that addresses victims’ issues and contains a range of recommendations, to which Mr Elliott has referred. The DUP amendment simply urges the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to have due regard to those recommendations in the formulation of a new policy.

What can we do for the close relatives of those who have died? What can we do for those who continue to suffer because of terror and criminal activity? We will always struggle with those questions if we are unwilling to grapple with the definition of what is a genuinely innocent victim and what is not. As a society and as an Assembly, we must never equate the perpetrators of atrocities with the victims of atrocities. To take one example, it cannot be the case that Sean Kelly, who murdered innocent people in the Shankill bombing, is equated with those whom he murdered. That cannot be the case. Those who set out to take innocent life and perished at their own hand are not innocent victims. They are not innocent victims in 2007, and they will not be innocent victims in 2107, in spite of any amount of revisionism.

Some people try to dress up the problems of the past 30 years by describing that time as a “conflict”, as if, to a greater or lesser extent, we were all guilty of murder. We were not all guilty; the people who pulled the trigger or perished by their own hand were guilty — they are not innocent victims.

We need a clear definition of “innocent victim”. It does not matter on this side of the House whether people

were Protestant, Catholic or any other religion; if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time and were murdered by a bomb or were shot dead, they were innocent victims and should be regarded as such.

If we get there, I am confident that there will be substantial desire for making progress and that there will be a foundation upon which we can build a future for the innocent victims. To do otherwise would compound the grief, anger and anguish that many victims’ relatives feel. They want to know that their relatives did not die in vain. They want to know that some progress can be made for all the community, given the sacrifice that their genuinely innocent relatives made.

2.15 pm

The report from the Interim Commissioner for Victims gives significant food for thought and a foundation upon which we can build. Unfortunately, we cannot stop people voting for those who murdered others in the past. That is their choice, but it will not change our opinion of what is an innocent victim. If certain people have to come to terms with their part in the past while they are dealing with the future, so be it. If their guilty conscience pricks them, so be it. They have to come to terms with their past. We must all move together into the future with a genuine regard for the innocent victims of the past.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

“; and further urges the establishment of a Victims’ and Survivors’ Forum.”

Despite the controversial manner in which Bertha McDougall was appointed, a process that not only did her an injustice but also called into question the public-appointment process, she has performed her duties creditably and with a great deal of sensitivity. Mrs McDougall was correct in her assessment of the Troubles when she said that:

“The real cost needs to be considered within the context of human suffering and the physical, emotional and psychological trauma inflicted on individuals and society as a whole.”

The previous two Members who spoke will acknowledge that the tears, trauma and psychological damage for those who survived remain the same regardless of how they became victims. All the families’ tears are the same.

Mrs McDougall referred to a forum for victims and survivors in the report. The SDLP has tabled the amendment because it strengthens the motion and gives a clear signal to victims and survivors that something will be done. I know that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister hope to announce the appointment of a Commissioner for Victims before the end of this week. I trust that they will also give a commitment to establishing a forum.

There was consensus among those who were consulted that a forum would be positively received by victims and survivors. Victims and survivors want a forum to address a range of practical issues; in the report, Mrs McDougall made specific recommendations for financial support and access to health services. A forum could also act as a platform to enable victims and survivors to come together and have a voice on aspects that they believe are not being dealt with. They would be able to tell politicians what their needs are, where the gaps are and how they could be filled. A forum should be independent, effective, inclusive, accountable and productive, and it should enable victims and survivors to share their experiences and co-ordinate good practice.

In the report, Mrs McDougall tells of the importance of storytelling and how she sees a forum enabling people to tell their story. I recently met with the family of a victim — a mother whose husband was murdered by the UVF because he was a Catholic and whose youngest daughter was two years old at the time. Looking at the financial contribution that society should make, a judge said that the child was too young to know the loss of a father. That was clearly wrong. In my constituency, there are fathers who lost sons and were so traumatised by the brutal nature of the murders that they had to give up work and lost their homes as a result.

The loss of a loved one therefore has a wider impact, as there are everyday issues to deal with. Those stories must be told, because we all need to hear them.

In her report, the Interim Commissioner adopted a needs-based approach, which deftly allowed her to avoid creating priorities or perceived alignments. That approach also allowed her to produce a report that can be welcomed by all Members. To oppose the report would be to oppose any further discussion of a fund for widows of members of the UDR and to oppose improvement in mental-health provision for all our children.

The report draws attention to transgenerational post-traumatic stress disorder, identification and diagnosis of which will be essential if the North is to succeed. We can create a stable peace, but the next generation must not be left with mental scarring that could prevent them from maintaining that peace. A co-ordinated and comprehensive response from Government, which should include the border regions, will be required to address that issue.

The Commissioner drew attention to that fact that victims' services tend to be centred around Belfast. I welcome her commitments to provide outreach services and to decentralise conflict transformation. That issue was not born in Belfast; neither will it rest there. Victims who live in rural areas have specific needs that must be addressed, not soaked up with promises of better transport provision.

Dealing with victims' needs can be viewed as also dealing with their societal needs. For example, the Government need to learn how to tackle mistrust among victims. In doing so, they would gain favour from everyone in the Chamber. Each side of the community feels that the other side is better treated on the issue of victims. Co-ordinated information and a cross-community approach should therefore help the rest of society. It would also create models of best practice that could be applied elsewhere.

The report also addressed the issue of the past, and the Interim Commissioner quite rightly noted the hurt and the anger that would exist if a line were to be drawn under the past. However, she also recognised the difficulty that exists in any truth recovery process. Victims should not be railroaded — it is important to be sensitive to, and cognisant of, their needs. There have been pleas from across the Chamber that not all victims are equal. However, the establishment of a forum for victims and survivors is a must. As an Assembly, we must show political leadership at an early stage and let the victims lead us to the right place from which to tackle this issue.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support amendment No 1 and oppose the motion.

This is a highly sensitive issue that should not be used as a political football. That is why it is important to recognise the issues faced by victims. Many victims feel that they have been forgotten, and that the issues that they have raised over the years have not come to the fore in any of the victims' reports that have been published. Many victims feel sidelined as a result.

It is therefore important not to rush into implementing Bertha McDougall's report. Amendment No 1 would allow the issue to be considered in the long term. As a new Victims' Commissioner has yet to be appointed, it would be premature to implement the Interim Commissioner's report, as that would tie the hands of her successor. It is important to consider the issue in the long term and to develop a new strategy for victims, rather than simply repeating what has already happened.

Many victims had serious reservations about Bertha McDougall's appointment. There were also concerns about the consultation on the report, and about the report itself and how it was finalised. Those important concerns should be addressed, because the report's conclusions clearly dealt with victims from one side of the community. The report also concentrated on aspects of security. It did not deal with issues faced by victims from all sides, and the different roles that victims can have. As I said, it would be premature to implement the report's recommendations now, without due consideration and without allowing the new Commissioner to address those issues.

The British Government must also acknowledge the role that they played in the Troubles —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Molloy: No. The Member has had an opportunity to say all that she wanted to say. I shall use my time to do the same.

We must start to acknowledge the issues involved, as well as the many thousands of victims of collusion and state violence who were not taken into account in the findings in the Interim Commissioner for Victims' report. Victims need equality of treatment. There should not be a hierarchy of victims, yet there appear to be many interpretations of the meaning of "victim".

We must examine the role that state violence played in the lives of so many families. Probably thousands of individuals and hundreds of families were affected by it. There was collusion, and people were set up by members of the security forces themselves. A structure was in place that directed and drove those members of the security forces. Even last week, we had a situation in which it was clear that there was a case to be answered, yet the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) decided not to prosecute anyone. Those people will now go free. There will be no justice for their victims, yet it is clear that collusion occurred between state forces and loyalist paramilitaries.

Not only did the security forces not stop killings from happening when they had prior knowledge of them, in one instance they even handed the gun back to loyalist paramilitaries to let another six people be murdered by it.

Victims have serious concerns about how they have been treated. Amendment No 1 deals with the present situation and looks to a new situation. If it is made, the First and Deputy First Ministers and the new Victims' Commissioner will be urged to deal with the victims issue, taking into account the Interim Commissioner for Victims' recommendations. We will have in place a new policy for dealing with victims and survivors that will meet their needs.

If amendment No 2 is made, however, we will be deciding in advance that victims should have a forum. Surely we should not be dictating to victims what structure any outlet for their views should take. Instead, let us put the matter out to consultation, talk to the victims, consider their needs and see how we can accommodate them to ensure that their needs are recognised in future. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Farry: It is important to stress that, up until now, the needs of victims, and the past generally, have been dealt with piecemeal and divisively. Judging by the debate so far, we are in danger of continuing along that path. We must try to deal with victims holistically and comprehensively, recognising the diverse range of

needs and the different levels of support and funding that are available. We must also consider the diverse demands of justice versus truth recovery. We need to introduce a policy that is capable of proceeding in a manner that promotes reconciliation and that is consistent with building a shared future, rather than one that will become a political football and perpetuate people's suffering.

Like others, I pay tribute to Bertha McDougall's work as Interim Commissioner for Victims. Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding her appointment, her work was comprehensive, and she had direct dealings with victims' groups from right across the political spectrum. Her report reflects what she heard from them. In many respects, the report is not simply Bertha McDougall's report but a report from the whole range of victims across Northern Ireland.

It is important that we do not get caught up in trying to define a victim. If we do, we are unlikely to get past stage one. One point that I wish to stress, however, is that a wide range of people can be considered to be victims, and victims can also be perpetrators. People who were killed while engaging in terrorism still left a family grieving over their passing. That said, that does not prevent society from saying, rightly, that what those people were engaged in was fundamentally wrong and that those who survived should have been amenable under the law for what they did. Those who passed away would undoubtedly have been answerable under the law had they survived. I do not think that those aspects are mutually exclusive.

2.30 pm

There has been talk of a hierarchy of victims. Both sides of the community are guilty of producing different hierarchies of victims: one seeks to deny victimhood to other sections of the community; the other elevates victims of state violence above all others. We must move away from those different interpretations.

The Interim Victims Commissioner's report is largely based on individual victims' needs. However, there are many wider issues that the report does not deal with in much detail. That said, the report is a valuable piece of work that fits into the broad spectrum of issues that we need to address, such as support for health, benefits, access to funding for individuals and groups, and the wider issue of the victims' forum. The report has reflected that there have been major deficiencies in those areas over the last number of years.

The report makes particular mention that people who suffered during the very early years of the Troubles have been badly neglected and let down. As time has progressed, we have become much more sophisticated in recognising the trauma and mental-health difficulties that people have faced. However, there is a large backlog of work that must be addressed. Many people have

been suffering in silence for many years, and it is time that we recognised what they have gone through, and address their needs.

There are also broader issues that we must consider, such as the day of reflection, how we acknowledge the past in general, addressing people's demands for justice, and how realistic that will be, given that limited resources are available.

Mr Storey: Will the Member indicate how he can believe in a day of reflection, when, in society and in this House, there is a party that still believes that what some people did during the Troubles was right? How can that circle be squared? Some people would not reflect on a basis of sorrow, but on the basis that it was unfortunate that some people happened to be caught up in what occurred?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for that intervention. I was referring to the Healing Through Remembering group's day of reflection, which is a private day of reflection that is designed to be inclusive. People participate in whatever manner they wish. Over time, perhaps we can move on. However, I fully recognise Mr Storey's point that people have certain feelings about those who were responsible for many things that happened during the Troubles.

Truth recovery is an important issue that needs to be considered. The forum proposed in the Interim Victims' Commissioner's report suggested the issue of support and funding as a starting point, with the possibility of moving on. We must also bear in mind the commission that was set up by the previous Secretary of State, headed by Robin Eames and Denis Bradley. The commission will seek to devise a more holistic approach to the past. Consideration will need to be given to how the work of that body will fit in with that of the Interim Victims' Commissioner and her successor, and whatever initiatives the Executive wish to take forward to support that. It must be a wide-ranging process.

Mr Spratt: I support the amendment in the name of my colleague Gregory Campbell, and reaffirm my support of the substance of the substantive motion.

This House has a duty to the victims of our past. With that in mind, I commend the work of the Interim Victims' Commissioner, Bertha McDougall. In producing her report, Mrs McDougall has been a fair and impartial advocate of the rights and needs of victims, and she should be applauded by all Members for her dedication and hard work. The report provides, for the first time, a real and meaningful support structure for victims and their families. That is to be welcomed.

A legacy of hurt and suffering as a result of the terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland was —and, indeed, is — a difficult issue to tackle. For many, it is probably a question of where to start. However, in Mrs McDougall's report, there is a positive framework and

recommendations that, I believe, can make a real and tangible difference to the lives of victims. The fact that the report is driven and moulded by the victim's voice makes it a suitable guideline to dealing with victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Who would know better than the victims themselves?

The three main areas of the report — funding, services, and the establishment of a forum — cover the broad concerns and desires of victims.

Long-term funding is vital, both for the individuals and the dedicated hard-working victims' groups who, despite struggling with financial sustainability, provide invaluable support to those who are in need. We must ensure that adequate resources are made available, and I welcome the proposals in the report of the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors for a flexible long-term funding strategy.

The report is right to state that current funding has proved inadequate to meet identified needs. It is dangerous for groups to rely too heavily on peace funding. Rather than money being directed to those ex-prisoners' associations that comprise many who created the victims, we should always give priority support to those who have suffered. Victims should be able to avail of assistance in applying for funds, and, indeed, when an application is made, it should be dealt with sensitively and with flexibility.

The Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors recommends that those who have been mentally scarred by our past have their needs provided for. Accredited counselling services are a must as we seek to give those who need help the standard of support that they deserve. An effective delivery model must be implemented and given the necessary financial resources to comprehensively deliver what is required. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister must at all times give the necessary support to ensure that there is delivery. I agree with the report's recommendation that, as a matter of urgency, a new fund be established to cater for the needs of victims. Financial gain can never compensate for physical loss or suffering, but we should provide for those who have lost so much.

For too long, the victim's voice has not been given the platform that it deserves. I welcome the recommendation to establish a forum, and I encourage OFMDFM to press ahead with implementing that. The DUP believes that victims' voices should be heard and that we should provide the means to make that possible.

Amendment No 1 does not detract from the report's recommendations. We seek to create an opportunity to add further provisions to ensure that victims get the best possible outcomes as the situation evolves. I support the call to implement the report of the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, but I firmly

believe that amendment No 1 gives us an opportunity to further widen the scope of provisions.

Victims may be victims of the past, but they must be cared for and provided for in the future. Victimhood never ends. We must make the hurt and pain easier to live with on a day-to-day basis. I support amendment No 1.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that a ruling was made several weeks ago that if Members speak for fewer than five minutes and take an intervention, they will be allowed an extra minute to speak. It is important that we continually say that; I know that Members are beginning to rush through their speeches as they watch the clock.

Ms J McCann: I oppose the motion, and I support amendment No 1. I also support my party colleague Mr Frankie Molloy.

The discussion on the victims and survivors of the conflict is very sensitive and emotive. We are speaking of the people who have lost their lives in this conflict, and we are speaking in particular about their relatives — the survivors who, every day of the week, have to live with the trauma of their bereavement. The circumstances of the death of the person concerned should mean little to us. Our priority and focus should be to ensure that all relatives are treated with respect and that every effort is made to support them all. I object — and I know that many relatives also object — to any notion of a hierarchy of victims, and the idea that some relatives are less deserving than others, simply because the circumstances surrounding the death of their loved one do not fit some people's biased political outlook.

Over the years, there have been many examples of relatives and relatives' organisations being insulted and abused by those speaking on behalf of political parties outside this Chamber. Families who are the victims of state violence and collusion feel that they have been demonised because they dare to seek the truth about how their loved ones died.

The combined actions of the British state and loyalist forces are responsible for 1,414 deaths. That figure represents a little over 39% of the total number of those listed as having been killed. Some of those deaths include young children who were killed by plastic bullets, yet the British Government have never acknowledged the hurt and pain that they were responsible for in their dealings with the relatives of those who were killed.

Accountability, truth and justice are paramount for all those who have been affected by state, and state-sponsored, violence. It is now firmly established in the public domain that the British Government armed loyalists and that British intelligence agencies directed them to kill people. That is what collusion was all about: it was part of the British Government's military offensive against nationalists. The British Government's use of loyalists gave cover to their armed forces to secretly

operate in an illegal arena in which the Crown forces could not be publicly seen or risk being caught. It is obvious to most reasonable people what the British Government were at, and the British Government must accept that fact.

The past decade has seen investigations into collusion by highly respected individuals motivated to uncover the truth surrounding state approved and directed murder campaigns. Lord Stephens conducted three investigations; Canadian judge Peter Cory investigated collusion, and Nuala O'Loan, the Police Ombudsman, produced a damning report that exposed the intimate, friendly and deadly relationship between RUC Special Branch and loyalists.

Recently, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) announced that no serving or retired members of the British Crown forces will be prosecuted for their involvement in the murder of seven people — one Protestant, six Catholics — including the human rights lawyer Pat Finucane. That decision and the manner in which the PPS informed the families concerned caused great offence and hurt. Those benefiting from the decision were involved in those murders and are in high office inside the British political and military establishment.

Families who have been directly affected by the policy of collusion are entitled to the truth about why a state agency that is supposed to uphold the law and protect citizens was instrumental in killing their loved ones. The dignity with which those families have conducted their campaign to uncover the truth, and the determination that they have shown when political representatives have attempted to trivialise that campaign by engaging in the politics of denial, has to be commended.

Nowhere in Bertha McDougall's report is there any mention of collusion or acknowledgement by the British state of its responsibility for and its role as a protagonist in the conflict. The British Government need to acknowledge and take on board the feelings and sensitivities of all victims, particularly the victims of collusion and state violence.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No, I will not give way. I am nearly finished.

If we are to move to a society that is based on equality and justice and where human rights are respected, then we should not fear the truth. The families of all victims of the conflict deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. There must never be a hierarchy of victims. When taking forward initiatives relating to victims and survivors, we should take our lead from the victims and their families and endeavour to make a positive contribution towards helping them come to terms with their circumstances.

Mr Storey: I support the amendment.

The DUP appreciates the work that was carried out by Bertha McDougall. The Government have indicated that the report by the Interim Victims' Commissioner is the platform on which victims' services should be built.

On 7 February 2007, in a Written Answer to a Question from Mr Dodds, which asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he made of the most recent report by the Interim Victims' Commissioner, David Cairns stated:

"I welcome Bertha McDougall's report as a detailed and thorough examination of the key issues affecting victims and survivors.

It provides a good platform for the incoming permanent victim's commissioner to work on."

2.45 pm

The 36 recommendations put forward by the Interim Commissioner for Victims provide comprehensive coverage of a wide range of needs that victims across Northern Ireland have and the problems that many of them face. Funding is one of the key areas covered by the recommendations in the report, which, rightly, highlights the importance of long-term funding for individuals and victims' groups. I want to place on record that I believe that the pittance given to victims of violence in Northern Ireland, to date, is a disgrace, considering that millions have been squandered on the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. That discrimination and inequality must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Victims' groups across Northern Ireland say that their work is hampered because they do not have the certainty of funding. Valuable time and effort is taken up trying to secure funding rather than delivering the service that victims require. The importance of funding to victims is highlighted by the fact that 24 of the 36 recommendations in the report relate to that particular issue.

The proposal that consideration be given to the establishment of a UDR fund, similar to the Northern Ireland Police Fund, is one that is warmly welcomed by many in this House. When the UDR was amalgamated with the Royal Irish Rangers to become the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR), it was the largest serving regiment in the Army and had been on active service longer than any regiment since the Napoleonic wars. The men and women who served in the UDR were on the front line and at the forefront of protecting the community, and they suffered heavily at the hands of terrorists.

Between 1 April 1970 and 30 June 1992, 197 UDR soldiers and officers were murdered. Sixty-one ex-soldiers were murdered after leaving the regiment, and a further five UDR soldiers who transferred to the RIR were killed after the merger with the Royal Irish Rangers on 1 July 1992.

The first of those to be killed was Mr Robert Irvine from my constituency of North Antrim. He was taken

out and shot in front of his family. The sad reality is that I have asked this question numerous times in this House, and there has been silence from the party that is sitting opposite: does it believe that the murder of people like Robert Irvine, who was on his way home from a hard day's work, was legitimate, right and justifiable? All those in their right mind know that that is not the case.

There are those in this House who claim that they were commanders of the Provos during the time that people were being murdered in this country. Today, a Sinn Féin Member said that those in high office in the British Establishment must be held accountable. I say that, equally, those who hold high office in this Assembly must be held accountable for what they have done in the past. Furthermore, there should be no ground given or taken.

More than 40,000 people have served in the ranks of the UDR, and there is no doubt that many former members of the regiment require the kind of help and service that is provided by the Northern Ireland Police Fund to former police officers. While the UDR Benevolent Fund does invaluable work —

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

Mr Storey: — it could be enhanced and developed further through the establishment of a UDR fund. I support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the motion. It has been unhelpful that there were those who saw the issue of victims as belonging to one or other community. That was a false division and led to many problems. However, discussing the issue together can be a step towards resolving those problems, although not all of today's debate has been constructive in that regard, and I may return to that point.

I begin by drawing attention to the need for urgency with regard to the full implementation of the report's recommendations.

One of the most important of the recommendations, to which another Member referred, is that which advocates a better replacement for the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund by the end of 2007. It is now July, and the restored Assembly approaches its first recess. The harmony with which the memorial fund is phased out and its replacement developed will impact on the success of what is to come. I urge the Executive to note that and to act without hesitation.

The ideas set out in Bertha McDougall's report are balanced and stand to benefit everyone. They do not depend on which model of truth recovery is adopted. Therefore, I urge the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister not to wait for the consultative group's report on the past. That would not be in anyone's interest, except perhaps anyone who fears the recovery of the

truth. It certainly would not be in the interests of victims, and they must come first.

A central message of the report revolves around the need for a victims and survivors' forum, one that the SDLP argues should be independent, effective and inclusive. There has been great progress on equality, as both communities come to realise that they gain from it. That should also be the case when it comes to acknowledging and addressing the needs of victims.

The report contains some horrifying statistics on the numbers of injured and bereaved. It makes clear that everyone is the product of the Troubles and that, in one sense, we all need help. However, the Assembly must start by helping the people in most need — those who feel the deepest hurt because of what the Assembly has done or has failed to do. I urge the House to support the motion and amendment No 2.

Mr McGlone: Members have listened intently to a discussion on the victims of violence. Does the Member agree that more Catholics were murdered by the Provisional IRA than by the combined activities of the British Crown forces? Rightly, the subject of collusion between British Crown forces and loyalist paramilitaries has been raised. However, Members must give similar consideration to the collusion between the senior ranks of those forces and the Provisional movement — collusion that unscrupulously sent IRA volunteers into an SAS gun ambush.

Mr O'Loan: Mr McGlone has made valid points that tie in with what I hope to say on the broader issue of dealing with the past.

I have concerns about amendment No 1's reference to a "new policy" and merely having "due regard to the recommendations" of the report rather than its implementation.

Anyone who reads a history of Ireland over the past 200 or 300 years can only be amazed by the degree to which it is repetitive. By simply changing the names, the history of 100 and 200 years ago can seem like the history of the recent past. People seemed to be caught in a vicious circle from which there was no escape — until recently. There is every chance that future historians will describe the events from 26 March to 8 May 2007 as having had truly historic import. However, the process is ongoing and is still to be tested.

Some say that, in the context of the Assembly and the dramatic events of the past few weeks, a line should now be drawn under the past. We dare not do that. The consultative group has been set up, but there are strong signals that some want its function to be to close the door on the past. To use Seamus Heaney's metaphor, the scaffolding should not be removed until the wall is securely built.

The wall is not yet securely built. Dealing with the past properly is vital for reconciliation in society. What happens in the Assembly and the business of dealing with the past are intimately connected. The Assembly must send out signals — and I hope that those will be united signals — as to how it wants that process to move forward. Those two elements are potentially mutually reinforcing and, therefore, also potentially mutually destructive.

Ultimately, the Assembly will not progress well or successfully without a sound process to deal with the past. Equally, those who work on dealing with the past will not succeed unless the Assembly works as a co-operative political environment. A direct expression of support for the victims, as stated in the motion and in amendment No 2, and the establishment of a broad process for dealing with the past combine to complete the entire picture.

In a way, we are all victims in this deeply hurt, fractured society; putting it together again will be a huge task. A huge responsibility rests with the Assembly and every Member who speaks in it.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I would like to start by giving my personal commitment and that of the Executive that dealing with the hurt, pain and anguish of the victims in our Province is to us an absolute priority.

We have listened for many years to the stories of those who have lost loved ones. I have seen at first hand the tears shed by mothers, spouses and children. A terrible legacy of loss and pain has been borne by our people.

I have a clear message to those victims who still suffer: you are not forgotten, nor will you ever be forgotten. I have discovered that tears have no political colour and no religious colour. They are all tears — tears from the anguish of broken hearts and everlasting partings.

Victims and survivors are part of our society; their problems are our problems; their issues are our issues; and their concerns are our concerns. How we deal with victims and survivors will not be an additional task for the Assembly and the Administration: it will be the central task to which we must apply ourselves, and it will test the resolve of all parts of this Government and the public sector to provide adequate help and support.

I have listened to the many contributions today. I treat with contempt the remarks by the Member from Enniskillen. They are not worthy of comment. The depth of feeling and sympathy that the Members of this House hold for victims should be clear to them. This is an important issue, and there is an enormous responsibility on us to get it right.

I assure the House that the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister is working to address that

difficult issue. We hope to appoint a new Victims Commissioner shortly. The Commissioner will ensure that the voices of victims are heard, and he, or she, will take forward the establishment of a victims' and survivors' forum to support the work. The Commissioner will also carry out a work programme. That programme will be agreed between myself and the Deputy First Minister to ensure that victims' and survivors' issues remain firmly on the agenda. The programme will be developed in consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. We look forward to working with the Committee in — I was going to say, collusion, if I would dare use that word — the interests of all our people.

There are three things that we need to keep in mind. The first is services and practical help for victims; the second is dealing with the legacy of the past; and the third is building a better future.

We want to make greater progress in providing services that will address the anguish that afflicts our people. We also want to make sure that we meet the basic practical needs of those who have suffered and those who care for those who suffer. Carers need our sympathy, our help and our support.

3.00 pm

In some cases, all people need is recognition that they are not forgotten, and that there is someone who understands what they have gone through. In other cases, practical help is needed, such as befriending services that can alleviate feelings of isolation, or information so that people know where to seek more specialised help. Those people must know that that help is theirs by right — they are entitled to it, and we, as citizens, have a duty to give them help that meets their needs.

The new strategy for victims will direct available resources to the areas of greatest need; it will emphasise the importance of ensuring that what is done by all service providers makes a real difference to the lives of victims. However, such work can be taken forward only on the basis of much better information on victims' needs.

Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that individuals, victims and survivors' groups can play their parts. Moreover, we must recognise the importance of those groups in the process. With that in mind, we will ensure that their efforts are appropriately directed and that they can plan ahead with confidence, knowing that finance will be made available to help them meet their aims. That means working with them in the context of a clear financial framework.

In dealing with the legacy of the past, Members will be aware of the recent initiative that was announced by the former Secretary of State Peter Hain. I do not wish to comment on that now, but I want to emphasise that this Assembly must be fully engaged in the consideration

of the past. It is our past; it is not Peter Hain's past, or the past of previous Secretaries of State — good, bad or indifferent. It is our past, and we must face up to it.

Mr D Bradley: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: No, I will not give way, for I have no time. I am sorry, but for a preacher to run out of time is the greatest sin in the world.

Our approach must also take account of the need to move towards a new and less divided future. Many victims may feel that recent political developments mean that their pain and hurt will be forgotten. Some may feel that they are being treated as obstacles to be pushed aside in some rush towards a future in which they will play no part. I wish to make it absolutely clear that victims have a very important part to play in building a better future, and that we have no intention of forgetting their suffering.

In conclusion, detailed proposals for a new strategy for victims and survivors will be brought forward early in the autumn. As I said, those proposals will cover services for victims, the legacy of the past, and the part that victims will play in building a better future. We wish to see those proposals considered in Committee as soon as that is practicable. Moreover, we wish to engage fully with the Committee in mapping the way ahead so that real improvements can be made in that important area.

I ask the Assembly to extend its understanding to us, and to the new Commissioner for Victims, when he or she is appointed, in facing the challenges ahead. I know that there are many differences of opinion: we are not so unrealistic as to expect universal support on everything.

I pay tribute to the considerable and hard work of the Interim Commissioner for Victims, Mrs Bertha McDougall. The work that she has completed will prove invaluable as a foundation for moving forward.

The Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles' report has been roundly welcomed by many involved in the victims sector, and I thank Mrs Bertha McDougall sincerely for all that she has achieved.

We cannot, and would not, insist that those who have suffered should do anything that goes against their deepest feelings. At the same time, with the new devolved Administration, there is a real opportunity to take new and bold approaches that would not have been possible under direct rule. We must seize this opportunity and ensure that we bring energy, commitment and the deepest sympathy to this job, and, please God, with His help, we shall succeed.

Mr Attwood: I thank all the Members who have contributed to this difficult and demanding topic. I cannot respond to every comment, so I will seek a broad thrust around some of what has been said.

When he opened the debate, Tom Elliott was right to say that there is deep anger and frustration among victims and survivors, and that addressing their issues has been allowed to drift and drift. That is why the SDLP tried to put a hard edge on the UUP motion by calling for the establishment of a forum for victims and survivors. I reassure Tom Elliott, and everyone else, that in making that call, the SDLP is not saying — as some might suggest — that people should be railroaded into a victims' forum, or that all victims have to gather together and face each other. That is not the point. In creating a victims' forum, victims and survivors will be allowed to define how they want to engage, or not, with each other.

I assure Tom Elliott that the SDLP has a number of formulations on how the forum for victims and survivors would work in order to give them the strength to be the alpha and omega in facing the difficult choices that they, the Assembly, and others will have to make over the next few years.

As usual, Sinn Féin gave a partial version of history and the truth of the past. That was best characterised by Jennifer McCann's contribution. She commented on the British having launched a military offensive against the nationalist people, a sentiment with which, to some degree, I concur, but she — and Francie Molloy — failed to refer to the IRA's paramilitary offensive against the Irish people over the past 30 or 40 years. That was a missed opportunity, and Sinn Féin must reflect on that.

I have some sympathy with Francie Molloy's comments about the scandalous decision that the Public Prosecution Service made last week on the Stevens inquiry. That was a denial of the truth and a suppression of the past, and it does nothing to heal our divisions. I say to Sinn Féin that when the British and the Public Prosecution Service decided on that course of action, they showed that they had learned well. They reintroduced the essence of autumn 2005 regarding the on-the-runs and state-killings proposals, which were welcomed and justified by Sinn Féin, even though they would have allowed any member of the police or Army who was guilty of a serious scheduled offence to not have to face one day in prison, see their victims in open court, or account in any proper way for the actions for which they were responsible.

Last week, the Public Prosecution Service buried the Stevens inquiry because the political system knew that others had previously justified such an approach to dealing with the past and with the truth.

At this late stage, for the reasons outlined by Dolores Kelly, the DUP should support the SDLP's amendment. It would send out an immediate and strong message to victims and survivors that they will be at the heart of anything that happens over the next year, either in the

Assembly or in the study group chaired by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley.

Jimmy Spratt said that he would encourage the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to press ahead with the recommendation for a forum and to provide the means to do so. From the First Minister's comments, I understand that his Office would take the proposal forward. Let us remove any doubts and create certainty. Let us send a message to victims and survivors today that, whatever else may happen, a victims' and survivors' forum — that Sinn Féin said should be established in the long term — will be established in anything but the long term.

The overarching reason for such a forum is that many people are trying to ensure that Denis Bradley and Archbishop Eames make proposals that do not deal with the past through a proper inquiry. For such people, that would be a bridge too far. By establishing a victims' and survivors' forum, the Assembly would send out the message that it does not believe that to be the case.

Mr Shannon: After reading the comprehensive report by Bertha McDougall, which several Members mentioned, one's heart could not fail to be troubled by the plight of those who still suffer the side effects of terrorist violence after many years. Indeed, for many of us those hurts are real and personal, in the Chamber and outside it.

We always remember those who have gone on before us and those families that were left to grieve or to take care of a loved one or those who were left with horrendous injuries of body or mind. There is no way to change what has been done. That is not to say that those people should be left to face their difficulties alone, every day. Mrs McDougall's report tries to address those issues. The DUP is happy to support the SDLP amendment; we feel that it complements ours.

It is important to know what is happening with victims and with the memorial fund: in the past three years, £11 million has been allocated to the memorial fund; and over the past nine years, £44 million has been allocated to victims. Fifty-five million pounds shows the financial commitment to what we are trying to achieve.

Mrs McDougall's report makes many valid points and recommendations, and I will highlight a few that I feel are pertinent and important. The physical effects of the Troubles are saddening as we see those who were maimed, blinded or otherwise affected. Those are only the physical side effects of the bombings, kidnappings and shootings; the emotional trauma and the psychological damage, although hidden from the naked eye, are no less devastating.

We must have compassion for those who are hurting, whether physically or emotionally. The mentality in

the Province has always been the stiff upper lip, grin and bear it, and do not think about it. Do not think about holding your best friend in your arms as he died; do not think about the children of those who have been murdered, standing by the graveside in bewilderment and grief; do not think about the bodies with dismembered limbs; do not think about searching frantically to find the person who is screaming under the rubble. Just do not think at all.

For too long that mentality has reigned, leaving a generation of men and women trapped in living nightmares. They are trying to move on but are held back by something that they cannot control. They are thrown into a world of pain and turmoil by flashbacks that are triggered by something that others would consider trivial — a car door being slammed, a loud shout, running feet or fireworks — yet devastating to them. They may be everyday occurrences, but they renew a bitter experience from the victim's past.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that it would be remiss of us, when speaking about victims and survivors, not to mention the disappeared and the fact that their families do not have a grave to visit? Every day, for them, is a living nightmare.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for her timely intervention. I agree, as we all do — at least, on one side of the Chamber — with her. The ripples affect the spouse, the family and the relatives, who only want to help but who are unsure of the victim's mood. They feel helpless as their loved one suffers.

The report shows the importance of a strategy for those suffering from emotional and mental torture to provide them with a dedicated, qualified staff who can offer help. However, as I said earlier, that needs substantial funding.

Simply talking to someone who understands can make a positive difference to a person's life, and ease the pain just a little. I urge the immediate implementation of a strategy to enable doctors to refer people to specialist professionals who deal with issues resulting from the Troubles. That would replace the sometimes hit-and-miss nature of past efforts.

3.15 pm

I was particularly encouraged by my colleague Mervyn Storey's comments on the UDR fund. It is good that such a fund is being promoted. Many of us who served in the UDR and whose friends and colleagues in the regiment were murdered will look forward to the establishment of that fund and the opportunities that it will create.

Many of us have lost friends or relatives. I well remember the Ballydugan four, who were murdered outside Downpatrick. They were friends of mine from the Newtownards and Ballywalter areas. Those memories

are important for all of us. My cousin Kenneth Smyth and his Roman Catholic colleague, both of whom were members of the UDR, were also murdered. As an SDLP Member said, the IRA killed more of its co-religionists than any other group did.

There are no easy solutions to victims' problems. The people who suffered will never be able to fully disengage from their experiences. Throwing money at the issue will not change things, but it certainly helps. Funding can ease the burden for bereaved families. It can provide essential, dedicated care to show that we will neither forget nor leave behind those victims. I support both amendments. I also hope that the recommendations of the Interim Commissioner's report will result in the immediate release of funding and implementation of the victims' strategy.

Mr Kennedy: I thank all Members who have contributed to this important debate. It has, at times, been a difficult discussion. In last week's debate on pension provision for RUC reservists, I said that there was unfinished business from the Troubles. Nowhere is that more true than in dealing with the victims of the conflict. Proper provision for victims must be made. We need a coherent, comprehensive and well-thought-out approach to address one of the great legacy issues of our time.

We realise that we can never fully compensate anyone for the loss of a loved one — even our best efforts will never be good enough. However, we are very fortunate to have at our disposal a clear road map in the form of the report produced under the expert supervision of Mrs Bertha McDougall, the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles. I join others in paying tribute to her for the highly professional, well-thought-out and well-researched report that she has produced. Mrs McDougall was uniquely qualified for the task and, in spite of much personal abuse and totally unwarranted and uncalled-for criticism, she produced a worthy report, which I commend.

I turn to the report's recommendations. I am grateful to victims' groups in my constituency for sharing their views with me on important issues such as better co-ordination between statutory agencies, especially those in the health sector, and the role of general practitioners and other medical professionals who give ongoing advice and assistance. Many people remain deeply scarred by their experiences, and we must urgently consider how best to address their problems.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: Unfortunately, I do not have enough time.

Many victims remain concerned about the overly bureaucratic nature of the services provided by statutory agencies. We must ensure that bureaucracy is replaced

by a lighter, kinder, more people-centred touch — indeed, a more human touch.

An obvious ongoing concern will be funding for groups and individuals. There is a clear argument for the establishment of a new fund to replace the Northern Ireland memorial fund.

A solution is also needed to the problem of long-term funding, which is currently provided largely under EU measures, and which cannot be relied on indefinitely.

One recommendation from Mrs McDougall's report is the creation of a new forum for victims. The Ulster Unionist Party will support the SDLP amendment, on the basis that the implementation of the McDougall recommendations would include the creation of a forum for victims. However, any such forum should be an independent body. Work for victims must be co-ordinated with the work of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to address specific problems associated with child victims of the Troubles.

The new fund should be created by the end of this year, and finance to underpin it should be available from the Executive. The fund should be victim centred and not simply a cross-community reconciliation mechanism. Now that the conflict is over, the victims of that conflict must be properly catered for. That must be done now, at the beginning of the new mandate so that victims and survivors can see that there is a place for them in the new scheme of things.

I shall cover some of the points that Members raised during the debate. My colleague Mr Elliott, in proposing the motion, reminded us of the great suffering of many victims. They feel quite forgotten, but they must not be forgotten. The Member for East Londonderry Mr Campbell said that we must never equate the perpetrators of atrocities with the victims of atrocities, and I strongly agree with that. Mrs Kelly paid tribute to the role of Bertha McDougall, but if nationalists and republicans had been a little less begrudging over her appointment as the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, it would be easier to accept the tributes that were made today.

It is clear that Mr Molloy — a Deputy Speaker — spoke on behalf of his party because his senior political colleague the Deputy First Minister remained seated and did not demur during Mr Molloy's contribution. Mr Molloy appeared to rule out any implementation of Bertha McDougall's report and talked instead about state violence and collusion. He gave his support for amendment No 1, tabled by members of the Democratic Unionist Party. I fail to understand how the DUP can sustain that position, but I look to that party for an early decision when the Question on the amendment is put.

Dr Farry broadly supported the McDougall recommendations and referred to dealing with the past. Mr Spratt was right to highlight the financial assistance that is required through EU funding. Jennifer McCann

returned to the Sinn-Féin-speak of there being no hierarchy of victims and blamed the British state and loyalist forces, but indicated that she would support the DUP amendment. All of that does not square.

I join Mr Storey in paying tribute to the security forces. I also endorse Declan O'Loan's comments that we need a full and early implementation of the Interim Commissioner's report. I thank the First Minister for his attendance and for his contribution. He indicated that victims' issues are a priority for the Administration and that they would not be forgotten. However, he also indicated that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would agree the work programme for the new Commissioner for Victims, when that appointment is made.

That throws up genuine concerns for the UUP, which will not be able to accept amendment No 1, as tabled by the DUP, because it would mean that control for all matters relating to victims, including the work of the new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles, would be vested in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and would result in direct day-to-day interference and guidance by people such as the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, and the junior Minister Gerry Kelly. Many victims, particularly those from the unionist community, will find it bizarre that such individuals could ever be given charge of victims' issues.

Mr Donaldson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry, I do not have time. Members of the DUP should reflect on the fact that, by signing up to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's dealing with victims' issues, many people will find it unacceptable and intolerable that people such as Martin McGuinness and Gerry Kelly should have any responsibility for those issues. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: I reject amendment No 1, and I ask the House to support the motion and the SDLP's amendment No 2.

Mr Speaker: I advise members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: *Ayes 56; Noes 27.*

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly,

Ms Lo, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr I McCrea and Mr Shannon

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Elliott and Mr McNarry

Question accordingly agreed to.

3.30 pm

Some Members: Shame. Shame.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Some Members: Absolute shame.

Mr McNarry: The shames have it.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to bring forward proposals, after the summer recess, for a new policy for victims and survivors, having due regard to the recommendations in the Interim Commissioner's report 'Support for Victims and Survivors: Addressing the Human Legacy'; and further urges the establishment of a Victims' and Survivors' Forum.

Rural Dwellings

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on rural dwellings. 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. Two amendments have been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposers of the amendments will each have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that members of the farming community can apply for retirement dwellings, and asks the Minister of the Environment to apply the same rationale to other countryside businesses, such as pubs and restaurants, allowing them to apply for the same occupancy tie relief, or replacement dwellings, and to have the same rights as other rural businesses.

This bes a gyely straight forrit question an' hit shudnae tak' ap owre mich tim' the day. Hit cums doon tae a matther o' common wit. Fairmin bes a bag pairt o' oor cultur an' heirskeip an' bes a baag pairt o' the economic balance i Norlin Airlan theday, bit nae matther aboot the historical ties hit hes, hoo monie faither tae sinn – an' noo tae dauchter, generations hae pleyed this role, hit bes, aa hit's hairt, a business. A gyely haird wrocht bit fulfillin' joab o' waark.

This is a simple issue, and it should not take up a lot of time, because I think that most Members are of a mind to support the motion as amended. It boils down to common sense. Farming is a rich part of our culture and heritage, and it is an essential part of the economic balance in Northern Ireland today. However, regardless of its historical ties or the role that different generations of a family have played through the passing of the farm from father to son — or to daughter — it is a business. It is a hard, but fulfilling, job.

Owing to the nature of the work — and unlike some other jobs — it is recognised that the full burden of farm work cannot be carried by people in their old age. However, the farm is all that some people know. Consequently, when the next generation begins to do the heavy work, where will the parents settle down? People have a right to privacy — even from their own children and parents. With that in mind, therefore, legislation is in place that allows the parents to build a dwelling on the farm site and live out their retirement in the place that they know. That enables the farm work to continue to be done by those who live on the farm, and it allows those who retire to have the opportunity to live around the farm. It makes perfect sense to all those involved, but the question must be asked: why should it apply only to farming? That is why I was prompted to table the motion. Why should those who are involved in the generational jobs of

machinery fixing, mechanics and engineering not be allowed the same rights?

Why have the Government restricted “rural employment” in PPS 14 to mean only farming, when many other facets of countryside life also contribute to rural communities? A farm cannot operate without the necessary machinery, so what happens when the machinery breaks? Must it be sent to the city — the centre of the governmental universe — or should it be sent to the farmer’s family, members of which may have been fixing tractors since they were first introduced? Are such people any less essential to country life because they do not till the soil? Certainly not: they are very much a part of the countryside.

What about the vet who needs a surgery? I am sure that many Members recall ‘All Creatures Great and Small’, a television drama of the past, which focused on a rural veterinary practice. Although it was humorous, it demonstrated the importance of skills and expertise in a rural community that make all the difference between successful farming and life-changing failure.

What happens when the vet’s hand is no longer so steady, and he recognises the need to pass on the mantle to someone else? How will his successor get planning permission for a new surgery? The answer to that is simple: he probably will not, if his predecessor is retiring. Planning restrictions will prohibit it. I do not have time to go into the precise reasons for that, as they are complex. The old vet would have to give up his home to ensure that the community did not lose out, and that is scarcely fair. Were he a farmer, he could build a retirement home on land that he owns close to the surgery, but he is not allowed to do so. He is faced with either giving up his home or letting down the people who need him.

There are also many residential and nursing homes in the countryside, some of which have been there for 20 or 30 years. As an elected representative, I have been involved in planning for 22 years and have had many opportunities to help residential homes, nursing homes and nurseries in the countryside. I have been able to help engineering businesses and those involved in the equine industry. Many have been able to get dwellings; but they will not be able to get a retirement dwelling. Their businesses are not seen as an integral part of countryside life, so they do not have the same opportunities that farmers have.

In the Ards Peninsula, there are 24 residential and nursing homes in Strangford alone. Several of those are in the countryside — the countryside being part of the attraction for such businesses. However, they cater not just for rural dweller but for those who have come from the towns. In nursing homes, unavoidable problems occur. To deal with those, one must live nearby. However, when owners are no longer capable of running the

homes, they must choose between leaving their own homes and staying to serve the community.

I have thus provided two examples of difficulties that can arise. Common sense indicates that where there is land on which a replacement dwelling could be built, such a building should receive planning permission as a matter of course and not as an exception to the rule. There are many rural businesses without which the rural community could not manage. When those businesses cease to operate, rural employment declines and the adverse effects are felt in all aspects of farming communities. People involved in essential businesses should not be forced to close or to give up their homes. Where no sons or daughters are able or willing to carry on the business, the owner must sell the business without being able to offer the possibility of a home on the land or nearby. That restriction thus ensures that the business will lose money or close down more easily.

To be successful, businesses, whether small or large, must keep their fingers on the pulse and be aware of everything that is going on. That may apply all the more in rural, isolated communities. Neglect of a small business will lead to its demise. To deny owners the right to live on the site or close by in order to give their businesses the proper attention is to sound a death knell for any such enterprise. To restrict access to the business will diminish its value.

3.45 pm

A similar case could be made for established restaurants, pubs and bed-and-breakfast accommodation. In their amendment, Mr Dallat and Mr P J Bradley refer to “established rural businesses”. Those are the businesses that I have in mind. They may have been running for 20, 25 or 30 years. They are countryside businesses that do not milk cows, rear sheep or feed chickens, yet they do provide a service to the countryside. Those are the businesses on which we must focus.

Another example is those who work in quarries. Where are the quarries? Of course, they are all in the countryside because that is where they should be — they cannot be located in towns. Many of those who work in engineering, forestries and preservation provide an essential countryside service, yet none of those workers is recognised and given due respect when it comes to the retirement requirement.

I could mention every aspect of country life and show how adversely the relocation or closure of businesses would deaden the thriving hub of country villages. However, the examples that I have already mentioned adequately show the highly restricted and unfair options available to business owners in the country. They deserve the right to build a business and enjoy their retirement in the home that they have made for themselves.

I do not advocate a business being opened one year, sold the next and a retirement dwelling then built in its place. That is not what the motion is about — it is about firmly established rural businesses that have served the community for many years and which are essential to the smooth running of country life.

It follows that the allowances and the rights of one business serving the community should be the same as the allowances and rights of another — hence the reference to equality.

Restaurants and pubs are dotted throughout the countryside, and many have been established for perhaps 25 or 30 years — indeed, their history can date back further. Many of those business owners have been established in the countryside for 20 years or more and have been involved in their community, contributed to country life, attended church and shopped in the country shops. Is it right that they should not be able to stay in the countryside, where their children have grown up, married and now live with their grandchildren? That is an equality issue, too.

I ask that it be acknowledged today that it is no longer an option to hold back those basic rights from members of the rural community. If they have been filling the breach in a locality for years, that is where they should be allowed to have a place — legally. We owe much to those who contribute to country life but who do not fit into the category that the Department has laid down.

Let us not continue with the double standards that have been all too evident to date. Those countryside businesses need attention. It is not right that people whose place of business is also their home should be expected to give up their home when they can no longer run their business. They should have the right to a retirement dwelling, and this unfair practice must stop today.

Mr Dallat: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “notes” and insert

“the right of eligible farmers to apply for retirement dwellings, and asks that the Minister for Regional Development (a) consults with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to review the present farm viability criteria; and (b) carries out an assessment of the extension of that eligibility to other established rural businesses.”

I tabled the amendment to place on record that it is the fundamental right of eligible farmers to apply for retirement dwellings rather than simply note that they can apply for retirement dwellings. In a changing environment, particularly in the farming industry, it is appropriate that consultation be carried out with all relevant Departments. The need for such consultation was never clearer than when the Department for Regional Development introduced the infamous Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14), with its draconian measures

that systematically and unilaterally imposed a ban on rural planning.

As the decline in farming continues and rural diversification becomes critical to the survival of the rural community, it is essential that the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development consult to review the present farm viability criteria to take account of the needs of small and part-time farmers, and that they carry out an assessment of the extension of those eligibility criteria to other established rural businesses.

Many farmers have attempted to supplement their farm incomes by diversifying into other small businesses. A variety of businesses would be eligible for grants from LEADER and other programmes if planning permission was granted. Government policy is contradictory; inappropriate planning enforcement is acting as a disincentive for farm diversification projects and completely fails to recognise the innovation and ingenuity of those rural communities that wish to protect and plan for their future and for the future of their communities.

In frustration, some have forfeited the right to grant aid and gone ahead with plans only to find that they face fines of up to £30,000 for breaches of planning regulations, which are totally out of touch with reality. In addition, many young rural dwellers who, in a previous life, could have expected to work in the agricultural industry now look to other means of income. Again, they are driven from the countryside or are living under the threat of prosecution for starting work without planning permission.

One of my constituents, a man with a young family, supplemented his farming income by making number plates for the motor trade. He received six visits, seven letters and countless telephone calls from the enforcement officer. Another farmer who repaired agricultural machinery suffered a similar fate, and another who set up a rural transport service was told that he must park his two buses in an industrial estate in Coleraine, 10 miles from his farm. Even a mobile chip van fell prey to overenthusiastic enforcement officers.

In the meantime, developers run amok building apartments in the seaside towns of Portrush and Portstewart, without raising as much as a squeak from the lads and lassies in County Hall's enforcement department.

The amendment that I am proposing will help to put in context the real dilemma that rural dwellers face. The blanket-ban approach of PPS 14 has been roundly criticised for failing to take account of the complexity of rural communities and rural livelihoods, as has been demonstrated by the examples that I mentioned.

The Department for Regional Development must work closely with local communities and key stakeholders in

developing a policy that better addresses the localised requirements and complexities of rural dwellers.

Furthermore, paragraph 4.24 of Planning Policy Statement 14, under the heading "Farm Viability", states:

"The Department for Agriculture and Rural Development will be consulted on all applications for dwellings on farms."

It is imperative that the Assembly should take note of that paragraph and demand that the same principle of cross-departmental working be applied to all aspects of the planning process that impact upon rural communities and not solely those involved in traditional farming.

The assessment of farm viability as specified in PPS 14 must be reviewed on a cross-departmental basis. The requirement that a farmer must prove the level of investment and commitment to the business, apparently on a long-term basis, and the use of the words "hobby farms" have caused outrage in agricultural and rural communities. They demonstrate the lack of understanding of the complexities of rural life and livelihoods and a lack of empathy with the deeply engrained attachment to the land and to rural areas felt by those who live and work there.

There has been a consistent failure to effectively implement rural proofing in Government policies that affect the rural community. The overzealous implementation of inappropriate criteria through the infamous PPS 14 demonstrates that, as does the lack of attention paid to the needs of rural dwellers who run non-agricultural businesses.

In a recent reply to me the Minister for Regional Development indicated that rural planning policy is a priority. While I welcome that, I stop short of agreeing with him that PPS 14 is a complex and topical issue. PPS 14 is one of the greatest injustices ever imposed on the rural community, and it must be addressed now rather than after more debate, as has been suggested.

Mr G Robinson: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Minister" and insert

"for Regional Development to consider applying the same rationale to other countryside businesses, when the need exists."

This subject has caused much ill will among those who live and work in the countryside. Although I have no wish to add further to the controversy, countryside businesses have a case for equality of treatment in line with that given to the farming community who also live and work in the countryside and deserve all the help and assistance that society can afford them.

There has been a trend in recent years for farmers to diversify into associated countryside ventures to aid their farming businesses and livelihoods. Therefore, a grey area exists in business terms. There is little point in encouraging farmers to diversify if they find it difficult to get planning approval for a dwelling for a family member who is vital to the running of the business.

Planning approval is necessarily hard to achieve in rural areas, but there is surely a case for those who work, reside and provide a service in the countryside to be treated equitably in respect of retirement dwellings, regardless of their business type or classification.

I ask Members to support amendment No 2.

4.00 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for Strangford for highlighting the inequality of a policy that gives benefits to one industry but not to another. However, I will support amendment No 1.

I recognise that farming is still at the heart of rural industry, but rural areas also have many other businesses, such as pubs, restaurants and light engineering. Indeed, those have arisen in part because of the decline of the farming industry and the need for diversification. Those businesses are all part of the social fabric and economy in rural areas.

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

It is acceptable that farming should be classed as a priority case given that farmers are regarded as custodians of the land, but weighting must also be given to other businesses and services that contribute to the economic viability of the rural environment. Like farmers, in the vast majority of cases the people who run those businesses have a kinship linkage. However, if such businesses are not permitted the same rights as the farming community, rural development will not be sustainable and communities will die out.

There are some 39,000 rural businesses. For example, 1,000 licensed premises make a contribution to the community and the economy. Should those people not be given the same consideration as that which is afforded to retiring farmers? The farm viability test under PPS 14 clearly states that:

"New houses on farms will not normally be justified on agricultural grounds, unless the existing farming business is both established and viable. In order to assess farm viability, it may be necessary for the farmer to provide information on the level of investment and commitment to the business."

However, the type of farming that takes place in rural counties such as Armagh, Down, Fermanagh and Tyrone is not reflected in the farm viability criteria. I could probably count on both hands the number of such farms that would be viable.

Mr Brolly: Let me give an example of a case that I dealt with involving two brothers. The younger man was the farmer so he was left the farm, but his older brother was left the house. Therefore, when the younger man planned to get married and applied for planning permission, even though the Planning Service had no trouble with what was a perfectly viable site, he ran up against this criterion of agricultural viability. He now

has a farm but no house. That exemplifies just how unfair the viability clause in PPS 14 is.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for that intervention.

Proposals for dwellings associated with hobby farms, or for enterprises in which the proposed occupant's main source of income is from another job, or from people who are semi-retired will generally fail because of the farm viability test. I feel that the term "hobby farm" is unfair and insulting to those farmers who have had to seek other forms of employment to supplement their incomes due to the decline in the farming industry. To me, the term "hobby farm" brings to mind a person who keeps a few chickens or ducks for their own personal enjoyment rather than someone who makes a contribution to the rural economy.

I would like to think that any comprehensive review of PPS 14 would include reconsideration of the viability criteria and extend rights to all rural businesses. I support amendment No 1. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Savage: I thank the mover of the motion for providing the opportunity to speak in this debate. At the outset, I declare an interest as both a farmer and a rural dweller.

It is important to note that for generations — and now more than ever, as they have to act in keeping with European Union law — farmers have been custodians of the countryside.

Farmers recognise the beauty of their area, wishing to maintain and enhance it. Agriculture is by far the biggest industry in Northern Ireland. Bearing that in mind, having given their lives to the farming industry, and having sown and reaped the harvest on the land, farmers deserve to use part of their land on which to enjoy a new home. They should be given the opportunity to build homes that are modest in size and appearance, but are a fitting reward for their hard work over the years.

The purchasing and demolishing of old, possibly derelict, farmhouses by developers, speculators and investors, who build mansions that are perhaps two or three times the size of the original dwellings, must be stopped. Such a dwelling is not only a blight on an area but an eyesore. That is simply not acceptable. Genuine people who want to provide homesteads for their families must be given the opportunity to do so. More must be done to protect the natural character of the countryside and to prevent architectural vandalism by developers.

Some of the most successful countryside businesses began in backyards in Northern Ireland. It is important that successful entrepreneurs and people who have a stake in the countryside have the opportunity to live beside the businesses that they have created and watch them grow and prosper.

Mr Ford: I had grave concerns when I first read the text of motion because it seemed that Mr Shannon was trying to find a way to say that he opposed PPS 14 without actually saying those words. Unless I misheard Mr Shannon, I did not hear him refer to PPS 14 at any stage during his speech. It would perhaps have been more honest had the Assembly been debating a motion rejecting PPS 14, instead of fiddling around and citing specific instances.

Mr Shannon's speech began by asking, "why farmers?". Yet, he answered his own question, because farmers are tied to the land. With the exception of farms, the vast majority of rural businesses are not tied to a piece of land. Although pubs, hotels, nursing homes and small engineering works have been mentioned in the debate, the vast majority of those are not tied to a specific location. As urban businesses do not need anyone living on the premises, neither do their rural equivalents.

If the issue of rural dwellings is to be realistically addressed, and if the specific exemptions for farmers who wish to build retirement dwellings are to be recognised, it is necessary to recognise why those specific exemptions exist. Farming is not the same as other industries, which can be as easily established in urban areas as in rural areas. Mr Shannon therefore answered his own question.

Service providers and a range of small businesses are almost the same in rural areas as they are in urban areas, yet there are no specific requirements that someone in an urban area must live in a certain place, or that someone can sell their home and build another in their back garden. The motion does not recognise the reality of the situation. It seeks instead — for whatever particular local exemptions exist for nursing homes along the Ards Peninsula — to redraft a set of policies, when we should actually consider the wider issue.

Therefore, although I have difficulties with much of it, Mr Dallat's amendment is an improvement on the original motion.

Several Members have made the point that, in the past, unfair and unrealistic tests have been produced regarding farm viability. I remember dealing with the interests of a neighbour whose son, as inevitably happens, wanted to build a house on land belonging to the farm. For some reason, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development said that 1·9 standard labour units did not constitute a requirement for two people to be involved in that business. Fortunately, on that occasion, the planning officer had more wit than the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

There are real issues, and succession planning for farms must be considered. These days, very few farms are viable purely for farming activity for one family, never mind for a potential second family — when the

son or daughter comes along. Therefore, farm viability must be considered. That should apply clearly as an incentive to encourage the transfer of a farm to the next generation. Ancillary activity may be required to make a farm viable. However, if a rigid definition is applied, the result will be a countryside that is denuded of farms. Recognising that, however, does not mean that we should assume that every rural business should get an exception.

Mr Dallat, at least, referred to PPS 14 and made clear what the debate is about. However, he did not explain why we are considering PPS 14 in a piecemeal way, rather than as a whole. His arguments for extending eligibility to other established rural businesses were little stronger than those from Mr Shannon. However, if Mr Dallat is seeking merely an assessment of that extension, maybe there should be an assessment of the potential extension of that eligibility to other businesses. Based on the evidence that has been produced in the Chamber today, there is little reason to extend that eligibility.

My colleagues and I will accept Mr Dallat's amendment, as it moves matters forward a little. However, that is not to suggest that there is any valid ground for breaching the fundamental principles of PPS 14. It seems to me that there is a danger that, if we do not accept that the basic principle of PPS 14 must stand, we will create bungalow blight by the back door. The issues that must be re-examined are related to rural society and farm viability — Members should be realistic about that.

In that sense, Mr Robinson's amendment suffers from the same problems as Mr Shannon's original motion. He may have got the Department right, but there is no improvement on the basic criteria.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support amendment No 1 and am in favour of the rights of our rural communities. As someone from a rural background, I can identify with a community where different services and businesses, such as garages, post offices, restaurants and pubs, are located in the countryside and spread across different townlands.

That is not uncommon. As my colleague Cathal Boylan outlined, there are some 39,000 rural businesses in the Six Counties. In England, businesses such as those are more commonly based in hamlets, villages and towns. That highlights what is wrong with PPS 14 — it is an English law, from an English perspective, brought in by an English Minister, and imposed on a rural Irish way of life. It is destroying rural communities, unnecessarily putting rural services at risk, and pushing house prices through the roof.

The only option available to people from rural communities is to buy houses that are being crammed into as small a space as is possible in our towns and villages. I know of at least one example in which a single

home is being knocked down to make way for eight new houses. People are being forced to live like sardines in a can in new housing developments — that is wrong, and planning policy must be changed to take proper account of available infrastructure and living space.

PPS 14 must be rescinded. When it is, measures must be taken to ensure that houses built in the country are not out of tune with the local environment. Sinn Féin is against bungalow blight, and fully supports the implementation of measures that deal effectively with sewerage provision for one-off housing developments. The environmental footprint of houses in the countryside should be as small as possible. To that end, geothermal heating systems and solar and wind energy should be used to the maximum effect.

Those who have a well-established connection with a rural community, who send their children to rural schools, and who avail themselves of rural services, must be given the opportunity to live in their own communities. Anyone with countryside businesses should be treated the same as farmers, as they all play an integral and vital part in our rural communities. Tacaíonn Sinn Féin leis an leasú.

4.15 pm

Mr McCallister: Like my colleague Mr Savage, I am a farmer. I want to protect and preserve our countryside, but I do not want it to become a vast track of uninhabited wasteland. I am equally concerned about rural depopulation and the provision of affordable homes for young people so that they can get onto the property ladder.

Owners of rural businesses should enjoy the same rights as farmers for replacement dwellings. They are part of the rural community that I would like to see grow and expand. No one wants to go back to the free-for-all of building bungalows everywhere. Perhaps Mr Ford is afraid that that is where we are going, but his fear is unfounded.

The Assembly should focus on regenerating rural communities that have been through an absolutely dreadful time over the past few years. Since we are discussing rural development and how best to develop farm diversification businesses, it is imperative that people are enabled to build in the countryside and stay in the rural community. I do not accept Mr Ford's argument that all rural businesses should move to town. Where would that leave us?

Mr Ford: For the Member's information, I did not suggest that all businesses move into the towns. I pointed out the contrast between what is assumed to be the rights of rural businesses compared to the rights of urban businesses.

Mr McCallister: I gathered from Mr Ford's speech that many businesses need not locate in the countryside, despite being managed by someone who lives in the

countryside and who farms part time. I also make the distinction between, as Mr Boylan pointed out, a “hobby” farmer and a part-time farmer; perhaps the Minister could ask his colleague in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to consider how those criteria work.

Even while diversifying their farming business, many people may be farming part time; they may have started up a light-engineering business on the farm or have opened a pub. In my constituency we are focusing on attracting tourists into south Down and the Mourne area. Many people in my constituency will consider diversifying into tea rooms, bed and breakfasts or other tourism enterprises; however, they may be farming as well. The UUP is happy to support the motion and amendment No 1.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Jim Shannon for the motion and the other Members for their amendments.

In response to the motion and the amendments, I am pleased to assure the Assembly that I consider a review of rural planning policy a priority. As the Department for Regional Development has responsibility for rural planning policy rather than the Department of the Environment, I, and not Arlene Foster, am responding to today's debate.

In my statement I will refer to some of the issues that were raised in the debate, but Members made points that struck me. In proposing the motion, Jim Shannon referred to issues that many Members are aware of: the difficulties that farming communities face, the evolving nature of life in a rural community, and the introduction of small businesses to help farmers to diversify and to sustain life on the farm. That is something of which we should all be conscious.

John Dallat, Cathal Boylan, David Ford and John McCallister spoke about farm diversification and farm viability criteria.

Some of the issue that John Dallat highlighted are matters for planning enforcement offices, which are on the Department of the Environment side rather than the planning policy side; however, I am sure that he will present those issues to the Minister of the Environment. He also referred to key stakeholders. People will be aware of the limitations of progress and movement in relation to PPS 14, and I intend to engage with those stakeholders on that issue when I present a paper to the Executive.

I do not agree with Mr Dallat's assertion that this is not a complex issue — David Ford also referred to that — because today's motion and amendments refer to only one section of what pertains under PPS 14. The idea of replacement dwellings or the ability to live next to farming businesses is only one section. Other matters

— the area plans, for example — cross-cut into the Department of the Environment.

Farm viability was mentioned, as was social housing in rural communities, the ability to expand villages to allow people to sustain rural communities, infill in existing ribbon developments and the number of houses that are permitted in them. There is a range of issues in relation to PPS 14, and they are complex. I am not seeking an end to this debate, and I am sure that Mr Dallat, as a member of the Committee for Regional Development, would be the first to complain if that Committee were not involved. Perhaps I could try to make changes by diktat, but I am sure that Members will wish to have an opportunity to debate the issue and have an input into it. That does not mean that this is a long-term, open-ended debate; however, it is a more complex issue than perhaps today's motions or amendments managed to address, even though they were a worthy contribution to that. The matter certainly requires further debate and an input from the many representatives who have a keen interest in it.

Some Members mentioned farm viability, and one of the first Ministers to speak to me on the issue was the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who would like to examine that as part of a review into PPS 14. Members expressed a desire to re-examine the strict farm viability criteria and the number of farms, particularly west of the Bann, that would meet those criteria.

David Ford highlighted the broader nature of this debate. Today's discussion concerned restrictions on building in the countryside, but there must be a much more wide-ranging debate on PPS 14. Daithí McKay's contribution touched on other planning issues, one of which will interest the Minister of the Environment, and that is the notion of cramming, whereby single dwellings are knocked down and replaced by a condensed housing development. Even under existing guidelines, the Department of the Environment has a negative view of that, as it takes away from the nature of the surrounding countryside or the amenity of the residential area that it is built in. I am sure that that will form part of future discussions on rural planning issues.

John McCallister reflected on the fact that there is no strong desire to revert to the previous policy, even with all the criticisms of PPS 14. There was a recognition that the previous policy did not serve the best interests of the countryside and its residents, or of the preservation of the nature of the countryside. The test for the Assembly and for myself as a Minister with responsibility for this issue — until such times as a judge gives his ruling at the end of the month — is to get a planning policy that fits the needs of the people and which strikes a balance between what went before and what currently exists.

The proposal that people whose businesses are located in the countryside should be able to obtain

permission for retirement dwellings in the same way as farmers raises some interesting challenges. To accept that proposal will challenge a long-standing policy position, but there has been an underlying shift in the structure and economics of rural society. It is right that we should take stock and make sound, sustainable policy decisions in the interests of the whole community.

When direct rule Ministers published the draft PPS 14 in March 2006 it attracted a storm of protest from many rural communities. They felt that their way of life was being threatened by policies that limited their opportunities to build new homes in the countryside where they had been brought up. An unprecedented 8,513 responses were received to the public consultation, with 95% opposed to draft PPS 14.

However, many people also supported the view that there could be no return to the old policy and felt that a revised and refreshed rural planning policy is needed. In January 2007, a subgroup of the Committee on the Programme for Government published its 'Report on Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning'. The subgroup agreed by cross-party consensus that draft PPS 14 should be fundamentally reviewed. I agree, and I intend to do exactly that. Later this week, I will put to the Executive proposals on how to take the process forward. Rural planning cuts across several Departments, and I want to build a common view across the Government and the Assembly on how to tackle the issue.

I intend to work with the Committee for Regional Development, and I want to hear its ideas and contributions so that those can properly contribute to a revised policy. It will not be an easy process, because rural planning is a contentious issue. People hold strong views both in support of, and against, draft PPS 14. However, through the process that I propose, a better rural planning policy can be developed, one that is based on the principles of sustainability and that strikes a better balance between the need to protect the countryside from unnecessary development and helping rural communities to flourish.

No one wants developers to spoil the countryside by building huge houses in every field; that would do little to address local needs. Sensitively designed homes for local people that integrate into, and complement, the environment are required. Draft PPS 14 is subject to a judicial review. The hearings have now taken place, and the judgement is expected later this month. Members will understand that I must take account of the outcome of that legal process before a final policy can be published.

The motion explains that members of the farming community can apply for retirement dwellings and asks that the same rationale be applied to other countryside

businesses; it cites pubs and restaurants as examples. The motion also asks for such people to be able:

"to apply for the same occupancy tie relief, or replacement dwellings, and to have the same rights as other rural businesses."

Farming is a vital part of the economy, and it is important that the planning policy supports the needs of farms and farmers. Currently, planning permission can be granted for a new dwelling or farm in cases where the proposed occupant works mainly on that farm. It is essential for him or her to live on the farm rather than at a distance, and applicants must pass a farm viability test.

During the consultation, many people expressed the view that the test was too stringent and that many smaller farmers were unable to satisfy its requirements. The Committee on the Programme for Government's report expressed concerns about the farm viability test and felt that the development of a new policy on farm dwellings was required. I concur with that, and I wish to explore the issue further.

Farming families have a key role in sustaining rural communities over many generations. When a farmer retires from agriculture or dies, planning permission may be granted for a house to be built on the farm to enable the retired farmer, or surviving partner, to continue to live on that land.

Established non-agricultural business enterprises that are located in the countryside sometimes require attached residential accommodation. The presence of such a business is not sufficient justification to grant permission for someone to live on the site. A site-specific need must clearly demonstrate that it is essential for one of the firm's employees to live on the site of their work, as opposed to there being a general desire to have a dwelling associated with the business. Planning permission granted under that policy is subject to a condition that restricts occupation of the dwelling to an employee of the firm in order to retain it for the use of the business.

I ask Members to consider the following points. For generations, the farming community has been the custodian of the countryside and, even as the nature of agriculture changes, its role has been carried forward. Although the current planning policy recognises its role and provides for essential homes for non-agricultural businesses, there are serious concerns about how the policies work in practice.

The main point made in the motion is that owners of countryside businesses, such as pubs and restaurants, should benefit from retirement dwellings in the same way as farmers. The requirement to meet the developing needs of other essential rural businesses has long been recognised. However, farmers are tied by necessity to the land that they farm, whereas that is not necessarily the case for other businesses. Many business activities

that are not tied to specific lands and that can be sited in different locations will, at times, change locations for sound business reasons.

The motion asks that countryside businesses be allowed to apply for replacement dwellings. There is no restriction on who can apply for a replacement dwelling. What matters, at present, is the nature and condition of the building to be replaced. Draft PPS 14 also received considerable attention during consultation on the Committee on the Programme for Government's report.

I wish to explore the Committee's suggestion of a more flexible and innovative approach to replacement dwellings. I have listened with interest to the debate today, and I have noted the points that have been made. I will find them all most useful as I continue to take forward the review towards the development of a final rural planning policy. Go raibh maith agat.

4.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr P J Bradley to make the winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank Mr Shannon for the motion and for agreeing previously that the SDLP's amendment has some merit.

I thank the Minister for his attendance also. Indeed, this is one of those debates in which we could have had the attendance of not only the Minister for Regional Development but the Minister for the Environment, who has now joined us, the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister for Social Development. We could have done with having every Minister here in the House because aspects of this issue are relevant to all of their portfolios.

Mr Shannon opened the debate by recognising the rights of farmers to retire in their own environment. He made a good case for people who want to retire in their own locality when he encompassed every business in the countryside. That is an area in which agreement is needed, because eligibility would be the key to realising such a scenario.

My colleague, John Dallat, rightly rounded on the draconian measures contained in PPS 14, and Mr George Robinson referred to farmers who have decided to diversify. There is merit in asking that their farming history and the forced situation in which they find themselves should be recognised.

Mr Boylan highlighted the wide and varied businesses that exist in rural areas across the North.

Mr Brolly gave an example of how retiring farmers who wish to make wills to hand their property on to their families could be prevented from doing so because of planning regulations. Indeed, the same thing happened in my constituency of South Down.

Mr Savage highlighted the need to protect the appearance of the countryside and said that local entrepreneurs should be encouraged. Mr Ford gave a slightly different version, and he drew Members' attention to how the current exceptions that allow farmers to build retirement homes could have an adverse effect on protecting the countryside and would, to use his words, introduce:

"bungalow blight by the back door".

Mr McKay took Members back to PPS 14 and talked about the need to start from the beginning once again. He highlighted what would be considered as acceptable in the countryside.

Almost everyone referred to PPS 14 at some stage.

Mr McCallister supported the line that farmers who had diversified could still be considered to be part of the countryside even though their farming activities may be on a part-time basis.

Finally, Members heard from the Minister for Regional Development who gave a fair insight, and said that he is in charge of the situation, and I accept that. However, if I am correct, when PPS 14 was introduced it was as though a Minister woke one morning in Birmingham and said there would be no more building in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the current Minister will have a sleepless night in Camlough and will decide that PPS 14 will be done away with.

I welcome the Minister's comments and hope that he will alter the situation sooner rather than later. His summary to the debate showed an understanding of the issues: it was encouraging, and hopefully the farming community and their representatives can now look forward to change taking place.

I thank all those who took part in the debate, and I look forward to Mr Shannon's winding-up speech. We seem to be working to a common agenda and, hopefully, rural people will leave here tonight a little happier.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I would like to clarify that Mr Bradley was giving the winding-up speech on amendment No 1. There was no further discussion on Mr George Robinson's amendment.

The question is that amendment No 1 as it stands on the Marshalled List be made. I apologise. I call Mr Shannon to give his winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Shannon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not going to let you away with that. *[Laughter.]*

I thank everyone for their contributions. The DUP is happy to accept the SDLP's amendment because we feel that that it is appropriate. As Mr Bradley said, there is not much difference in what we are trying to achieve.

I respect Mr Ford's comments. He is right. I did not mention PPS 14 in my introduction, because I know

that there is a court case ongoing and we will have to await the outcome.

Mr Dallat highlighted an issue that applies to all of us, not just for his constituency of East Londonderry but also for mine in Strangford and for our friend, Mr Bradley's, in South Down. Mr Dallat mentioned coach businesses and car, tractor and machinery repair businesses.

Clearly, there are valid grounds for reconsidering the matter. That is what Members have been saying with the fulsome views that have been put forward. I tried to outline some of the business involved, and I am sorry that I was not clear enough for Mr Ford, although I will try to make myself clear now. I am referring to businesses that have been established in the countryside, and not to ones that came in yesterday, stayed today and will be gone tomorrow. I am referring to businesses that have been here for 20 or 30 years, and businesses that I can, with my hand on my heart, say were established in the countryside. They do not necessarily fit into the agricultural or rural business category, but they are very much a part of the countryside and what Members are focusing on today.

My colleague George Robinson tried to highlight the farming enterprise and other countryside businesses in his amendment, and while the DUP is happy to take the SDLP's amendment, nonetheless, that cannot be looked at.

In moving the motion, I mentioned the word "inequality", and Mr Boylan mentioned it as well. There is inequality in the countryside. People with non-agricultural businesses find that they are treated unequally. Why should that be? I thank the Minister for his comments; he seems to have grasped the issue. PJ Bradley said that we woke up one morning and PPS 14 was here and that we will wake up another morning and it will be away. That would be a good morning, but I am not sure if we have the power to make that happen, but we will see how things go.

Mr Brolly introduced an example of a man who had land but no house, and I can point to such a case in my constituency. It is unbelievable. A farmer not far from where I live has 200 acres of land, but he cannot build a house on it. I have asked the Minister to look into that case, of course, and I will wait to see what happens. Obviously there is something wrong. Imagine having all that land and not being able to even sleep in the barn.

George Savage said that we are custodians of the land, and so we are. All farmers are custodians of the land and have a real love of the land, and it is important that that is taken on board. He also mentioned developers taking away any possible opportunities for development in the countryside, be that replacement dwellings or otherwise. The Minister said that he would refer to that in his response, and I look forward to hearing that as I feel strongly about it. There are opportunities for old

dwellings in the countryside to be refurbished or replaced by new dwellings. Would it not be more aesthetically acceptable to have a new dwelling rather than an old dwelling falling to rack and ruin? I think it would.

I thank Mr Ford for his comments and his views on the planning process. He said that there should be similar exceptions for businesses, and I agree. I am not sure that I agree with what constitutes a business in the countryside, although my feeling on the subject are quite clear. There are pubs and restaurants in the countryside, and I know of one that has been in business for 30 years, although the owner retired recently. He is established in the countryside: his family live there; his children went to school there; and his grandchildren go to school there. However, after 30 years of contributing to the countryside he has to move away now, and that is wrong.

I have light engineering businesses in my area, and Mr Dallat and Mr Boylan said that they had as well. I represent Strangford, but that does not mean that it is any less a countryside area than anywhere else in the Province. I mentioned some examples, but the same examples can be replicated all across the Province.

My colleague Ian Paisley Jnr, who is not in the Chamber, has an example of a rural transport business, which has been established in the countryside for over 35 years, and the owner of that business cannot build a dwelling either. Those are all important issues. A quarry owner cannot be expected to live in a town. I use examples because I am aware of them. I know of a builders' supplier in my area that has been established for 35 to 40 years, and clearly it is in the countryside. The owner of that business should have the same opportunities as everyone else.

Mr McKay said that PPS 14 had destroyed the rural countryside — and it certainly has. However, there may be one person in the Chamber who would disagree with that.

I think that the rest of the Members are aware that PPS 14 has destroyed the opportunities in the countryside. I would like to see it being done away with, and I look forward to that. Mr McKay also mentioned energy saving issues in relation to new builds — we will all concur on such issues.

John McCallister from South Down spoke of vast tracts of land. The countryside should not be a wilderness in which nobody lives — that would be madness. We want people to live in the countryside, such as the families who have been established there for some time and want to stay there. We want to them have opportunities there also; perhaps the regeneration that this motion could stimulate would allow that to continue.

Mr PJ Bradley mentioned farmers making a will and preparing for old age. There should be a nice, gentle handover and exchange from father to son — or indeed

from father to daughter. If I did not mention the latter, my colleague Mrs Foster would probably scold me.

There is a common theme in each and every comment from Members who have spoken. I thank the Minister for his comments. He is correct on one issue, and all of us who live in the countryside are aware of it; the rural community is changing. With that change, there must be a change in planning rules and regulations. We must ensure that the businesses that are established in the countryside can stay where they have provided jobs, economic prosperity, and where they provide a service for all of the countryside. Planning rules and regulations have to change with that.

I welcomed the review of PPS 14. I am sure that that review will encompass many of the ideas of individual Members, although it might not encompass all of my ideas. When people elected me, at the past election, one of the biggest issues for them was the removal of PPS 14. My constituency is a mainly rural one. My constituents have told me that we need to do away with PPS 14; we need change; we need to have opportunity back in our hands again; business must be able to continue and the countryside to thrive and do well. The message is that rural people contribute greatly, and they must have opportunity too.

I welcome everyone's contribution and I look forward to a fruitful conclusion to the debate. I do not know when that will be, although the Minister has said that it may happen in a month's time. If that is the case, I can look forward to a full debate on PPS 14 in September when the changes take place. I look forward to that.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the right of eligible farmers to apply for retirement dwellings, and asks that the Minister for Regional Development (a) consults with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to review the present farm viability criteria; and (b) carries out an assessment of the extension of that eligibility to other established rural businesses.

Motion made

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker*]

ADJOURNMENT

Lignite Mining in North Antrim

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Lignite mining in North Antrim is a very important issue for many people, as I am sure other Members who represent the area will agree. It also concerns other parts of the North, as air pollution from a lignite mine in Ballymoney would affect all those living in Belfast, in the east, to those living in Donegal, in the west. It would also affect parts of Scotland.

A similar lignite mine to that proposed in North Antrim created a black triangle in parts of Germany and the Czech Republic. In those areas, sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxides from lignite-fuelled power stations have damaged the environment and were linked to the destruction of vegetation and to genetic mutation in livestock. That was in addition to the dust and water pollution that was experienced locally.

The World Wildlife Fund's local representative, Malachy Campbell, has pointed out that carbon dioxide is thought to be the main reason for climate change. Given that lignite releases more carbon dioxide than coal, oil or gas — [*Interruption.*]

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to raise a point of order. Is there a quorum in the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We do not have a quorum. However, as a vote will not be taken, the debate may continue.

Mr McKay: The environmental effect would be disastrous. When I saw the effects of a flash flood in Cushendall this morning and spoke to families who have been devastated by the damage that it caused, I was provided with a glimpse of how badly affected communities would be if climate change were not tackled adequately.

4.45 pm

The Australian company Auiron Energy, which is now known as Felix Resources, applied to build a mine outside Ballymoney but withdrew its application three years ago. However, the company remains adamant that its project is still alive. I am concerned that, even since that application was withdrawn, the relevant planning legislation makes it easier and more attractive for companies to apply to operate lignite mines here.

The Just Say No To Lignite Campaign group has done some superb work, which was demonstrated by the fact that more than 35,000 letters of objection to

the lignite mine application were submitted. I want to be the first to welcome representatives of that group to the Assembly today.

No one should be under any illusion that the issue has been resolved. Lignite designation still has a negative effect on communities. The development of new mines is controlled by the Planning Service, which is now in the hands of local politicians. Although it is not possible to enforce an outright ban on the development of new lignite mines, it is possible to draft development plans and policies in ways that will ensure the refusal of planning permission for such proposals. The Planning Service's draft northern area plan 2016 includes two designations that affect lignite mining: first, areas of constraint on mineral development; and, secondly, lignite resource areas. Under the areas of constraint on mineral development designation, the Planning Service is unlikely to grant planning permission for the development of new mines. Under the lignite resource area designation, proposals for new lignite mines are likely to be given planning permission, subject to certain environmental and transportation considerations being met.

The easiest way in which to place restrictions on the development of new lignite mines will be to expand the areas of constraint on mineral development designation and reduce the size of lignite resource areas. There is absolutely no reason why those courses of action cannot be taken. North Antrim is awash with tourist attractions and locations marked as areas of outstanding natural beauty. The region has massive potential for the development of clean and renewable energy sources such as wind power. Who in their right mind would even contemplate the building of a pollutant lignite mine the size of 4,000 football pitches in the middle of such an area?

Planning restrictions are still in effect in North Antrim as a result of the presence of lignite. Planning permission will not be granted for any new homes in the designated lignite resource area. That will have a devastating effect on the surrounding communities. Indeed, by way of the draft northern area plan, the Planning Service has more than trebled the size of the protected lignite zone. Areas such as Dunaghy and part of Stranocum are now trapped in that zone, which means that new homes and new businesses cannot be built there.

The situation is outrageous, but the problem can be resolved if the Ministers responsible show firm and unyielding leadership. All four main parties are opposed to lignite mining in North Antrim. Therefore, now that those parties are all represented in the Executive, there can be no excuse for not expanding the area of constraint on mineral development designation in Ballymoney; for not reducing the size of the lignite resource area, thereby removing the planning stranglehold that grips rural communities; for not ensuring that lignite no

longer forms an integral part of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry's energy strategy; and for not increasing the focus on renewable energy.

More than 35,000 people cannot be wrong. I am glad that the Minister of the Environment is in the Chamber for the debate. Sinn Féin wants a firm commitment from the Ministers responsible that they will act on this issue, acknowledge that lignite is the dirtiest and most polluting fuel in Europe, and, once and for all, close the door on lignite in North Antrim. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I welcome the opportunity to place on public record once again our opposition to the extraction of lignite in the most idyllic part of this country, and, in particular, in my constituency of North Antrim. The issue of lignite mining has been a running sore in the area since lignite was first discovered in the early 1980s. Two common themes have emerged since then; namely, lignite mining is not wanted, and, if it were to be start, it would devastate the area.

Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that the areas that have been mentioned were not the first in which lignite was discovered. I am glad that the Minister of the Environment is in the Chamber this evening. I am pleased that my colleague from South Antrim, Mr Clarke, and the leader of the Alliance Party, Mr Ford, are also in the Chamber. The Minister will know that a site at Ardboe in County Tyrone had previously been considered as suitable for the extraction of lignite.

It seems as though Ballymoney has been specifically chosen as the area in which lignite mining is to be pursued. I want the Minister to explain why Crumlin and Ardboe have suddenly gone off the radar and why north Antrim has been specifically targeted as a site for lignite mining. In the past, serious issues have been raised about why the contractors did not return to the site in Ardboe. I will say no more on that issue unless it is absolutely necessary during the debate.

Lignite mining would have a profound, long-term and irreversible destructive effect in north Antrim. It can create deserted villages and lunar landscapes. In the past, I have also described it as "environmental rape", and that is putting it mildly. However, it is also open to serious question whether the suggested benefits that that kind of devastation would create would even transpire. It is well attested that the process by which electricity is created by that kind of lignite mining plant suffers from high pollution and is vulnerable to the price fluctuations of the market. Furthermore, many jobs that would be created by such an operation would be short term and would not be filled by people from the local area, but, quite possibly, from overseas. All that would occur in what is now rich agricultural land, but by then that land would have witnessed the closure of some 80 farms.

It would also be the single greatest cause of a massive drop in tourism along the Causeway Coast. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment need not bother with its proposed interpretative centre at the Causeway if lignite mining were to go ahead. The establishment of lignite mining would mean kissing goodbye to the Giant's Causeway and to the Causeway Coast's status as an area of outstanding natural beauty and a place that attracts visitors. The gateway to the Causeway would be devastated. The Member has correctly referred to the fact that the proposal covers the equivalent of around 4,500 football pitches. Members need to understand that it is not a proposal for a small-time development but a large extraction and removal of the countryside in north Antrim.

The economic arguments are only one collective reason why Northern Ireland cannot afford lignite mining. The ecological and environmental reasons include: the impact on the rural landscape, with many thousands of acres being used in the operation; the many miles of overhead power cables; the annihilation of the farming community; the destruction of habitats; a massive increase in road traffic; and the diversion and possible pollution of rivers such as the hugely important River Bush. The River Bush has already suffered as a result of many problems through the years, and it could do without more problems.

Further problems for the area would be land pollution from the various toxins that would result from the project, the substance of houses and the need to rehouse many people, and increased illness and higher mortality rates in the area as a result of air pollution.

Those are the potential repercussions of lignite mining in north Antrim. However, the threat of lignite mining haunts the area today; it is not merely a cloud in the future. It is a reality with which people have to live; it is a long shadow that is currently being cast over the economy, the housing market, the environment, the ecology and the population of my constituency.

It is widely believed that house and land prices have been depressed because of the threat that hangs over the area. Effects have been felt from the villages of Stranocum and Dunaghy to the town of Ballymoney.

The Minister of the Environment should initiate an investigation into the impact to date of the threat of lignite mining in my constituency. She may say that such an investigation would involve the consideration of matters such as house and land prices, economic investment and employment, which are beyond the remit of her Department. If that is the case, a joint investigation is required and, as we are all advocates of joined-up government, I am sure that such an example of good practice will not be difficult to achieve. This issue is important enough to warrant such an approach, which I request be taken.

Reassurance and certainty are additional requirements. The Minister is in a position to state unambiguously that, as far as her Department is concerned, the nightmare for North Antrim is off the table and will not be coming back.

There is another issue that Members must be clear about when they discuss the lignite issue. The extraction of lignite for use in power generation is not the only matter for concern. Given that lignite is a fossil fuel, which would incur huge carbon taxes and all the problems that have been highlighted, and having read the statistics, no Member could conclude that the extraction of lignite could be financially viable for any company.

I highlighted this issue when I wrote to Malcolm Wicks who, at that time, was the Minister of State for Energy at the Department of Trade and Industry. The matter was clarified in the Planning Service's draft northern area plan 2016, which states, under the headings "Designation COU 15" and "Lignite Resource Area":

"The lignite deposit in Ballymoney Borough is recognised as an important and valuable mineral resource, part of which has been proven to be of internationally recognised standards. The Plan safeguards this resource, to ensure the reserves remain exploitable if and when the need arises."

The important part of that quotation is:

"exploitable if and when the need arises."

Regrettably, that has caused grave concern. The problem is compounded later in the same document. Under the headings "Policy MIN 1" and "Protection of the Lignite Resource", the document states:

"The lignite reserves in Northern Ireland are included within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's overall long term Energy Strategy Framework for Northern Ireland."

Therefore, current draft Government policies not only identify a valuable resource, but allow for its exploitation if and when the need arises. That is the heart of the problem. Who is to say whether or not some genius, if such a person still exists, might discover a purpose other than power generation for which lignite could be used? Lignite would again be considered a valuable resource — something that could be exploited. Members must have reassurances that the cloud that has hung over my constituency for such a long time will be raised, once and for all.

5.00 pm

In conclusion, I wish to pay tribute to the Collective Objectors to Lignite Development group, which has accomplished an immense task. It is easy for politicians to use other people's material, rather than do the work and gather the material themselves. The coalition launched the Just Say No to Lignite Mining campaign and has single-handedly ensured that the issue has not gone under the radar. That group has ensured that the issue has been kept to the forefront of the public's attention.

Public opinion has been mentioned during the debate. Sometimes, one must be careful about public opinion; it is not always a good benchmark from which to plan public policy. Unfortunately, certain legislation has come to the fore after it has been approved by public opinion. However, the 37,500 signatories of the petition against lignite mining, which include people not only from Northern Ireland, but from the Republic, Scotland and other areas, have made it abundantly clear that the issue must be dealt with.

This matter must be dealt with in a way that gives the landowners and the population of the affected area — as well as the rest of Northern Ireland — the assurance that although lignite has been identified as a valuable resource, it will be kept in the ground and will not be exploited, so that the people of North Antrim can be left alone in peace to enjoy the tranquillity of the greatest constituency in Northern Ireland. Without bias, I want to say that that constituency also has the greatest MP, who happens to be the First Minister of Northern Ireland.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: There is little left for anyone to say after that excellent speech, and the one that came before it. I am glad that I have the opportunity to speak on this subject, because those of us who have had the privilege to work with the coalition and the Just Say No to Lignite campaign can say that, undoubtedly, our meeting with them was one of the most moving at which one could be present. We heard people speak from the heart about their difficulties, fears and concerns.

When one considers the situation, and the fact that lignite is at the bottom of the list of energy production sources, one begins to realise that this issue should not have come to the fore at all, particularly in the present climate of global warming. From that perspective, the Assembly must take on board the fact that lignite mining would create a huge potential for pollution in this country.

When figures and research were produced, we discovered that dust from such a mine would travel for at least 90 miles, and that most of Northern Ireland, particularly the most northerly part, would be covered in that dust. Furthermore, that dust would spread as far as Scotland. The reason that people in Scotland got behind the campaign against lignite mining in North Antrim is that they too would be affected by it.

Those of us who travelled to the continent to see lignite mines and their surrounding areas realised immediately that if that was what would become of North Antrim, action must be taken to stop it. Not only did we see the rape of the countryside, but the awful desolation of those areas, which were without people, schools, churches, community centres, and so forth. Owing to lignite mining, there was nothing there except a wilderness.

Moreover, huge mounds of the top strip of mined earth were left just as they were. When one considers the amount of lignite in North Antrim and the depth at which it lies, one wonders where those mountains of topsoil and top strip will be put. It is claimed that they will be put back into the hole that is left in the earth. However, if many thousands of tons of lignite are mined, that which is stripped from the top layer of soil will not fill the huge, gaping hole that remains.

To facilitate that mining, rivers would need to be diverted and watercourses changed in the North Antrim countryside, which is one of the most beautiful parts of Northern Ireland.

On top of that there is the disturbance to farms, churches and all the people who live in the area as well as the planning permission restrictions. Are Members to agree to allow an entire generation or two to be taken away from that countryside? I am glad that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is in the House, as we have the opportunity to take a serious look at this from the point of view of the human population and do something about it. Planning restrictions should be eased. Young people cannot get new houses built in those areas. The old population is growing older, and young people are forced to go elsewhere.

I do not want to repeat arguments that have been made so cogently already, but when Members look at this, they will see that there are wider implications than that of the rape of the countryside. There are also environmental and human implications, and the area affected is not only countryside. The lignite goes under the town of Ballymoney, so if the mine extends fully, most of the town of Ballymoney will disappear.

This presents a challenge to Members: shall we take on board what needs to be done? There are environmental reasons; there is pollution from dust; there are planning restrictions; and there are the residents and changes in the rate of population growth. But we should also consider this: we cannot let this happen because it would destroy not only the area around Ballymoney, but the country as a whole. I support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: As the Member who moved the motion said, this matter is of extreme importance. I run the risk of being repetitive as Members are singing off the same hymn sheet; nevertheless, it is important that the following facts and opinions are on record.

The background is that Ballymoney Power Ltd (BPL), which is part of an Australian Company called Felix Resources Ltd, submitted a planning application for a lignite opencast mine and power station. At the time, over 37,500 people opposed the proposal, which is the largest number of objections raised against any planning application submitted in Northern Ireland. All the political parties were opposed to the development.

A coalition against the proposal was set up. That coalition, which I support, actively embarked on a campaign to stop the proposals from going forward, and it is still working on that cause. My predecessor, Sean Farren, strongly supported the campaign group, whom he introduced to Members of the Dáil, because pollution from the mine could reach Donegal and other areas of the South as well as some parts of Scotland, if it were allowed to go ahead. Despite the fact that the planning application did not prosper, there is concern that the company may still be working on it in the background.

I am concerned that, as detailed in Policy MIN 1, 'Protection of the Lignite Resource', in the draft northern area plan, the Planning Service has now chosen to protect the resource for future exploitation. That new plan also proposes to extend the lignite area.

In April 2003, some of those objecting to the mine travelled to Aachen in Germany to see the effect of opencast lignite mining. What they saw was described as:

"scenes of deserted villages and lunar landscapes".

I have a number of facts and figures about the mine and power station that I will relate as if the mine were going to go ahead. I hope that exactly the opposite will happen, but the intentions of the developers are as follows: the mine will cover an area of 5,500 acres — the equivalent of over 4,000 football pitches — and extend nearly 8 km from the bypass around the town of the Ballymoney. BPL says that the proposals will provide employment and a major economic boost to the area. However, the Ballymoney area has a relatively low unemployment rate and has more potential for tourism development, which would not be detrimental to the environment or people's lives.

Mining may last for 30 years or more, affecting not only our generation, but those that follow. A large part of the upper Ballymoney River will be removed, and that will interfere with the River Bann into which it flows and, consequently, affect the groundwater. Furthermore, two of the streams that feed into the River Bush will be covered by the heap of removed soil.

It is likely that the depth of the mine will cause the water table to be lowered, which will cause the meadows, springs, wells and streams to dry up in the summer. That, in turn will destroy the habitats of curlew, lapwing, snipe, moorhen and buzzard. Is it worth taking a risk and damaging the ecosystems of the River Bush and lower River Bann to such an extent that eels and salmon become extinct?

The mine will operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It could be at least 500 feet deep, and the chimney of the power station will be over 500 feet high. Water tables in the area will be affected if the proposed mine and power station go ahead. Approximately 80 farms and 167 houses will disappear, and churches and schools will also be affected. Some seven townlands will

disappear entirely. Communities and family connections that have been built over generations will be broken up and never replaced. Pylons and overhead power lines will disfigure the countryside.

The power generation plant will devour six million tonnes of materials a year, and property values in Ballymoney and the surrounding area will be drastically affected. There will be a loss of archaeological sites, artefacts, raths and souterrains that date back to early Christian times. Homes, roads, lanes, tracks and hedges will end up in the soil heap, and a slice of human history will vanish with them.

In the area known as the "Black Triangle", which covers parts of Germany and the Czech Republic, sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxides from the lignite fuel power stations have damaged the environment and have been linked to the destruction of vegetation and to the genetic mutation of livestock. Such damage would also occur in North Antrim, in addition to dust and water pollution.

Our damp weather will make the pollution worse, because it localises sulphur dioxide, which produces acid rain. Lignite produces more carbon dioxide than burning coal, gas or oil, and it is one of the worst fuels for climate change. A huge list of dangerous chemicals will be produced, all of which will cause serious health problems such as poisoning, cancer and bronchitis. Human, animal and plant health will deteriorate.

Mining lignite will create a big hole in the ground, which will be filled with by-products from the furnace and covered with the soil from the soil heap. There is also a fear that the hole could become a landfill site. Either option will put the quality of the groundwater at great risk. It has been said that the area will be landscaped and replanted following the replacement of the soil. However, that land will not compare with land that has taken thousands of years to develop. Who will dismantle the pylons after the project is complete or restore the site if the company becomes insolvent?

Some basic questions must also be asked about lignite mining. Will it be good for tourism on the Causeway coast? The importance of the Causeway coast to our tourist industry cannot be overstated, and one must wonder about the wisdom of building a mine in that area — as Rev Robert Coulter mentioned. Who will bear the consequences of a badly damaged environment?

We should aim to generate more electricity from wind and solar power, as substantial capacity for sustainable renewable energy already exists across Northern Ireland. The proposals concerning the mine and power station directly contradict Assembly policies. Sustainable economic development is required. The UK Government's White Paper on energy has set targets for the use of renewable energy at 10% by 2010 and 20% by 2020, with a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions of

60% by 2050. Lignite mining, on the contrary, is a non-renewable and highly inefficient source.

It is essential that the Assembly stop any plans for a lignite mine and power station in North Antrim — or anywhere in Northern Ireland. We must protect the North Antrim environment for the future and say no to lignite mining in North Antrim or anywhere else.

5.15 pm

Mr Ford: With permission, I will intrude a mile and a half south of the North Antrim boundary.

Mr T Clarke: You are welcome.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Trevor.

I thank Daithí McKay for securing this Adjournment debate. I assure him that the lignite mine proposal is not only opposed by the four parties represented in the Executive, but by the five groups in the Assembly.

During a previous election campaign, I had the opportunity to meet representatives from the Just Say No to Lignite campaign, and I congratulate them on their extremely effective lobbying, the evidence that they produced and the key way in which they addressed the issue. It is therefore a matter of considerable disappointment that the threat of the mine is still floating around. Although the proposal was said to have been abandoned three years ago, it has not yet been seen off. I am concerned that the proposal is protected under the guise of a planning policy to protect a resource when, in fact, it is preserving a threat.

The exploitation of lignite was considered in the 1980s in the Crumlin area — a short distance south from where the present threat exists — and I remember the extent of the planning blight that existed at that time, over what was a smaller area than the area from Ballymoney to Stranocum, which is currently threatened.

As the intruder from the next-door constituency, I do not intend to repeat all the arguments that have been made. Mervyn Storey highlighted the economic problems — in particular the threat to tourism — that would arise if lignite mining were developed. If Members refer to the statistics that show how much tourism contributes to the Northern Ireland economy, they will see that it is a key area that must be considered.

Rev Coulter discussed the general problems that arise from the use of fossil fuels, including global warming and various other environmental difficulties. Acid rain would be a problem, not just in the immediate locality, but potentially over a wide area from Donegal to Ayrshire. The environmental damage that would be caused in the immediate area by the digging of a huge opencast mine can scarcely be exaggerated.

A proposal for harvesting alternative energy on the north coast attracted suggestions that to put wind turbines out at sea would destroy the landscape forever. Those who

used such language need to get real. There is absolutely no doubt that a 500-foot-deep hole, infringing on seven townlands, would destroy that landscape forever.

To consider the problem seriously, we must — as Declan O’Loan did in the last part of his contribution — identify appropriate alternative environmentally friendly energy resources in Northern Ireland. It is not enough to say simply that there should be no lignite mine in North Antrim. We must consider the contribution that we can make. The wind in Northern Ireland is a better resource than is available in virtually any other part of Europe. We should use it to play our part in reducing the threat of global warming.

I hope that the Minister will address the threat of lignite mining to the north Antrim countryside and give us an assurance that, in the execution of her wider environmental responsibilities, she will co-operate with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that we develop relevant environmentally friendly energy sources, rather than persist with lignite mining.

Mr Paisley Jnr: At the commencement of the debate, I did not think that I would be in a position to welcome my North Antrim colleague Declan O’Loan into the Ulster Says No campaign. I am delighted by the progress that we are making in our constituency and the conversions that have taken place. *[Laughter.]*

On a serious note, I really do —

Mr O’Loan: I am equally delighted that my fellow Member for North Antrim has joined partnership Government with such full enthusiasm.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Touché.

It is most welcome that Members from other constituencies have joined with those from North Antrim. That is quite right: this matter is not simply about North Antrim. It is not simply about preserving Stranocum or Ballymoney; rather, it pertains to the whole of the Province, the whole of the island and to parts of the western coast of Wales. Members should recognise that fact.

A few years ago, I was a member of a loyalist flute band. Members may wonder what that has to do with lignite mining. However, the band’s bass drum bore on its side the words “Eternal Vigilance”. Members should adopt that motto with regard to the lignite mine. We should be eternally vigilant.

As my colleague Mervyn Storey mentioned, the Collective Objectors to Lignite Development group has been a driving force in raising vigilance and opposition to the lignite-mining scheme. Its Just Say No campaign organised tens of thousands of letters opposing the scheme. Indeed, as the Member opposite stated, the group sent over 37,000 letters, which demonstrates the campaign’s vigilance.

We cannot, however, let the matter rest there. At present, the Planning Service does not have a planning application for a lignite mine in North Antrim. That may not always be the case. Vigilance is required to ensure that, if ever a company tries to put such a scheme on the agenda again, the community will resist it.

Every Member has rightly spoken of the filthy stink that an opencast mine brings to a community. It is one of the filthiest ways to mine. As Members have said, it causes all sorts of pollution, and it impacts adversely on the environment, the community and, potentially, people's lifestyles and health. That being recognised, we must ensure that that opposition can continue should any future planning applications be made.

Members have rightly identified the Causeway coast as one of the most scenic parts of Northern Ireland, and they highlighted the fact that opening a mine on the route to that area would cause devastation. It would be madness for representatives of that area, or of any part of Northern Ireland, to pursue such a planning application.

Earlier today, the House debated rural planning. Many members mentioned how difficult it is to get a single planning application passed now because of Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14). It would be totally ironic if an application of this magnitude was given the green light when single farmyard applications are not. That irony is not lost on anyone.

I understand that the Minister must consider on merit all applications that come before the Department. No one wishes to constrain the Minister, and I am aware that the Department has legal obligations. However, I hope that she will be able to assure the House, and my constituents, that if a planning application similar to the last one emerges, all the environmental implications of the proposal will be fully assessed. If that happens, we will have the opportunity to be vigilant, to identify issues and to ensure that opposition continues in such a constructive, focused and compelling manner that the Minister will be left with only one option — to remain in the "Ulster Says No" lobbies with other Members of this House.

Some Members also mentioned the mineral extraction licence. I understand that a moratorium on those licences is in place until October 2007. The expiration of that moratorium may signal to someone an opportunity to seek a prospector's licence to start drilling again or to carry out experimental drilling. That is an important time frame. In October, the vigilance really must begin again. It is at that point that a fresh application could be lodged, with the potential to progress. It is right to flag up our opposition now, not just as constituency representatives, but as representatives of Northern Ireland as a whole. We must recognise that that is the wrong type of planning application for Northern Ireland at this time. It would be wrong for our environment,

our housing, our farmers, and our community. Northern Ireland does not need that sort of mining. I hope that our eternal vigilance will be in force, and that that vigilance will be effective.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I congratulate the Member who secured this adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue. I can sense the depth of feeling that has been expressed by the Members in the Chamber today. The Department is very much aware of the concerns of the residents of Ballymoney and Stranocum about the application for opencast mining in the area and the proposal contained in the draft northern area plan to protect an area of lignite reserves there.

The Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland contains the current regional planning policy for mineral extraction. That requires that where there is an occurrence of proven reserves of minerals that are of particular value to the economy, those reserves are protected from surface development that would prejudice their future development. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has identified lignite as a mineral of particular value to the economy, and the reserves in Northern Ireland form an integral part of its energy strategy.

I will give a little bit of background on that matter. Exploration work in the 1980s and the 1990s discovered extensive lignite resources, which is known as brown coal, in three areas of Northern Ireland, which my friend Mervyn Storey mentioned — Ballymoney and Crumlin in County Antrim, and Ardboe in East Tyrone. However, the lignite deposits around Ballymoney are the largest and are the only deposits economically accessible by opencast mining. That answers one of the questions about why the debate has concentrated on Ballymoney as opposed to East Tyrone or Crumlin.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is responsible for issuing and regulating prospecting and extraction licences for all non-precious minerals, including lignite.

My Department's planning policy recognises that, although the exploitation of valuable minerals, such as lignite, may have environmental effects, there should not be a presumption against their exploitation, but rather each proposal should be treated on its merits. I welcome the comments of my colleague from North Antrim the Junior Minister in relation to my legal obligations. I acknowledge that I must look at each application for lignite mining on its merits, and I will have more to say on that matter.

Members will no doubt appreciate the necessity to protect minerals that are recognised as valuable to the economy of Northern Ireland; however, that protection — and Members must take this on board — does not

necessarily mean that a future application will be approved.

What a great day it is for the Assembly when this debate has enjoined Declan O'Loan and Ian Paisley Jnr in a campaign of eternal vigilance. I look forward to that campaign continuing. In response to their comments on environmental matters, I assure them that all the environmental implications of any proposal will be fully assessed before a decision is reached. I have no difficulty in giving them that undertaking.

Many Members referred to the application that was received by the Planning Service in 2003, which was accompanied by an environmental statement, to develop an opencast lignite mine and power station outside Ballymoney in County Antrim.

The Department declared that the application was a major planning application under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Mr Storey said that he needed to place on the public record the opposition to that application. No one is in any doubt about the depth of that opposition, given that it provoked the largest response to any application, and the Department received 36,000 objections. However, I must take issue with him over his controversial remark about North Antrim being the most beautiful part of the country, because we all know that that is Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but that is a different matter.

The application, as I said, attracted approximately 36,000 objections, and it was withdrawn in June 2004. The Department is unaware of any applications planned for the near future.

I mentioned the differences between Ballymoney and the other two areas of lignite reserves. Ballymoney is seen as the only site that is big enough to make extraction economically viable. Ardboe and Crumlin definitely have lignite reserves, but they are considerably smaller than that at Ballymoney.

Government policy on lignite reflects the fact that extensive reserves are of strategic significance to Northern Ireland. Considerable data has been compiled as a result of exploration activity over the past decades. That led the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to suspend, in October 2004, the issue of any further prospecting licences for lignite in the Ballymoney area. That is still the position. However, my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Investment, will review that position in September 2007.

In the event of a company's lodging an application for a mining licence or lease, it is necessary for that company to obtain planning and other statutory approvals before DETI will consider the mining licence application. As I said, no applications for prospecting or mining licences for lignite in the Ballymoney area have been received during the period of the moratorium.

There is a moratorium on lignite prospecting licences in Northern Ireland until October 2007. No prospecting licence applications for lignite have been received in the Ballymoney area during the moratorium. An application for a mining licence will be considered by DETI only in the event of planning permission being granted by the Department of the Environment.

5.30 pm

Although I cannot, as some Members have asked, give an outright promise on this issue because of the legal obligations on my office, it should be of some comfort to Members to know that any application to mine and to create a power station in or around Ballymoney would need no fewer than five different consents. The applicants would need: a mining licence from DETI; consent for a power station from that Department; planning permission from DOE; and pollution consents from my Department. They would also need to satisfy the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) that the development would not destroy local habitats.

Dr Coulter asked why lignite is still seen as a viable commodity. I am told that DETI's policy is to encourage diversity both in fuel use for power generation and in the sources of fuel supply. That is the rationale for protecting the current resource.

Mr Storey mentioned the strategic energy framework. I can inform him that the framework is currently undergoing an internal DETI review, which I understand is due for completion in the autumn.

The north-east area plan 2002, which was adopted by my Department in August 1990, provided protection for an area of lignite reserves between Ballymoney and Stranocum. The new draft northern area plan 2016, which was published on 11 May 2005, proposes to protect a larger area between Ballymoney and Stranocum. The lignite resource area that is now proposed differs from that of the 2002 plan because it is based on a more accurate identification of the lignite reserves, which in turn is based on survey work that consultants carried out for DETI. I know that colleagues have raised several objections to the growth of the area that is designated under the draft area plan, but that increase is based on scientific research that has been carried out for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

However, colleagues will be aware that they now have an opportunity to object to the proposed policies to protect the lignite reserves. To date, more than 4,000 objections have been received. Declan O'Loan mentioned the wording of the draft area plan, and I am sure that we can consider that.

In all probability, the lignite policy and the designation components of the draft plan will be debated at the public inquiry into that plan. Obviously, I cannot prejudge the outcome of that inquiry. However, if an

application for lignite mining were received, it would need to be accompanied by an environmental statement identifying the environmental impacts of the proposal and indicating what measures would be taken to mitigate those.

Mr Ford widened the debate by asking about the Crumlin lignite reserves, but I have already dealt with that matter. He also said that he hoped that my ministerial colleague in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I were considering more renewable energy sources. As he will know, I informed the House on 25 June that we will introduce permitted development rights for renewable energy developments for domestic properties. We are considering widening those to include commercial properties. Therefore, the answer to his question on whether we are considering ways of increasing renewable energy is most certainly yes. I have already discussed that with my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I am sure that that discussion will not have been the last.

Finally, Dr Coulter mentioned the planning restrictions that will be imposed under the draft area plans as a result of the designation of lignite reserves. As he will know, such designations are not the only difficulty with planning applications in the countryside because — I know that this will be of little comfort to him — under PPS 14 there would be very limited development in that area. However, that perhaps does not answer his question about the reason that planning restrictions will be imposed by the lignite resource area designation.

Mr Storey: The Minister mentioned her commitment to renewables, which we welcome. The DUP has always said that the use of lignite cannot be opposed unless there is an alternative. Currently, there are a number of applications in the planning system that have identified renewables, and these are taking a considerable time to process. I refer in particular to two outstanding applications in North Antrim, one of which regards the Long Mountain in Dunloy. Will the Minister ensure that those applications are given priority so that the issue is resolved? This would show people that politicians are serious about the issue of alternative energy sources.

Mrs Foster: All wind farm applications now go to the strategic planning department in Planning Service headquarters. That is a good move because it means that applications for wind farms, which by their nature are specialist, will be dealt with by a specialist team. However, if the Member wishes to raise specific issues with me, I am happy for him to do so and I will look into them.

Any application received regarding opencast mining would have an environmental statement, which would be publicised in the normal manner. The public would then have an opportunity to make representations. Given

the comments made by Members, I have no doubt that there will be quite a number of comments, if and when such an application was advertised. I have already mentioned the procedures for major applications under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. It is likely, if not certain, that any application made for opencast mining would be dealt with under article 31. Article 31 allows the Department to ask the Planning Appeals Commission to hold a local public inquiry, if necessary, to consider representations and help reach a decision on a major application. The final decision on article 31 applications is made by the current Minister, who takes in all of the considerations including the environmental impact.

It is good to have a debate of this nature, and it is a good one to finish on. The debate is essentially an environmental one. I take great heart from that: environmental issues are now coming to the fore in the country, which is right given the prominence of issues such as climate change and sourcing better forms of renewable energy.

As this is the last debate before the summer, I hope it is clear that the Executive are listening to the concerns of Members. Members will understand that I cannot give a definitive no on the issue, although they should be aware that I will take great cognisance of any citation of an environmental impact in an application that relates to lignite mining.

Adjourned at 5.38 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 September 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I welcome all Members back after the summer break. Before we proceed, I wish to say a few words about the future conduct and procedures of the House. I have already advised the Business Committee that I intend to work with the Deputy Speakers to maintain a more orderly approach to business.

For example, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is to make a statement to the House this morning. It is important that Members be in the Chamber at the start of a ministerial statement. Members who come in immediately after a ministerial statement has been delivered will not be called to ask a question on it.

Another matter caused concern before the recess. The Business Committee spends some time deliberating on the public and private business of the House.

Timings for business in the House are not set in stone, but are indicative, and it is really up to Members — especially party Whips — to keep a watching brief on business. On at least two occasions before the recess, I witnessed that Members who had their names down to move motions were not in the Chamber to do so, because they were not following the speed of business.

If a Member who has tabled a motion is not in the Chamber to move that motion, it will automatically fall. Moreover, if Members who are down either to lead or to speak in debates are not present when it comes to their turn, we will move on to whoever is next on the list to speak.

It is important that we protect the reputation of the House and the business before it. The past couple of months have been a learning curve for some Members; however, the period of latitude is now over, and it is up to every Member to know his or her place in, and the procedures of, the House.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Speaker: We shall move on to the next item of business. I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in England.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Today is world suicide prevention day, and, before I make my statement, I wish to acknowledge those families who have been bereaved by suicide, which is a huge problem for us.

With the Speaker's permission, I shall make a statement on the recent foot-and-mouth disease outbreak and my response to it.

We have a high dependency on external markets, with sales to destinations outside the North valued at approximately £1.6 billion per annum, which represents 64% of total agrifood-processing-sector sales. The outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain, therefore, had the potential to have a significant adverse impact on that trade and on the local economy.

It was vital to stop the disease from entering the North; however, I found that my main efforts were focused on protecting our trading status with the rest of Ireland, and with Britain, other EU member states and non-EU countries. That entailed getting the EU to recognise the North's unique position by citing that we are divided from Britain by a significant body of water, which provides a natural barrier to the spread of animal disease. For disease-control purposes, therefore, the North is treated as a separate entity from Britain.

I am particularly grateful to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for their support: to the First Minister for personally intervening with the Japanese ambassador in London, after Japan had refused to accept our product; and to the Deputy First Minister, who held important discussions with the US authorities.

Furthermore, I thank my Executive colleagues and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development for their engagement and support at the time. I wish, too, to pay tribute to our many stakeholders, to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and to Invest NI for their very important and valuable contributions.

Finally, I thank the staff of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for the sustained commitment and support that they showed me during that very difficult time. Officials were mobilised here

at Stormont, on farms and at our ports to advise me on policy, to trace animals and to put in place the necessary biosecurity measures. I recognise and appreciate the long hours that they put into their work, and the personal impact that the incident must have had on them and their families, particularly during a holiday period.

At the beginning of last month, immediately after a case of foot-and-mouth disease was confirmed in Surrey, England on Friday 3 August, I took action to close the North's ports to susceptible species, such as sheep, pigs, cattle and goats, from Britain. Moreover, I placed an immediate ban on the import from Britain of fresh meat from susceptible animals and of unpasteurised milk.

Biosecurity measures were introduced at the ports and airports that were compatible with those in the South, and I recognise particularly the efforts of the portal staff who mobilised at short notice to put those measures in place, and who continued to work around the clock. I saw evidence of their efforts for myself when I visited the ports during the outbreak.

Over that first weekend of the outbreak, my officials traced and examined all consignments of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs that had been imported from Britain, or that had transited Britain since the beginning of July. In total, 128 consignments were traced and examined. All examinations were negative, which gave me assurance that no disease had spread to the North and that no animals had originated from the infected zones in England.

Based on our own veterinary risk assessment, I decided to apply no constraints to the operation of abattoirs, shows, markets and assembly centres here, and that access to the countryside would continue to be unrestricted. I did ask that the public, and those in rural areas in particular, introduce appropriate biosecurity measures, and farmers were asked to be vigilant. In my press releases and in interviews with the press, my message was that, as far as I was concerned, it was "business as usual". I felt that my actions and those of my officials were swift, decisive and proportionate to the foot-and-mouth disease threat that we faced.

Thankfully, the situation in Britain is now largely resolved. There were only two confirmed cases with no spread of disease beyond that, as demonstrated by the extensive surveillance undertaken. The Chief Veterinary Officer of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) stated on Friday that foot-and-mouth disease had been eradicated from Britain. From noon on Saturday 8 September 2007, DEFRA lifted the surveillance zone in Surrey, and all restrictions throughout Britain were lifted at the same time. The Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) will meet in Brussels tomorrow to decide whether to revoke all remaining

measures that have been applied to Britain during the past month.

Returning to the issue of trade, exports of animals and animal products have continued uninterrupted to other member states of the EU. There have been some minor problems, but, in the bigger scale of things, not too many, and we have been taking action to rectify those as soon as we are made aware of them.

The safeguard measure brought in by the European Commission (EC) on 6 August 2007 gave our trade legitimacy in EU law, and this was confirmed with the revised decision voted through by SCoFCAH on 8 August and again by an amending EC decision on 23 August. Those decisions have allowed trade to continue to other member states.

Although we were able to secure EU recognition of the North as a separate region from Britain, the EU decision on foot-and-mouth disease still required DARD to provide official certificates to accompany consignments for EU trade. As industry representatives had concerns that our certificates could not readily be distinguished from those issued in Britain, some extra polish was added to make them easily distinguishable. This new format was developed in consultation with the industry, and with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The EC accepted that revised approach.

The official status of the certificate was emphasised by the inclusion of the DARD logo. A bold statement was added at the start of the certificate indicating that we are free from foot-and-mouth disease, and the exporting country was clearly identified as this region in large, bold print. Those changes were warmly welcomed by the exporters of meat and dairy products.

As a result of those actions, our agrifood industry has been able to continue to trade with their customers in Europe. In meetings with the industry, it has said that there are now relatively few problems in the EU and that the official certification is working well. I have also made two pieces of subordinate legislation to enable us to enforce the terms of the EU decisions if required. My objective has been to maintain current trade flows to other EU member states by providing adequate assurance with minimal bureaucracy.

At my request, the UK Chief Veterinary Officer wrote to her counterparts in all EU member states, providing assurance that we are free from foot-and-mouth disease and that animals and animal products originating from here pose no risk of foot-and-mouth disease. My officials followed this up with calls to the offices of the Chief Veterinary Officers of six key member states — France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands — to check that the position was understood. Calls to other countries will be made if specific issues arise.

To assist the dairy industry, the DARD Chief Veterinary Officer also provided a letter for each of the local exporters of dairy products, which they could pass on to customers who were nervous about accepting our dairy products. The provision of those letters was welcomed and has helped exporters to iron out problems. The DARD Internet site has also been constantly updated.

With regard to controls on imports from Britain, we retained our prohibition on the importation of live animals until 25 August and on fresh meat produced after 15 July until 24 August.

12.15 pm

Those imports were permitted again after a unanimous decision that was taken at SCoFCAH on 23 August to lift — subject to veterinary certification — the ban on exporting live animals and fresh meat from outside the surveillance zone in Surrey to the rest of the EU. In line with that relaxation on trade to the rest of the EU, we permitted imports to the North from Britain to resume under conditions that were similar to those that were applied to exports to other member states, including the Twenty-six Counties.

The movement of live, susceptible animals from here to Britain has also been gradually eased over the past few weeks: first, for slaughter animals; and secondly, for breeding and production animals. As a precaution, and until the surveillance zone was lifted on 8 September, we continued to operate additional biosecurity controls at the ports.

We have also tried to minimise damage to our trade with countries that are outside the EU. We have spared no effort to help the beef and dairy industries in circumstances in which any trading difficulties have arisen; that work continues. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) had banned imports of certain animal product from here that were deemed “prohibited” — fresh product that was derived from foot-and-mouth-disease-susceptible animals — and that arrived at its ports from anywhere in the UK on or after 3 August. My officials and I made immediate contact with the US Administration directly and also through DEFRA and the European Commission. We put a strong case to the Administration that we should be treated separately from Britain.

The Deputy First Minister and I also raised our difficulties with senior US politicians in an attempt to get them to expedite matters. I was therefore delighted to hear on 17 August from Robert Curtis, the head of the European division in USDA, that the trading restrictions that had been imposed on product from the North had been lifted totally with immediate effect. Since then, five containers of pork products have been exported to the United States.

We have also taken steps to address the ban on the importation of animal product from the UK, which

Japan announced on 4 August. That decision primarily affected our trade in pork to the Japanese market. Historically, the Japanese require a high level of reassurance to restore trade, and, post-2001, that reassurance involved a visit by a Japanese delegation to the North. Another visit may be required before any trade is restored this time, but my aim is to help to restore export trade in animal product to Japan as early as possible.

After the helpful phone call that the First Minister made in the first few days of the outbreak, and at my request, DEFRA has written on our behalf to the Japanese Embassy through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). We are currently awaiting a response to that letter. My officials will follow up with DEFRA on that and on any issues regarding other countries.

Similar to the authorities in the USA, those in Canada have accepted the position of the North on the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain. They recently approved another meat plant here to export to Canada. We are working with DEFRA in its negotiations with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) to achieve an early restoration of the UK’s official foot-and-mouth-disease-free status. Regaining foot-and-mouth-disease-free status at OIE for the UK is the quickest route to regaining OIE foot-and-mouth-disease-free status for the North, given that Britain contained its outbreak so rapidly. However, the fact that we were recognised at the outset to be free to trade with the rest of Europe means that some countries may be persuaded to accept our products before that date, just as the United States and Canada have done.

We have also worked closely with our industry stakeholders throughout this period. Indeed, in view of the importance of external sales to the local industry, my permanent secretary and his DETI counterpart have been in regular contact with dairy and meat processors and exporters and also with representatives of the retail sector. Those meetings fostered a better understanding of trading issues for us all. They provided a forum in which views on necessary action to assist the industry with exports could be heard and exchanged, and reports on our actions could be brought back. At those meetings, it was clear that that industry was appreciative of DARD’s efforts to minimise the impact on trade.

We have also had regular meetings with our other key stakeholders, and I am pleased to say that they have supported my decisions and have congratulated DARD on the actions that have been taken to assist them during the foot-and-mouth-disease crisis. I emphasise that we gained much from our meetings with the industry, and I thank those stakeholders for their positive and constructive engagement.

Good communication and liaison with officials and Ministers in Britain and the South have been crucial throughout the process.

Consequently, throughout the crisis, I have kept in regular contact with my ministerial counterparts. I spoke to Mary Coughlan in Dublin and Jonathan Shaw in London on the first evening and had ongoing and very helpful contact with them in the days that followed. I pay tribute to UK Chief Veterinary Officer Debby Reynolds and her team for recognising the unique position of the North in their deliberations, particularly with the European Commission, and for their outstanding negotiation skills in securing an early relaxation of the EU restrictions with regard to movement and trade. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Department of Agriculture and Food officials in the South in supporting our case.

Together with my officials, I worked on a daily basis with the South to ensure that the fortress Ireland approach was applied immediately. That was crucial in ensuring that the North was excluded from the EU ban on British produce. The support of the South, and our cohesive approach within the island, was important both operationally with regard to biosecurity and border controls and from an external perspective with regard to trade.

Unsurprisingly, the issue of Brazilian beef imports has recently been raised again. Questions have been asked in recent weeks as to why I continue to allow the importation of beef from Brazil. I have responded by explaining that the Government of the UK, acting on behalf of England, Scotland, Wales and the North, has agreed in the Treaty of Rome that the EU shall act in matters relating to the common agricultural policy. Consequently, the power to ban meat from countries with which the EU has established trade agreements is governed by EU law. The rules governing the importation of fresh meat and meat products into the North from Brazil are subject to European Union agreements with Brazil, which in turn are based on European Commission scrutiny of the controls that Brazil has in place. Those rules are in the form of Commission decisions and are implemented here in our national legislation.

If we were to act unilaterally to ban imports of Brazilian beef, it is highly likely that beef importers and exporters would be in a position to commence legal proceedings against the Department for any loss suffered as a result. It is also quite possible that the Department would be open to the levying of EU fines for interfering with the free movement or trade of a product that has entered Europe legally. In addition, such an action would constitute a failure to adhere to and implement the relevant European legislation.

However, I remain concerned about the findings of the Irish Farmers' Association and the Irish Farmers' Journal investigation. I will closely monitor the situation as the Commission progresses its investigations. I watched last week's developments in Brussels closely, particularly the declaration put forward by MEPs calling on the Commission to ban imports of Brazilian beef to the European Union. I also plan to raise the matter of Brazilian beef imports with my ministerial colleagues at our next meeting.

As regards the investigations into the source of the outbreak, we will be giving careful consideration to the reports that DEFRA published on Friday, and to that Department's response. I am aware that the reports have concluded that there is no absolute certainty about how the outbreak occurred. The most likely explanation is a combination of factors, including weakness in the drainage system, heavy rains, and the movement of construction vehicles. There are valuable lessons to be learned from these findings, and we will want to consider what lessons we can draw from the experience in England and apply here.

Looking ahead, our focus is on preparation for the next SCoFCAH meeting, which will take place tomorrow. The indications are that the Commission will revoke the existing decision and return Britain to its position prior to 3 August. My priority is to continue to safeguard our ability to export. I have decided, therefore, to retain all existing certification and veterinary check procedures until the SCoFCAH decision tomorrow. I obviously do not want to do anything to undermine the assurance that the present system of certificates offers to receiving countries and companies. Following SCoFCAH's decision on 23 August, DEFRA initiated an exercise to identify and prioritise the markets outside the EU to which UK companies export, as such countries may be waiting for OIE to restore the UK's foot-and-mouth-disease-free status. DARD is consulting with the industry to identify such markets for our exporters, and will liaise with DEFRA on that.

I have asked my officials to review DARD's response to identify what went well and any lessons that could be applied in the event of any future outbreak. Our foot-and-mouth-disease contingency plan, which was already in place, will be updated and improved in light of what we have learned from this experience.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to our colleagues in Dublin for their support of, and co-operation with, my Department at such a difficult time. That close level of North/South co-operation will continue, given our shared interest in the prevention of outbreaks of serious animal disease on the island of Ireland.

Again, I thank all those who have helped me and my Department to deal with the recent foot-and-mouth disease crisis. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I call the First Minister, the Rt Hon Dr Paisley.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development knows that we have all been shocked by the plague of suicide of which she spoke at the beginning of her statement. All of us in this House have a serious responsibility to help to solve this awful tragedy, which seems to be growing in our Province.

Will the Minister agree with me that the help from London, Dublin, the USA and the Japanese Government in relation to the foot-and-mouth disease incident was most welcome? I also wish to record the help that I received from the British ambassador in Dublin in making contacts for me with people who had power to help us in those matters. I am sure that all right-thinking people would wish to express thanks to all those mentioned by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, those who have not been mentioned — although they, and we, know who they are — and, of course, the Minister herself.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the First Minister for his comments. From all of this, we have learned that the reaction to the incident could not have happened without a local Minister and Executive in place. The speed with which the Executive met on the morning of Saturday 4 August, and the ongoing contact that my Department had with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and Executive colleagues, meant that we were able to give leadership and act decisively. Again, I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for their most helpful intervention and support.

Mr Speaker: I call the Deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I concur with the remarks of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the First Minister on the issue of suicide.

Does the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development agree that during the period of the ban, between 3 August, when it was introduced, and 17 August, when the ban was lifted, the American authorities moved very speedily, and that that was due in no small part to the considerable work done by the US ambassador to London, Bob Tuttle, and his colleague in Dublin, Tom Foley? I made several phone calls to Paula Dobriansky, who was in Korea and remained in contact with me, and to Congressmen Richard Neal and Jim Walsh, who have been long-standing friends of the peace process. I hope that the Minister will agree that a word of thanks is due to all those whom I have mentioned.

Ms Gildernew: Again, I thank the Deputy First Minister for his comments. The interaction with the United States was hugely significant, and when Canada followed, it showed that the rest of the world looks to what the United States does and takes its lead from them. I was amazed at the speed with which USDA responded. Less than a fortnight after foot-and-mouth disease was confirmed in England, USDA had lifted its restrictions. That was hugely important for our agriculture industry given the amount of food that we export, especially dairy products. It was a huge group effort, involving many people in the offices of several Congressmen and Senators; it would take a full hour to thank everyone who helped and responded during the crisis. We are very grateful to have the support of such friends.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I thank the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for its quick and professional response to the crisis and its efforts to secure derogation from the EU to allow our exports to continue. I also want to recognise the positive role played by DEFRA in supporting the arguments for derogation put forward by the Department. I thank the farming community and the farming unions across the United Kingdom for their assistance, and their positive and constructive suggestions during this crisis.

12.30 pm

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

At the heart of the new certification is the identity of Northern Ireland. However, I found it interesting that there was no mention of that in the Minister's statement. Why was "the North" mentioned in the statement but not "Northern Ireland", when that is clearly how our produce is identified?

The Minister talked about the "fortress Ireland" approach. Is it not important that the identity and independence of Northern Ireland be protected? If, God forbid, there was an outbreak in the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland would have to have independence to be able to trade, as the Irish Republic did with BSE-free Irish beef at the time of the BSE crisis, when the UK was unable to trade its beef. Although there is a working relationship with the Irish Republic, there must be clear identification of and independence for our Northern Ireland produce.

Can the Minister tell the House what lessons the Department has learned from the crisis and how those lessons can be applied in Northern Ireland? What risks are there, and is the Department undertaking a review of biosecurity at our own laboratories?

Although it is true that we cannot act independently, it is of vital importance that the Minister actively participate in the debate so as to stop Brazilian beef.

We must force the hand not only of DEFRA and the Ministers in the rest of the United Kingdom, but of Europe, to protect our product, because it is the best product and it should be able to stand on its own feet across the world.

Ms Gildernew: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer the Chairman of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's questions in reverse order. As a member of the European Union, the North is bound by EU law to accept products from countries outside the EU. Therefore, we cannot impose a ban on all Brazilian beef, but we can ban — and have banned — imports of beef from areas of Brazil that are affected by foot-and-mouth disease.

The Department has robust controls in place to ensure that imports from countries outside the EU meet the required standards and will seize products that do not adhere to those standards. The European Commission plans a Food and Veterinary Office mission to Brazil later this year as a follow-up to an earlier visit and has said that, unless the situation improves and the Brazilian Government can give assurances on the quality of beef exported to Europe, it will reconsider controls on beef imports to Europe from Brazil. As I said earlier, I will be working with my ministerial colleagues and I will push for action on Brazilian beef similar to that which has been taken in other places.

Our Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) laboratories do not hold stocks of the foot-and-mouth virus. Most of their work is done around bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis, and there have never been any leaks or any biosecurity mishaps or accidents at those laboratories. I spoke to Seán Hogan, the chairman of AFBI, and George McIlroy, the chief executive, on the evening of 3 August and asked those same questions. I am content that we do not have the same risk, as we do not have the live virus in the laboratories here. The public can be reassured by that.

The Department has learned lessons from this. It will update and review its foot-and-mouth disease contingency plan. It was good for the Department to be challenged in this way to see how quickly it could respond and put provisions in place. I have spoken to people who came over on the boat that evening and who were impressed to see that biosecurity measures had immediately been put in place at the ports. They did not even realise that there had been a foot-and-mouth outbreak in England until they came home and saw the portal staff. Measures such as that help to reassure people that the Department is doing all that it can to keep disease out of Ireland.

I understand where the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee is coming from in regard of the Twenty-six Counties. However, I felt sorry for Richard Lochhead, the agriculture Minister in Scotland. He was faced with

many challenges, because the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease was on the island of Britain. Scotland faced automatic restrictions even though the outbreak was geographically closer to France.

If there were an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease anywhere in the Twenty-six Counties, the whole island of Ireland would suffer, regardless of what was done in the North. The disease is virulent because it so easily transmitted: it can be airborne, transmitted from the wheels of cars and lorries or carried on people's feet. It is a serious illness when it gets into a herd.

However, I am content with the amount of work that was done with ministerial colleagues such as Mary Coughlan in the South. A stringent policy on animal health and welfare is needed, and that has been on the table for many years. Diseases do not recognise borders, and I am deeply concerned about other diseases in mainland Europe, such as avian influenza and bluetongue. Robust measures must be taken at our ports to try to keep all diseases out of Ireland. Action must be taken on an all-island capacity to eradicate them. I do not want any disease to come from Dublin and affect trade in the Six Counties. It makes sense to treat the island as an epidemiological unit.

Lessons have been learnt. It has been a challenging time for the Department and for me. Thankfully, with the support of colleagues — and I have acknowledged the support that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has shown me — our reaction to the outbreak was well handled. We should not be complacent, but we know that we did all in our power to keep Ireland free from foot-and-mouth disease. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I commend the Minister and the Department on their handling of the outbreak. Will the Minister detail her plans to ensure that biosecurity is as effective as possible in guaranteeing freedom from future outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease, and other diseases?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I will continue to ensure that everything possible be done to keep us free of animal diseases that would have serious economic implications. My Department has put in place a system at the ports to ensure that dirty vehicles are not permitted to enter the North. Robust systems ensure that no contaminated soil can enter the North on vehicles from other places.

Additional systems, such as the disinfection seen at ports in the past month, can easily be introduced at times of increased risk, and can be stepped up depending on the level of threat. Our procedures for cattle traceability are excellent and form the basis for ensuring that animals are closely monitored and can be easily traced. For example, during the outbreak, my Department traced within 48 hours all 128 consignments of animals that

had come from Britain since the start of July. That was fundamental to ensuring that, if the disease had spread, the Department would have picked up on it quickly and dealt with it.

My Department has a long-term commitment to education, including the timely implementation of biosecurity measures in response to heightened risk. Education takes the form of leaflets, advertising and posters. Since becoming Minister, I have been invited to disinfect my feet on every farm that I have visited. Biosecurity measures are already in place on farms.

There is close co-operation between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Food in the South on the prevention, surveillance and control of a range of epizootic diseases, some of which I mentioned earlier. That co-operation has included discussions on the assessment of risk; the preventive actions that would be taken in respective jurisdictions, and the importance of those actions being co-ordinated; the alignment of contingency planning; and the control of movement that would be necessary in the event of an outbreak. Given the shared interest in preventing the introduction of serious animal disease to the island of Ireland, that close co-operation between North and South will continue.

Mr Elliott: I wish to thank the Minister and the departmental officials for the swiftness with which they dealt with difficulties arising from the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in England. We did not wish to create any unnecessary alarm among the general public of Northern Ireland, and that was successfully achieved.

Identifying and examining all the relevant animals that had come from GB into Northern Ireland since the beginning of July was a huge task, and I am thankful that the disease did not spread beyond the original zone. My aim is to ensure that the general public and farmers with produce from Northern Ireland are protected.

As regards the report on the source of the disease, and with the particular reference to Pirbright, there does not appear to be sufficient clarification on the situation there. Part of the site comprises a Government laboratory, and if the source of the disease had been directly from a farmer, there would have been completely different consequences for the farming community. I am very concerned that there may be a cover-up by the Government about the source of the disease.

Does the Minister support a Northern Ireland branding and labelling strategy for its meat products, and would that be helpful? Also, regarding the export of our products during the crisis, what actual difference was there between regulations and licensing governing the export of non-fresh food from Northern Ireland and those for non-fresh, or non-live, exports from the rest of GB outside the surveillance zone?

Ms Gildernew: I will try to address all of those questions. As regards concerns about Pirbright, the privately-owned laboratory, which is run by Merial, ceased operating from the point at which the outbreak was confirmed, and Merial will be unable to restart its operations until all remedial work has been completed. On the Government side, the Institute for Animal Health has also decreased its workload and is only conducting necessary work in an attempt to ensure that all bioremedial action is implemented to ensure safety. There is still an issue around the sanitation of effluent prior to it leaving the plant.

There are concerns and lessons to be learned, and officials are examining the matter in detail to determine what steps we need to take. We wish to have robust systems in place that will ensure that this can never happen again.

In answer to the question regarding non-fresh products, I do not have the relevant details and will respond later in writing. As regards labelling, I have been talking to people in the industry and have had some enlightening conversations with them since taking up my post, and not just since 3 August when the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak was confirmed.

Some of the people I have spoken to have said that the marketing strategy is important and that we must get it right. I can quote those who have told me in no uncertain terms that labelling produce “Northern Ireland” for export purposes does not work — and those are people who are successfully exporting to the United States on an all-island basis. They are telling me — and I am not making a political comment — that Irish branding works much better when exporting to the United States, and that they will stick with that. My Department will work very closely with the industry to see what works best. We wish to maximise the returns, especially in exporting. Sixty-four percent of our produce is exported.

That is no small feat. We will consider carefully what we need to do. I intend to carry out more work on labelling and on marketing our food. I will do what is best for the industry and what gets the best returns elsewhere for our fresh, quality products.

12.45 pm

Mr P J Bradley: First, I compliment those who installed the new audio system. We do not have to lip-read in this corner any more, because we can now hear.

I thank the Minister for her statement and for her answers to the questions that have been posed. The Minister and her Department were rightly praised for the prompt action taken at the time. I also pay tribute to those who so quickly traced the consignment of imported animals. That traceability worked on that occasion gave great confidence to those who, at times, may have been critical of traceability and of the detail

that often goes into it. I cannot name each person involved, but I wish to thank everyone North, South, east and west who helped during the crisis.

However, was it an oversight not to include immediately a ban on the importation of non-pasteurised milk and fresh meat? Why was there a 24-hour delay in doing so? In a foot-and-mouth disease crisis, 24 hours can be critical.

Ms Gildernew: When I received the telephone call on the evening of Friday 3 August, my instinctive reaction was to close the ports and ban live animals from being imported. We had all learnt lessons from the 2001 outbreak, when we saw the implications of foot-and-mouth disease after it entered the country. I spoke to Jonathan Shaw from DEFRA and to Mary Coughlan in Dublin. I agreed with Mary Coughlan that we would adopt a similar approach. It was Saturday morning before Dublin officials told us that they were taking the step of banning the import of unpasteurised milk and fresh meat. We had said that we would work in tandem with the Department of Agriculture and Food, so we then introduced the same ban. I was not advised on the Friday night that it was necessary to take that step, considering the threat that existed at that time. However, as I have said, we had agreed to take a similar approach, North and South. That is why there was a time lapse in the introduction of that ban. Again, that is something that we would put in our “lessons learned” paper and in the foot-and-mouth disease contingency plan. Every time that we go through a similar crisis, we learn lessons. It does not bode well for the future if we do not learn anything. I might not have gone down the route of banning the import of unpasteurised milk and fresh meat, but I am now glad that I did. With the benefit of hindsight, it was the right thing to do. That is why one decision was taken on Friday night and the other on Saturday morning.

We also tried to identify whether any products that arrived on boats on Friday evening would be susceptible, but there were none. I could have turned boats around that Friday had there been live animals on board, and we did that later in the weekend. Obviously, it was a fluid situation, but on Saturday and Sunday we did send shipments of fresh meat and unpasteurised milk products back to England.

Mr Ford: I, too, thank the Minister, her ministerial colleagues and, particularly, DARD staff for the efficient, constructive and collective way in which they dealt with the problem. Perhaps lessons can be learned for other issues that will face the Assembly.

By Monday 6 August, the Minister reported to a group of MLAs that 128 consignments of animals had already been traced and examined. That is a tribute to the work that staff in Dundonald House and in the local divisional veterinary offices carried out. However,

when the Minister refers to the review that her officials are carrying out, what external advice and assistance is being made available to that review? Real issues may be understood by having an external opinion on such a review. That is not a criticism of the officials concerned but merely a statement that those who were so closely involved may not appreciate all the lessons that must be learned, especially as we face not only foot-and-mouth disease in future but other diseases such as bluetongue and avian flu.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. There will be a review of how we dealt with the issue, and part of the strength was in the collective approach that was adopted. On the Monday after the outbreak, the Department met industry representatives from between 50 and 60 different organisations and bodies with an interest in the issue. That invitation was extended to Belfast Zoo, the Tourist Board, all the agristakeholders, the Committee members, et cetera. The Department worked very closely throughout with the entire industry, and took its advice and guidance as and when necessary.

The Department will want to discuss an external review, and I shall examine the possibility. The Department worked closely with the industry during the latest outbreak, and work was done on a collective basis. That enabled us to make decisions that suited the industry and kept key exports and trade going so that there was no significant downturn in business.

Mr Irwin: I record my thanks to the Department and the Minister for the swift action taken during the latest foot-and-mouth crisis to secure Northern Ireland’s position as a foot-and-mouth-free zone.

Does the Minister accept that the poultry and pig sectors in Northern Ireland currently face a major financial crisis? If the price of the produce is not immediately increased to a level that reflects the massively increased feed costs, many producers in those sectors face financial ruin.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question and for the very creative use of his time. As the Member knows, we are supposed to be dealing with foot-and-mouth disease. Obviously, I am exercised by the demands and challenges for the poultry and pig sectors at the moment, so he may get an opportunity to ask that question again later on in ministerial questions.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join other Members in commending the Minister, the Department and all those who worked to prevent the spread of the latest outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease from England. Their speedy approach incorporated the lessons from the last outbreak, and put them into practice to maintain our biosecurity and the stability of the farming industry, and that has been commended by all.

I refer to the “fortress Ireland” approach that was adopted during the latest outbreak, and how important that was in ensuring that the scare did not last long. Members know that foot-and-mouth disease can be a very lengthy business for farmers, and we have learned lessons from the previous outbreak. People should take into account that because this is an island, we are entitled to adopt that type of approach. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the shamrock brand has been of enormous benefit to the island of Ireland for produce, and the fact that we were considered separate from England, Scotland and Wales made an enormous difference, particularly in monetary terms, to our farmers. I am sure the Minister will agree that the island approach will always be of vital importance in dealing with any future outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Member for asking a question that lasted longer than the answer will last. *[Laughter.]*

The “fortress Ireland” approach was crucial in minimising the risk to the island of Ireland during the foot-and-mouth outbreak. My officials and I worked very closely with our counterparts in Dublin to ensure that a consistent approach, which was proportionate to the risk, was adopted throughout the island. The Department already has close links with its counterpart in Dublin, and that close level of North/South co-operation will continue in future. The European Commission recognised the unique position of the North, which meant that we were excluded from the EU ban and therefore allowed to continue to trade with other member states.

On the Saturday morning after the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in England, the First Minister spoke of our need to retain trade with the rest of the island. He mentioned the large quantity of our business that is done on an island-wide basis and the movement of animals to markets and shows. Those comments were important. That the border did not close during the recent outbreak was very important; that we did not implement the same level of spraying and disinfecting that was carried out along the border in 2001 was also important. That was helpful to the industry.

I appreciate Mr McHugh’s comments on the marketing of our produce, and, as I said to Mr Elliott earlier, I will be examining how best to market and label our produce to secure the maximum return for our producers.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response and for the good work of her Department, which is much appreciated. One of the pitfalls during the recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease was the movement of farm machinery from the location of the outbreak in England to Northern Ireland. In light of the breakdown

of the rules during the recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, what action has the Minister and her Department taken to ensure that any movement of farm machinery from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland or machinery that has been brought here on the ferry from the UK mainland will be monitored?

My second question — which the Minister might have already answered, and I apologise if she has — is on what lessons might be learned from the outbreak across the water, which, it seems, arose at a DEFRA laboratory. What lessons can the Department learn from that incident for its own benefit?

Ms Gildernew: I am glad that the Member asked about the transport of farm machinery, because there are always robust measures in place at our ports — not only during foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks. Vehicles are routinely checked, and every vehicle that leaves a ferry at one of our ports is examined. If there is evidence of soil, clay, straw, hay or any similar material on a vehicle, it is deemed to be unfit for entry, and it is sent back. Our port staff have carried out those examinations, and they will continue to do so. They have no compunction about sending back a machine that is dirty, because it is not safe to bring it here.

A journalist asked me the same question as Mr Shannon, and I said the same thing to the journalist that I will say to Mr Shannon. If he has any information about the transport of tainted farm machinery, I would be interested to hear it, because the Department wants to see an absolute crackdown. Considering the reassurance that I have received from the Department on the stringent measures that are in place, I would be highly surprised if a soiled vehicle were permitted through our ports. If a vehicle is not allowed entry owing to its condition, it is transported back at the exporter’s expense. There is, therefore, a financial inducement to ensure that vehicles are clean enough to be brought here and to be permitted to remain.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and I will look carefully at what happened in England and at DEFRA’s response and will be examining what we need to do. There will be implications for all of us from the lessons of the outbreak, and they will be given careful consideration.

A contingency plan is being prepared. First, it will be brought to the permanent secretary and the departmental board, and then it will come to me. I will immediately share that plan with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. There will be a joined-up approach. Officials worked well throughout the recent crisis, and we have begun examination of DEFRA’s paper to see what lessons can be learned and what measures we can put in place to strengthen our foot-and-mouth contingency plan for the future.

Mr Savage: I will keep my remarks brief. As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I compliment the Minister on a job well done and I thank her for doing everything within her power to protect the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland.

As a farmer, I am only too aware of what could have happened this summer. We all remember the disaster of 2001, and I wish to acknowledge and commend the Minister for her swift intervention.

1.00 pm

Indeed, it appears that lessons have been learnt from the past. I thank the Minister for keeping members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development informed.

It would be remiss of me not to mention —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Savage, I must ask you to come to your question.

Mr Savage: It would be remiss of me not to mention DARD's permanent secretary, Dr Malcolm McKibbin, who played a pivotal role.

I commend the Minister for her comments about Brazilian beef. However, will she consider using the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels to encourage the European Parliament to debate the issue of Brazilian beef with a view to banning it or bringing it up to the traceability standards that we have in Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his question and his comments. I come from a farming background, and I fully appreciate what he is saying.

It is all too clear that this disease is rampant. The Member represents Upper Bann, which was the worst-affected constituency in the previous outbreak. The Department will do all it can to keep out this awful disease.

I am glad that the Member mentioned Dr McKibbin. I appreciated his valuable support and help in the crisis. He was not found wanting when it came to making difficult decisions and supporting me in carrying them out.

I will discuss the Brazilian beef issue with our MEPs and will use Eileen Kelly in the Brussels office, and whatever avenues are available, to try to sort out that problem. Brazilian beef is an emotive issue because of the problems that Brazil has with foot-and-mouth disease and the fact that our farmers are aggrieved that the standards to which they have to produce their livestock are not necessarily mirrored in other parts of the world. Beef, or any product, that is imported should be produced to the same rigorous standards under which our farmers work. We produce one of the best-quality products in the world because, from birth to factory, we take very good care of our animals. Our

animal welfare is second to none, and the same standards should also apply in areas that export to us.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has outlined the diplomatic efforts that were made to ensure that our exports were not blocked by the international community. Does the Minister agree that those same contacts can now be used to enhance and improve our exports overseas?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. As I have already mentioned, while the First Minister was contacting the Japanese ambassador in London, the Deputy First Minister was making phone calls to the US Administration. At my request, the Department's Chief Veterinary Officer wrote to other European Chief Veterinary Officers, advising them that we were free from foot-and-mouth disease. In places such as Turkey, there were difficulties concerning hides and skins; that work is ongoing. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI were involved in other strategies such as "meet the buyer" events, and letters of comfort were given to exporters who were experiencing difficulties.

However, the Member's question is valid. We want to raise everyone's boat and want producers to get a better return for their product. Markets are opening up — for example, in China and India — that have potential and have not been tapped into to any extent.

I support the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, in trying to expand our markets by looking at other regions and countries into which our products can be exported. We have a high-quality product, and we should be getting a good price for it. We should examine areas into which we have not traditionally exported beef, for example, in order to get the best return for that product. Go raibh maith agat.

Lord Morrow: In the Minister's statement to the House, she said that export sales are valued at £1.6 billion and that that represents some 64% of the total sales of the agrifood processing sector.

That is a phenomenal figure by anyone's standards. Can the Minister tell Members what the financial impact has been on the agrifood industry as a result of the measures that she was forced to take to ensure that foot-and-mouth disease did not spread to Northern Ireland?

Ms Gildernew: I cannot give a specific figure, but I will reply to the Member in writing. However, the financial impact was minimal in comparison with what it might have been. Given the fact that we were able to carry on trading with the rest of Europe and, in a very short time, with the United States and other countries, we did our best to minimise damage to the industry.

The North is an exporting country, and it could never consume all that it produces. The industry relies

on export markets, which are important to our economy. We keep hearing about the importance of export trade and of being able to export products from here. It was important to keep that export trade open, and I am pleased that we were able to do that as it is important to the industry. People will accept the fact that the initial difficulties were ironed out. In the week after 3 August 2007, representatives from the dairy industry met departmental officials every day, and that industry worked closely with those officials to iron out any problems. I spoke to Hugh McReynolds from Grampian Country Pork Ltd about the Japanese issues, and the First Minister was also involved in those discussions. The damage was minimised. However, I will write to the Member with figures, but I imagine that they will be quite low.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As there are no further questions for the Minister, we will move on to the next item of business.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Standing Order 18(1) states:

“A Member of the Executive Committee shall make statements to the Assembly on matters for which the Executive Committee is responsible.”

One must, therefore, logically presume that members of the Executive Committee act collectively on behalf of that Committee, as, for example, when Mr Murphy addressed the House about the flooding in east Belfast. This morning, the Speaker allowed two members of the Executive Committee — the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister — to ask questions of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on a statement made — presumably — on behalf of them as members of the Executive. Can you explain this constitutional novelty to the House, or can you pass on a message to the Speaker to allow him to do so at an appropriate time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The First Minister is also the leader of his party and can raise a point in that capacity, which he did this morning.

We will move on to —

Mr Ford: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Speaker called Dr Paisley as the First Minister and Mr McGuinness as the Deputy First Minister. The subsequent round of questions started — quite properly — with Dr McCrea as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and Mr Boylan representing the second-largest party in the Assembly. Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness were given not only an additional status but recognition as Ministers. Therefore, I repeat my request that you discuss the matter with the Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I take your further point of order, Mr Ford. I was not in the Chair at that time. I will refer the matter to the Speaker, and the Speaker will respond appropriately.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion to change the membership of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Francis Molloy replace Mr Mitchel McLaughlin as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. —
[*Ms Ní Chuilín.*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Economic Development Task Force

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to establish a task force to address urgently the economic development of the west, including the areas covered by Fermanagh, Omagh, Strabane, Dungannon and Cookstown District Councils; and further calls upon the Minister to bring forward a report of the task force by 31st March 2008, to include specific recommendations to tackle neglect, increase investment and maximise opportunities for North-South funding aimed at improving infrastructure and achieving higher levels of employment and employability in these areas.

The motion addresses the imbalances that exist between the east and the west in infrastructure, economic development and job opportunities. People everywhere expect that we in Northern Ireland are on a road to a new beginning. The principles of inclusion and equality are embedded in Government policy, and the motion is about making that policy a reality.

It is time for the west to have a new start. I will not use the debate to list endless complaints about past neglect in the area, nor will I propose that resources should be diverted from deprived areas elsewhere in Northern Ireland. I will make the case to increase equality of opportunity and to redress the historic underfunding of the west. The appointment of members to the task force is the responsibility of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, as is the task of overseeing the implementation of proposals.

Despite the west's not being on a level playing field, there is enormous potential in the area. We have a highly skilled workforce, and our young people are well educated. There are successful companies, some of which are household names in Northern Ireland and beyond, and we have excellent natural resources and assets that attract thousands of visitors every year. The Erne-Shannon link is an example of the benefits that can be gained for border areas through the development of North/South links.

Nevertheless, Members must recognise that the west suffers as a result of the legacy of neglect and that there are serious disadvantages and past wrongs that we have a responsibility to put right. No railways serve the west; they were all closed down 40 years ago.

There is no gas supply, with the result that businesses have to depend entirely on electricity. Access to broadband is limited, and the telecommunications network that serves the area is second rate. When it was being built more than 40 years ago, the motorway that was supposed to replace the railways stopped at Dungannon. There was a promise that it would be extended to Enniskillen. However, it has never been extended. That failure to put in place an important road link started a trend that continues. As a result of a lack of investment in new roads, Enniskillen suffers chronic and serious traffic congestion.

Plans for bypasses — such as the southern bypass and the Cherrymount link, which are necessary to divert through-traffic away from the town centre — have been with the roads authorities for more than 20 years. There is still no sign of work starting. The recently completed Omagh bypass was fought for for over 30 years. The failure of Government to provide funding for roads is an ongoing source of frustration and annoyance in Fermanagh and Tyrone. Members must not forget that public transport is poor and that most people have no choice but to rely on their cars.

Unemployment statistics that cover many years have documented the lack of both investment and job opportunities in the west. In March 2007, the labour market bulletin from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment stated that districts in the west of Northern Ireland showed the highest concentration of long-term claimants, with the eastern region showing to be lower.

1.15 pm

Without investment and infrastructure, local services are being squeezed, and the people of Strabane, Omagh, Enniskillen and Dungannon know that too well. Even now, every proposed reform, be it the Water Service or in relation to the Review of Public Administration (RPA), is about centralisation. With such centralisation, the east will gain and the west will lose.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) produced a strategy for growth in 2007, which was based on the development of what it called signature projects. Those are meant to act as magnets to pull in tourists, help the economy and create jobs. However NITB excluded Fermanagh and Tyrone from the list.

Those are only some examples of the very unfair policies being implemented by Government and that serve the west very badly. It is time to put an end to that and begin to remove the historical disadvantage that pertains to the west.

To begin that turnaround, I call for the establishment of a task force. However, it will be a task force with a difference — its recommendations will be acted upon and will be grounded in reality. It is time for a task

force to examine in detail the measures that are required to level the playing field.

Each of the five councils in the west, together with partners in the business and community sectors, has been striving to increase investment and tackle difficulties such as factory closures and job losses in the textile industry. The five councils agreed and launched a western economic strategy in 2006 to encourage enterprise and to lobby for, among other things, better roads. An Assembly-appointed task force will give focus and better cohesion to that work.

There are some absolute priorities, such as roads, the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, inward investment and healthcare, which are all high on the agenda of the people of the west.

We need a major transport plan that will take forward speedily the expansion of the two corridors already identified in the development plans of the Northern and Southern Governments. Those are the North/west corridor, linking Derry to Dublin through Omagh, Strabane and Monaghan, and the east/west corridor linking Sligo to Belfast through Enniskillen and Dungannon. We know that the Irish Government has pledged £700 million for such projects, which are in the interest of regional, balanced development, and which will draw down European Union support.

I want to make it clear that I am calling for a time-limited task force, as stated in the motion, to bring forward recommendations. It is a reasoned and specific call for action. The amendment, on the other hand, calls for no specific action that would be directed immediately towards solving our obvious problems, which will be highlighted by other Members today.

I am calling for a task force, because any serious attempts to develop the west will require the active participation of many bodies, including Departments. It is simply not good enough for the development needs of the west to be taken into account through a general motion. The west needs more than discussions. Due to many years of neglect, neither I nor anyone in the west believe that we will get anywhere by taking things into account.

The west cannot continue to be the last item on the agenda of this or any other Assembly. It must not be allowed to slip between the cracks. We need a task force that sets out clearly for the Assembly's consideration what needs to be done, how much it will cost and how it will be done.

As we know, the whole island suffers from regional imbalance. Through North/South co-operation, we have the means to take steps to tackle that, develop new plans and spread benefits to the west.

There is no mention of such co-operation in the amendment. This is not simply about the development

of two economic corridors. The rural population in the area is dispersed, and many of its roads are third class. Roads Service must step up and make a substantial investment in the repair of those roads.

The main factors for business are access to markets and labour. It would be a great pity if, on a motion asking simply for equality of opportunity and fair play, there was a reversion to the sterile politics of the past, with unionist Members combining to defeat a proposal for specific recommendations. I hope that that will not happen. Some people would be surprised if it happened; most would not, and they would not be impressed if it came to pass. I say to the Assembly that if it does, this matter will come back here. Now is the time for a new start in the west.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first "to" and insert

"investigate with relevant Ministers the economic development of the west, including the areas covered by Fermanagh, Omagh, Strabane, Cookstown, and Dungannon District Councils; and to ensure that these matters, including infrastructure, employment and employability, are taken into account in the discussions leading to the Programme for Government, Budget and Comprehensive Spending Review."

Mr Gallagher used a significant phrase: he said that "the sterile politics of the past" would be insufficient. Had he taken that sentiment on board before he drafted his motion, we might have had consensus on something. However, I hope that, as a result of the amendment and the debate, we will be able to achieve that, because both of us are saying the same thing in different ways. Mr Gallagher is as keen as I am to see the west develop. I look forward to Mr Gallagher's withdrawing his motion and throwing his weight behind the amendment. That would send a powerful message to the Assembly, which he asks to move away from the sterile politics of the past, to Northern Ireland and further afield.

I congratulate the authors of the western economic strategy team's (WEST)'Strategy and Action Plan 2006-2008'. It is a concise and significant document that will be relied upon greatly in the future as we seek to improve the economy of the west. The plan aims to promote greater co-ordination and cohesion among economic support agencies in the western areas and to position that region as a place in which to do business.

For too long there has been a definite line between east and west in Northern Ireland. As I have said previously, with respect to economic development it is almost as though there are two Northern Irelands. If we are to bring the west onto a par with the rest of Northern Ireland, there must be a change in mindset.

WEST has laid out structured suggestions for economic development that would greatly enhance the lives of residents and constituents in the area. I recommend that all Members read that document. The strategy embraces the district council areas of

Dungannon and South Tyrone, Fermanagh, Cookstown, Omagh and Strabane. The various Government agencies and Departments are left in no doubt as to what is necessary for proper consideration of those areas' needs and feelings. We do not want to be thrown leftovers from other projects, but rather to be integrated into every strategy, including those for employment, development, tourism and education.

Undoubtedly, the west now fares better than it has done previously. The upgrading of the A4 between Dungannon and the Ballygawley roundabout, due to commence next spring, will add significantly to the road infrastructure of the Province and of the west. There is still a lot more to be done. The continued upgrading of County Fermanagh's roads is important and must be examined sooner rather than later. A distributor road is necessary in Dungannon to deal with congestion in the town centre and to carry that traffic which does not seek to come to Dungannon but to go elsewhere. There has to be a distributor road to take away the traffic that is causing congestion but bringing very little else to Dungannon.

The west is blessed with exciting tourism opportunities, but funding to promote them to full capacity is often lacking. Similarly, residents of the west face difficulty in accessing employment, and that is coupled with continuous economic strain in rural communities. The scales of funding must be fairly balanced to ensure that the area flourishes and becomes steadily stronger, instead of being allowed to stagnate. It is vital that every possible avenue to highlight the need for immediate and dramatic change is explored, and that the aim of improving our respective areas is fully supported. On examination, the current picture can sometimes seem grim. A positive change is overdue and will be welcomed. The sooner that happens, the better.

The total population in the west is some 224,000, which represents around 13% or 14% of Northern Ireland's population. By 2017, if trends continue, that figure will increase by around 10%. I doubt that other areas are growing at that rate. The west also has an above-average number of under-16-year-olds in employment with no formal qualifications, particularly in the Strabane District Council area. Such issues need to be tackled head on.

A total of 12,800 enterprises are located in the western region, of which a staggering 99% are small businesses employing less than 50 people. There are a mere five large enterprises employing more than 250 people, and all of those are located in or around the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area. I ask the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to look at those figures, which are significant and worthy of consideration.

Gaping differences are noted in the Strabane and Cookstown areas, which respectively boast just 10 and 15 companies that employ more than 50 people. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment must give consideration to that fact when job creation is promoted in Northern Ireland in order to ensure that the west will not be forgotten, but will be given its proper place among the other regions.

There have been areas of significant growth in both the manufacturing and construction sectors. However, there is ongoing below-average employment in education across the region, perhaps with the exception of Omagh, and below-average employment in the public administration sector. I agree with Mr Gallagher's comments on that important point.

The average weekly earnings across the region are below the Northern Ireland average, with employees in Cookstown the worst affected. In 2004-05, 16% of redundancies in Northern Ireland were in the west — a jump of 7% on the previous year. That translates as 782 job losses in two years, of which 60% were in Strabane. Those are significant figures and I am delighted to see the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the Chamber. The Minister will be responding to the debate, and I know that he will take seriously Members' concerns that something must be done. I look forward to the future and his heading up of the Department, because it is true to say that his roots are in the west too, so he has an interest in the area not falling behind, and I have no doubt that he will not allow that to happen.

Statistics show that the combined local government districts of the west fall within the 40% most deprived in Northern Ireland. Shockingly, Strabane ranks as not only the most deprived area in the subregion, but in Northern Ireland as a whole. That is extremely worrying given that the definition of the word "deprivation" includes housing, general facilities, fuel, and environmental, educational, working and social conditions. Therefore, it can be argued that the affected areas, particularly Strabane, lack all of those elements, which are nothing more than basic requirements that should be expected in today's society. The day-to-day living that most of us take for granted has been denied to most of those who are affected by that situation.

Although Strabane has earned the unpleasant reputation as the most deprived district in the Province, its neighbours do not fall far behind. Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon have been designated among the six most disadvantaged council areas in Northern Ireland — a fact of which the Department must take cognisance, and to which it must give proper consideration.

Strabane, Dungannon and Omagh are well below the Northern Ireland average for economic activity. Why should that be? The number of people who claim

unemployment benefit in western areas is higher than the Northern Ireland average. That is not acceptable. There must be the same opportunities for all.

1.30 pm

The west must not be an afterthought: the place that is thought about only when there are leftovers to be given out. I do not subscribe to that at all. I trust that the House and the Department do not either. That is why I have moved an amendment that focuses directly on the issues and will take politics out of the equation altogether. Members are not here to play politics with such matters. There will be plenty of opportunity to do that with less important issues. In my estimation, to do that in the current situation would be unforgivable. I strongly commend the amendment to the House. I ask the House to unite behind it and send out a powerful message that, in future, the west must be treated like the rest and also that it demands the best.

Mr Molloy: I congratulate Mr Gallagher for moving this important motion, which seeks to deal with the infrastructural neglect of the west over the past years. I want to declare an interest as a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council. I also congratulate the Minister for his presence at the debate to listen to the calls from the west. I am aware that he has roots there and certainly has a particular interest in the area.

I ask Members to support the motion rather than the amendment — not on any party-political grounds — simply because Ministers can already come together to discuss and deal with such issues as the neglect of the west and how to improve its infrastructure and environment for job creation: indeed, Members expect them to do so.

However, as Mr Gallagher's motion says, what is needed is a task force for the west that is charged with compiling a time-limited report on the progress that is being made and which will set the pace for the way forward. WEST has put together its plan, and I congratulate the councils in the west for banding together to start to put together a programme to tackle the area's needs. A similar approach worked in the Derry area when demands were made for infrastructure and support for the second city, the benefits of which can be seen. There has been a decentralisation of Departments into Derry. However, there has not been any decentralisation of Departments into western council areas, with the possible exception of Omagh, to which some Departments have moved from other council areas.

A task force for the west must be a focus for the new Administration. It must start to build a future for the west by identifying the area's needs and developing a programme to deal with them. A task force and its report are important factors in that. I call upon Invest NI to adopt a new approach to the west. There has been

no drive to bring industry into the west. Historically, any industry in the west has come about through the entrepreneurial skills of local people. Those industries have been successful; indeed, they have become world leaders. For example, 80% of quarry machinery for the rest of the world is manufactured in the west, particularly in the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area. That demonstrates how local people have recognised the neglect, lack of jobs and infrastructure in the area and have banded together and brought forward their own programme to develop world-leading industry. Those entrepreneurial skills must be developed and supported. Although there are many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the area, those businesses have developed as far as they can.

A drive is required to turn those businesses into exporters and to put them into the international market. Invest NI can perform a major task by encouraging those businesses to develop in such a way that we do not simply end up with good family businesses, albeit with an increase in jobs, but in a way that develops those businesses as exporters.

Mr B McCrea: I am interested to hear the Member talk about people banding together in the west of the Province. Will he consider all the manufacturing companies that have come together under the industrial derating campaign? Those companies would tell the Member that they hope that he and his party will support all possible measures to keep industrial rates down as a means of securing the future of those companies in the west of the Province that currently export goods.

Mr Molloy: That is a discussion for another motion. My party's support for derating has certainly been forthcoming. This matter is not framed by the west whingeing about what it has not got, but is about the development of skills to show what it can achieve in the future. The motion is concerned with the development of the west and how it can foster the necessary skills to achieve that aim.

At a conference in Dungannon last week, as part of the Flight of the Earls festival, we were told that a programme is urgently needed to address the skills issue if we want to reap the benefits in, perhaps, eight to 10 years time. We need a programme that will ensure that the skills exist to develop future industry. We must start to shift the manufacturing base into an export role, and we must start to develop the current InterTradeIreland programme, expanding it to ensure that we have a better future.

Mr Cree: Having lived west of the Bann for several years, I have considerable sympathy with the motives behind Mr Gallagher's motion. We are told that more people are in work and that fewer are unemployed, but economic inactivity remains high. Historically, earnings in the west are below the Northern Ireland average and

16% of all recent redundancies have occurred in the west. Those are quite alarming figures.

I was interested to be reminded of the strong manufacturing base that exists in the west. In Cookstown, 23% of the workforce is involved in manufacturing. In Dungannon, that figure is 29%; in Fermanagh, it is 18%; in Omagh, it is 12%; and in Strabane, it is 29%.

We have taken an ambiguous attitude towards derating in the manufacturing industry, as illustrated in the Assembly debate in June 2006, of which Members have a record, and in the motion that I proposed in June this year. I sincerely hope that the Assembly will decide to support our manufacturers in a practical way on industrial rates. That seems to me, perhaps, to be more relevant to manufacturing than chasing the Varney Review on the reduction of corporation tax.

I recognise that a study has been undertaken by WEST. That has already been referred to, and the report, covering the period 2006-08, is very good. Other initiatives are ongoing. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Northern Ireland is 3.7%, which is the lowest rate on record. That is lower than the rate for the UK, which is 5.4%, and it is the lowest of all the UK regions. Despite that, we have clear evidence that the UK regional policy is not working. Two days ago, I received a copy of 'Institute of Directors Northern Ireland News', from which I quote Professor Mike Smyth of the University of Ulster on policy fault lines:

"The ongoing discussions with HM Treasury (the Varney Review) have highlighted a number of serious fault lines in government policy.

For me, the biggest fault line is the inescapable conclusion that UK regional policy is not working. Real economic convergence among the UK's lagging regions (Northern Ireland, Wales, the North of England, Scotland, etc) is not happening. In fact, GVA per head over the past 15 years has been diverging from the UK average in most regions. Surprise, surprise, the only regions not diverging from UK average living standards are London, the South East and the South West."

I am concerned for the future of the economy for all of us. The economy will continue to be a difficult issue with very low growth — as low as 1%, some have predicted. There are bound to be considerable pressures on our economy, and the much-publicised economic package has failed to materialise. However, we must continue to tackle the problems of deprivation and social exclusion in our most disadvantaged areas, and that certainly includes west of the Bann.

However, it is essential that DETI continues to improve jobs and opportunities for employment throughout Northern Ireland. More needs to be done. The best task force that we could muster at this time would comprise our Ministers. For that reason, I support the amendment.

Dr Deeny: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for allowing me to speak on this important motion. Perhaps

I have some authority to speak on this, having spent the past 21 years of my life living in the west — without giving my age away, I spent the first 30 years living in the east.

I cannot recommend the amendment because it has been proposed for two reasons only: to remove the words "task force", and to remove the words "North-South". I agree with Lord Morrow that he and Tommy Gallagher are singing from the same hymn sheet. However, the word "investigate" is not strong enough. We need something solid here, and a task force seems right to me. Therefore, I support the motion but cannot accept the amendment.

I commend Mr Gallagher for two reasons: first, for proposing this important motion for debate; and, secondly, for including the whole of the west in the motion. Lord Morrow said that some 200,000 people live in the west. Last time I looked west of the Bann, 404,000 people were living there. That is a significant number.

It is good that Mr Gallagher included the two large counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh. When I refer to the west, I include Derry, but I will focus a little on the two counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh. Do not forget that Tyrone is the largest and most deprived of the six counties. The establishment of an economic development task force for our region would help to bring the two counties, Tyrone and Fermanagh, together, and they would both benefit from each other. Such a task force would promote economic development on all fronts in both counties and would, therefore, greatly benefit everyone across the North.

People often ask what we in the west have to offer. Tourism has been mentioned already, and it remains, and will remain, a major contributor to the economy in Northern Ireland — I am thinking of the Sperrins, the Fermanagh lakes and, of course, our wonderful Ulster American Folk Park. Economic development is measured in terms of jobs, members and income. It results in improvements in human development, education, health, choice and environmental sustainability.

I have to say — coming not so much from Belfast, but even further east than that — that it is quite obvious to me that many things are Belfast-centred. It has been said in the past that Northern Ireland stops at Dungannon, and Mr Gallagher mentioned that the motorway to Dungannon, which was built 40 years ago, has not been extended beyond Dungannon as promised. Some people would be certain that Northern Ireland stops at Lisburn. Everything is centred on the periphery, which is a contradiction.

The west has been neglected for far too long, and it is time that that was put right. There is a lack of public-sector jobs in the west. It has been noted by a former Minister and many others that many people in Omagh work in the Civil Service but have to travel to

Belfast to do their jobs. There is no reason for not moving those jobs to the west. Strabane has lost hundreds of jobs in recent years, and no agencies have moved in to replace that lost employment. It is now official that many people are travelling out of — and even moving out of — the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone because of that. Indeed, there is a brain drain in the south-west.

1.45 pm

There are no universities in the west except, of course, in the Maiden City, although the development of local colleges is very important, and I am thankful for the one in Omagh.

Members know my views on the plans for healthcare provision. They do not cater for everyone in Tyrone and Fermanagh, and there has been the unacceptable closure of three acute hospitals that served the people of Tyrone: three, not one. The Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt looks after the people in Cookstown. We must have adequate, modern healthcare facilities to cover all medical eventualities in both counties, and not just for our people — we need them for tourists as well.

Roads and railways have been mentioned. There is no motorway network in the west at all. We do not even have a dual carriageway — Mr Gallagher can correct me, if there is one in Fermanagh — except for one small one in Tyrone, just outside Cookstown. The roads are shocking, and there is no railway network. Multinational companies must be encouraged to come to the west. An economic development task force would ensure that Tyrone and Fermanagh attracted important developments in line with what is happening in other areas of Northern Ireland.

This is a new era for Northern Ireland, and we all want a modern Northern Ireland in a modern Europe. That means investing in, developing and modernising all of Northern Ireland, and that includes the west. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the opportunity to discuss economic development matters today. I wish that we had many more such opportunities, because — and I think that we all accept this — the economy is the biggest challenge facing the new Executive. We must ensure that nowhere — and nobody — is left out of what we hope are going to be years of prosperity ahead. We also want to ensure that every social class and every part of Northern Ireland benefit from a boost in the economy. That is a huge challenge for all of us, and that is why I support the amendment. It is much better to investigate rather than create a task force that would mark out the west as the sick man of Northern Ireland. That would not be good for the west, especially when it is not an entirely accurate perception.

I read with interest the action plan developed by WEST and noted that it has found that research has identified the region to be characterised by, among

other things: an entrepreneurial spirit; regional diversity; a spirit of collaboration; a strong economic mix; a sustainable rural economy; and a high level of skills. Those are some positive points for the west.

We all accept that there are problems. All Members who have spoken in the debate mentioned accessibility, and there is no doubt that it is a problem. Investment in the roads infrastructure is sound investment and gives good value. We have only to look at our neighbours in the South to see the economic benefits that it can bring.

Economic inactivity is also a problem. It is worse than the Northern Ireland average. Coming from the Ards Borough Council area, where 29,000 people are economically inactive at present — the fourth highest figure in Northern Ireland — I have considerable sympathy with the west. I note that in the past there has been a lack of available industrial land, particularly in the Strabane District Council area.

However, if we create a task force, as called for in the motion, there will be a case for a task force for every area of Northern Ireland. I could make a case for my Strangford constituency where the economy has been decimated in recent years by a huge downturn in the traditional textile industries, and I am sure that colleagues from Belfast and elsewhere could make similar cases. We have all been badly affected, and we all suffer from disadvantages, and, to carry on with Leslie Cree's theme, perhaps the best task force would be the Executive itself, of which the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is a part.

There is another case to be made against a task force. We all have experience of task forces that build up expectations and deliver nothing. There are any number of task force reports simply gathering dust and not being acted upon. It is essential that we place this important role in the proper context. All areas of Northern Ireland have issues that prevent them from participating in the upturn in the economy, and those must be overcome.

I support the investigation called for in the amendment. It is right that such an investigation be placed in the proper context, as outlined in the amendment, which is that of the Programme for Government, the Budget and the comprehensive spending review. There it would receive better attention, as well as the appropriate resources, in the context of the Executive's aim to lift the Northern Ireland economy for everyone.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion, and express some disappointment at the amendment. Listening to Lord Morrow's contribution, I felt that, in many ways, he supported the motion. However, he appeared to rule out the establishment of a task force, as if that were some challenge to the Minister's authority. Although the motion is a challenge to the Minister, it recognises

his authority to put together a task force and to implement its findings. If the DUP were to reflect on that point, I believe that it would support the motion.

The four district councils of Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown and Fermanagh, along with Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, make up the counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh. It is a vast, rural area, with a diverse, rural population and some major towns. Those counties suffer from an appalling lack of infrastructure. There are no railway lines at all. People there do not even have a railway to complain about, never mind late trains or bad timekeeping. Put simply, there is no rail network in those counties.

They have no motorway and no dual carriageway. There is no regional airport, and the recent debates about Shannon and Belfast airports showed how crucial a regional airport is to the development of any geographical area.

There are no gas pipelines, and no potential for bringing gas into the west. I am concerned that, if recent reports of the potential gas find on the Fermanagh-Cavan border come to fruition, the only pipeline will be one to take gas out of the area.

The water and sewerage infrastructure is not sufficiently progressed to allow for ongoing development of the area. Furthermore, there is very limited broadband access.

The economic indicators — employment, unemployment and poverty — clearly show that the area needs attention. It needs a task force to focus attention on the area, and that task force's findings should be implemented.

The potential that existed for there to be decentralisation of Departments and agencies has not been delivered on. Unfortunately, the amendment — although those speaking to it almost speak in favour of the motion — misses the key point, which is that a task force would bring with it clarity, and an indication that, at last, the neglected infrastructure and all other areas of neglect in the west would be challenged.

I urge the DUP to rethink the content of its amendment. In many ways, that party is going along with Tommy Gallagher's thoughts. However, it misses the key point, which is the establishment of a task force. As I have said, the motion is not a challenge to the Minister. It recognises that he has the authority to put a task force together and to bring its findings to fruition.

I urge all Members to support the motion.

Mr McFarland: Although I represent North Down, I am originally from, and my wider family still live in, and, indeed, at, the centre of the universe — Plumbridge, in the heart of the Sperrins. I have therefore an ongoing interest in the issues involved in the debate.

Mr McElduff: Does the Member accept that he is widely regarded in west Tyrone as an honorary west Tyrone man?

Mr McFarland: I thank the Member for that.

For many years, the councils' economic development units have been doing sterling work. They have come together in teams and produced many glossy and expensive brochures, some of which I have here. However, that work has never quite led to a proper plan that would allow the area west of the Bann to sort itself out and to get up there in the serious economic stakes. Perhaps the time has come for the Executive to co-ordinate those issues and finally produce a plan for success.

I draw Members' attention to the excellent regional development strategy that appeared during the time of the first Assembly. It took a long time to develop, but we seem to have lost sight of it. At the time, it was the envy of England, Scotland and the Republic. It produced a plan for Northern Ireland that cut across all kinds of issues. Let us remind ourselves of some of them. It noted that farming would become more difficult as the money from Europe dried up and that farmers would need to diversify, and not just on the farms: some of them, or their children, might have to take part-time employment in local towns and villages. Consequently, there would be a need to develop SMEs in those towns and villages to cater for those in the local population seeking work and for farmers looking for part-time jobs.

Transport, and the transport networks, was a major issue. Recently, I had cause to travel from Omagh to Enniskillen, and I do not want to reopen the dreaded hospital debate, but, my goodness, you would not want to be taken poorly in Greencastle or Cranagh on a winter's night, when Roads Service is unable to grit the roads and it is icy, and to be heading for a hospital in Enniskillen. Chances are that you would be long gone before you reached Omagh. There is a major issue about the infrastructure in that mountainous area that goes right down into Fermanagh and right through Tyrone. It does not affect only medical situations; if people need to transport goods or to meet business colleagues, they face the same difficulties. Everything takes ages.

The Strabane and Omagh area has the fastest-growing population in Northern Ireland. How are we to meet the education needs of young people and provide them with the skills that employers require? How do we encourage young people to stay in the area? We need to create jobs, which will probably be provided by SMEs rather than by major companies coming into the area — home-grown businesses are better as a rule. In order to keep young people there, we need to allow them to live there. On one level, I am quite encouraged that Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14) has gone

back to the drawing board. However, that is not to say that there is not a need to protect the countryside. I was in Donegal recently, and it is just appalling. I spent a lot of my childhood there, and what has been done there is iniquitous. I do not want Tyrone and Fermanagh to follow suit, with bungalows shoved in everywhere. There must be some sort of planning policy, but what I do not understand is why those who say that they are interested in rural planning do not want to allow people to rebuild on the sites of existing houses.

Finally, I call on the Minister to revisit the regional development strategy and to produce a cross-cutting plan to establish economic development in the west. I support the amendment.

Mr McGlone: In speaking to my colleague Mr Gallagher's motion, I do not want to rehash or repeat his points.

2.00 pm

However, in this new politically stable atmosphere, we want economic growth, so we must facilitate and support that growth.

Investment in job creation and infrastructure is necessary if we are to realise the work of the task force that Tommy Gallagher has proposed. Our Civil Service jobs must be decentralised, and economic advantages will result from the regeneration of our district council towns through that decentralisation. Many of those towns have been totally denuded in recent years as a result of the loss of vital Civil Service jobs, and that has had a ripple effect on local economies. However, as well as the economic advantages, decentralisation has clear social advantages. For example, people with young families are forced to travel day and daily to Belfast to work, getting stuck in traffic jams in so doing, and decentralisation would mean that that would no longer be the case. Decentralisation would also bring environmental advantages. Urban congestion and fuel consumption would be reduced, as would the cost of travel. Many people who face those costs are on low incomes.

Mr McFarland has just absented himself from the Chamber, but he — and Mr Hamilton — referred to planning, which is crucial in order to make land available. For example, the introduction of PPS 14 — although I am not sure how to describe it now — has meant that long-established family, local and rural businesses have suffered. In a particular case that readily springs to mind, one businessman could not expand his business, which was established in a rural area, to create an extra seven jobs. PPS 14 has had detrimental effects. Recently, it has also placed an obstacle in the way of the creation of potentially 150 to 300 jobs. A job-creation scheme is available, but people have to wait two and a half years for a refusal under that package. Businessmen and investors simply will not put up with that type of behaviour.

Instead of presenting obstacles and reasons for not creating jobs, Invest Northern Ireland should be facilitating job creation and doing what it can, within reason, to enable developers to create jobs in those areas that have suffered for many years as a result of economic disadvantage, high levels of unemployment and deprivation. The task force must tackle those planning obstacles at the pre-planning application stage to iron out infrastructural problems, such as difficulties with roads and water. Other planning policy issues and problems with departmental matters such as Department of Agriculture and Rural Development food manufacturing schemes could be smoothed out at that stage, as could cases in which Invest Northern Ireland should be facilitating job creation but is delaying it by making negative comments to the Planning Service.

If the task force tackles those problems, we can arrive at a situation in which we, as Members of a new Assembly can, through the new Executive, create jobs for those who have elected us. If those problems are tackled, a developer who is interested in creating jobs will not be left for two or two and a half years waiting to hear nothing but the refusal of his planning application. Difficulties must be ironed out well before then. We must move into the twenty-first century. The bureaucrats in Invest Northern Ireland who are hindering the process must note that they are there to do a job: to help developers to boost the economy and create jobs. We cannot have those bureaucrats giving developers reasons not to invest. People want encouragement and support, and a "why not?" approach and a professionalism should be there for all to see. We, as elected representatives, demand that type of approach.

I support my colleague's proposal to establish a task force. As a representative of what is referred to as the rural west, I have related some of my experiences to the House. I hope that we can learn from some of those experiences, and I hope that in future we will be in a position to help to create jobs with maximum efficiency.

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

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wholeheartedly welcome the motion and thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone for proposing it. I also welcome the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to the House today. It is important that the economic deficit in West Tyrone be discussed on the first day of this new session; again, I commend Mr Gallagher for bringing it to the House.

We, in the west, are living with an economic deficit. The Assembly and the Executive have a great responsibility to redress the inequality that exists, particularly between east and west. One of the earlier Members who spoke said that that case could be made for practically any area. I disagree. In August, the Department for Social Development published a report

— ‘Households Below Average Income 2005/06’. A key finding of that report, which is relevant to the debate, was that:

“Individuals living in the West of the Province were most at risk of being in low income. Those living in the East of the Province were least at risk.”

Why is that? I am going to whinge and complain about it. It is because there are no jobs, a lack of investment and poor infrastructure. All those points have been made, but I want to emphasise the case: there is a difference between east and west.

Mr Gallagher mentioned tourism signature projects. There is a route in my area that the hon Member for West Tyrone will recognise. It starts in Strabane and goes over Ligfordrum into Plumbridge, up the Glenelly Valley and into County Derry. I guarantee that it is one of the most beautiful routes in this country, equal to anything in the Mourne, on the Causeway or in the glens. Where is our signature project? It does not exist. Mr Gallagher made an important point, and I support him fully.

These days I often pass the Titanic Quarter. Fair play to the people who are working on that project. In May, the Executive gave — how much was it? — £25 million to that project. Fair play to whoever is responsible for the project. There are loads more millions available for it, according to the report on the website.
[Interruption.]

It does not matter which party a Minister comes from. I am speaking for the west. Whatever Ministers happen to be in the Executive, it is for all of them to make those decisions.

In discussing this matter, several Members have spoken of WEST — the western economic strategy team. I must say right away that I sat on that body, as did my council colleague on the other side of the House, Councillor Allan Bresland, who is now also a Member for West Tyrone. I have great respect for that group's work. If we are to implement the task force — and I support the motion and the establishment of such an employment task force — that group will make a good reference point. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Armstrong: I am pleased that the motion is being debated today, coming as I do from Stewartstown on the western shores of Lough Neagh and representing Mid Ulster. I am well placed to discuss the economic difficulties in the west of the Province. The economic recovery in Northern Ireland since 1998 has been remarkable, but hardly surprising. The IRA campaign of terror was designed to bring Ulster to its knees economically, and to that end, we had numerous bomb attacks on town centres, hotels and restaurants.

Such activity was designed to destroy our economy and to ensure that local investment dried up, while

potential outside investment stayed away. Thankfully, those days appear to be behind us.

Although the whole country suffered economic depression due to IRA terrorist attacks over 30 years, I contend that the particular circumstances of the west of the Province meant that the impact of that depression was even more pronounced in that region. The lack of a modern transport infrastructure is a huge issue. There is no railway line throughout a huge swathe of the west, barring that which runs from Belfast to Londonderry to the far north. Promises that were made back in 1960, when the west's railway lines were torn up, were not delivered upon, and, to this day, we still have no motorway except that which begins at the outskirts of Dungannon.

The west of the Province suffers from the traditional Belfast-based mentality that civilisation ends at Glengormley and Lisburn. To put it another way, if something is not within 10 miles of Belfast, it is not worth going to. I have no doubt that such thinking, even subconsciously, has clouded the opinions and decisions of policy makers in the past and continues to do so to this day. Even given a benign interpretation of events, Belfast has seen a great deal of development, such as the Titanic Quarter, the Waterfront Hall, the Odyssey Arena and Victoria Square. The Belfast lobby is not content with those; look at the outcry there was when John Lewis dared to try to move as far west as the city of Lisburn. Belfast obviously needs its share of development, but so do the rest of us. Belfast's traffic congestion will only get worse if more and more people are forced to leave the west of the Province to commute to Belfast for work, or move to fuel the already crazy property market in the city.

The west of the Province has traditionally had pockets of extremely high unemployment, such as used to be found in Strabane. However, problems have also arisen from the traditional reliance on agriculture and related industries for employment opportunities. The agriculture industry has been beset with problems in recent years due to foot-and-mouth disease, BSE, low farm income and high feed prices. Those factors have compounded an already difficult situation, and many farmers and businesses in the textile industries are at their wit's end, laying off staff, and, in many cases, giving up altogether.

I have no doubt that the west of the Province could benefit from a task force, but we have seen task force initiatives on several occasions in the past — talk is cheap, and nothing is done. We require the political will to ensure that real action will follow any recommendations for the establishment of a task force.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I congratulate Mr Gallagher for securing the debate. As the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I share Mr Gallagher's desire to

see the west of Northern Ireland continuing to benefit from a steady improvement in the economy. References have been made to my grass roots in Fermanagh. Although I was born in Londonderry, I was brought up in Fermanagh, and I am all too aware of the issues in the west of the Province. However, I do not think that we should set false confrontations in this Assembly.

The issue is not about east versus west; it is about raising all of Northern Ireland's economy so that everybody can benefit, paying absolute regard to the particular challenges and disadvantages that affect particular areas, whether in the west, the north-west, the south or certain parts of Belfast. All Assembly Members could, can, and do, rightly, bring issues of particular concern to me and other Ministers. It is important that we take all of those into account while developing for Northern Ireland — as a whole — an economic strategy that lifts the entire economy and drives it forward.

Mr Campbell: The Minister mentioned a matter that is of concern to me and other Members as regards the wording of the motion. The geographical location stated is quite prescriptive — if it went any further west, it would be in Nova Scotia — and western areas such as Limavady and Londonderry have been excluded.

Mr Dodds: The Member has drawn attention to a point that was mentioned in the debate. Perhaps those who tabled the debate will explain during the winding-up speech why they have defined the west in such a way and why some areas have been excluded.

I am simply making the point that there are particular challenges and issues in all parts of the Province, some of which are more exaggerated and emphasised in some areas than others. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the particular challenges and issues that affect the west of the Province, as defined by Mr Gallagher.

2.15 pm

Overall, Northern Ireland has enjoyed sustained economic growth over the past 15 years. The economy continues to perform well in historic terms. Employment levels are higher than ever, and we are benefiting from lower unemployment. As Members have said, the Northern Ireland unemployment rate has remained below the 5% mark for over two years. The current unemployment rate of 2.3% is one of the lowest in the United Kingdom.

However, stating those figures does not underestimate the challenges that remain, not just for the west, but for all of Northern Ireland. That includes the need to address lower levels of productivity and private sector earnings, the high levels of economic inactivity and the relatively small private sector, compared with the public sector. A number of Government strategies are in place, including the regional innovation strategy, the regional development strategy, the Department for

Employment and Learning's skills strategy and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. However, it is important that the new devolved Administration builds on those measures to make the economy more sustainable and create the wealth that will enable us to pursue the level and quality of provision that we want across Northern Ireland. That is why the Executive are highlighting the economy for special attention in the Programme for Government and comprehensive spending review process.

No one in the House or outside it could fail to have noticed the emphasis that has been placed by all parties in the Executive on the need to drive forward the economy. All parties have recognised that a healthy, growing, vibrant economy is essential to move forward, not only on the standard of living, but on the provision of healthcare, education services and world-class environmental and housing provision. It is not a question of the economy versus social provision; it is a matter of the economy being central in order to provide the wherewithal to make progress on the other issues.

A number of Members, not least the proposer of the motion, have referred to roads, decentralisation, health matters, transportation, railways, airports, planning, and several other matters. Those are legitimate issues to raise when considering the development of the west. The motion, however, calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to take action to assist the economic development of the west. Those matters are outside my remit but they are matters for the Executive as a whole. That is why it is important that a cross-cutting and collective approach is taken.

There is considerable merit in the amendment that has been tabled. I am happy to deal with the issues that fall within my responsibilities, but it is worth noting that the employment and unemployment statistics for the western region are broadly similar to the Northern Ireland average. There are pockets where that is not the case, just as there are areas in any set of statistics that do not carry the broad thrust of those figures. However, the latest figures demonstrate that, in the areas that are mentioned in the motion, the overall positions in claimant-count unemployment, percentage decrease in unemployment and increases in employee jobs are almost identical to the Northern Ireland average. The one area where there is a marked difference is the economic inactivity rate, which includes people on incapacity benefit, students and older people. I will deal with that point shortly.

I shall explain what my Department and its agencies are doing, in partnership with other Departments, to support economic development in the areas covered by Fermanagh, Omagh, Strabane, Dungannon and Cookstown councils. DETI policy already recognises the problems that are faced by a number of council areas in the west. The Department has disadvantaged-

area maps, which are based on the income and employment indicators of deprivation from the 2005 Northern Ireland measure of multiple deprivation, and they designate Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon as disadvantaged areas.

Those areas are already designated. In practice, that means that the Department and its agencies are committed to paying particular attention to such areas when delivering policies and programmes. I have ensured that that is the case. For example, Invest Northern Ireland has targets to attract 75% of all first-time inward investment projects to locate in disadvantaged areas and to secure at least 40% of new business starts there. The latest figures show that those targets are being met; indeed, the figure for investment projects is some 80%.

People talk about neglect, and so forth. It is a question of balance and ensuring that we know what is happening and what measures are already in place. Of course, there is room for improvement and certain factors must be taken into account as the areas develop. Invest Northern Ireland can also offer an enhanced incentives package to companies wishing to locate projects in disadvantaged areas. The size of that package is determined by the merits and scale of the project and the number and quality of jobs available.

An important role for the Department for Employment and Learning is to address the high rate of economic inactivity in order to encourage economic growth. Parts of the west have some of the highest rates of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, a point that Lord Morrow and several other Members raised. Colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning, with whom my Department has a close working relationship, have a comprehensive range of provisions available to address the supply of labour and to help those who are economically inactive to find work. That includes the Pathways to Work initiative for people receiving incapacity benefit, which will be available throughout Northern Ireland by April 2008; it will be rolled out in Omagh and Dungannon next month.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Invest Northern Ireland has regional offices in Omagh and Enniskillen, and continues to engage at a local level with councils and other stakeholders to deliver effective economic development activity in the west. Invest Northern Ireland's officials are involved with various organisations in the region that Members have mentioned, including WEST, to which several favourable references have been made.

Members have talked about taking action and task forces. WEST provides an example of having done the work and produced a report. Executive Ministers, as part of their discussions on the Programme for Government, the economy, the comprehensive spending

review and the Budget, must be able to take all such reports into account rather than waiting for a task force that will not report until after those matters have been dealt with.

The regional office is supported by a full range of programmes and initiatives from Invest Northern Ireland, which are available for local companies. A dedicated ICT adviser for the western region offers specialist advice to SMEs. That relates to a point that Mr Molloy raised on the need to encourage family businesses to become more export oriented. He is right, because that challenge faces not only the west, but everywhere in Northern Ireland, which has a high percentage of SMEs. By investing in R&D and innovation, my Department's role is to encourage those enterprises to become outward looking, export oriented and to increase productivity. Those areas are specifically targeted in the west and must be targeted across Northern Ireland.

Manufacturing has been mentioned, and reference was made to industrial rating. Members know about the ongoing review that was instigated by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The report of that review will be sent to the Executive and the Assembly in due course. Industrial rating is an important issue for local manufacturers. I welcome many of Mr Cree's comments; however, he seemed to say that the Varney Review of Tax Policy in Northern Ireland was somehow irrelevant when compared with industrial rating, but he went on to talk about the need to increase productivity.

The critical point about the Varney Review is that it seeks to address how to achieve regional convergence and increase Northern Ireland's performance in comparison with other regions of the United Kingdom. The new tools and instruments of financial policy that are being sought as part of the Varney Review are required to drive forward the economy and thereby make the major change that is needed to increase productivity.

If we continue to act as we have in the past, we will not make the real difference that everyone wants to see in Northern Ireland. There are many wonderful examples of manufacturing companies in the west of the Province, and Members from those areas will know them well.

I congratulate those companies that are doing so much in the manufacturing sector and those that are involved in exports and in substantial areas of trade. It is also clear that the west is benefiting from increased investment in the service sector, and there are many examples of that. There is also a strong ethos of entrepreneurship in the west. Over the past five years, business start-up figures for the western region have been consistently higher than the Northern Ireland average. There is a danger that we are talking the area down — there are challenges, but we should also recognise the excellent work being done.

With regard to tourism, my Executive colleagues and I are mindful that tourism in Northern Ireland has underperformed for the past 30 years, for obvious reasons. Tourism has an important part to play in our economy and has enormous potential. Rural areas in the west of the Province have an important role to play, and a regional tourism partnership has been created in the west to drive forward the delivery of tourism at the strategic level.

Mrs McGill mentioned tourism signature projects and the money that has been made available for the Titanic signature project. As she seems puzzled as to where the money came from, I will clarify that for her. It was achieved with the active endorsement of all members of the Executive, including those Sinn Féin MLAs who represent the west and who voted for it. I am therefore very surprised at her comments today.

Infrastructure and telecommunications were also mentioned. On several occasions, Members have mentioned the inaccessibility of broadband to people in the west. According to international investors, one of Northern Ireland's selling points is the fact that it is the only region — and was the first region of the UK — to have 100% broadband accessibility. The policy objective was pursued that there should be no digital divide that would disadvantage remote areas such as parts of the west, where customer volume alone would not justify private sector involvement. If Members have particular issues to raise about that, I will be happy to take them on board.

I welcome the debate: it will help to draw attention to the problems and challenges that exist in the economic development of the west. We should focus on that, and I assure all Members that I will ensure that we will address those issues as part of the Programme for Government, the comprehensive spending review, and in the Budget discussions over the coming weeks.

Mr Speaker: The debate will be suspended at this point. We will return to it following Question Time. Members may take their ease for a few moments.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Shared Future

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what action had been taken following the findings of the report 'The Cost of Division - A Shared Future Strategy'. (AQO 54/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): As the hon Member will know, the report was commissioned by the previous Administration on 29 March 2006 and was conducted and finalised during direct rule. Although commissioned by the previous Administration, it is an independent piece of research and there are really no surprises in it. The final report was presented by Deloitte in April 2007, prior to devolution.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is totally committed to moving society forward and making a real difference to the lives of all our people. Our vision is for a future based on tolerance, equality, mutual respect and respect for the rule of law. We shall bring forward proposals to the Assembly and to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister later this year to promote the interests of the whole community and move towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the First Minister back from his holidays, and I wish him well for the remainder of this year. I would not dare indulge in any religious matters. *[Laughter.]*

On a technical point, the report referred to in my question is not available in the Assembly Library, and it ought to be. In fact, I had great difficulty in obtaining a copy from the First Minister's office.

The substance of the report reveals that £1.5 billion is spent in Northern Ireland as a result of division, which is a startling fact. That emphasises the need for the First Minister and his colleagues to tackle the causes of that division. Does he have any plans to tackle the peace lines that scar our towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland? That would be a

welcome first step in dealing with sectarianism and division in our society.

The First Minister: I thank the Member for the strange remarks that he made at the beginning of his question. It is a pity that he had not been clearer about what he was seeking. I assure him that copies of the report are available, and I will see to it that he receives a copy at the end of today's sitting. I am sorry that I cannot buy him a new pair of spectacles to see the religious situation more clearly, but perhaps that will come. Even little pussycats open their eyes at the end of certain days.

We want progress; we do not want barriers built across parts of our land, but divisions must be dealt with before we can take down those barriers. People have been murdered in our society, and it is after the murders end that we can pull down the barriers. We must apply ourselves to many other matters, but I want to say today that I am totally dedicated to seeing peace in the Province that I love.

Mr B McCrea: Does the First Minister agree with the suggestion in 'The Cost of Division — A Shared Future Strategy' that a massive 66% reduction in the police budget would be desirable? Does he accept that if a similar approach were applied to education and health, on the basis of differential per capita expenditure, it would result in massive curtailment of public services and job losses in the Province?

The First Minister: It is all very well to ask a question like that; however, in the present reality it is clear that the police need money to do their job successfully. It would be wrong for any Member to suggest that we just slice the police budget in order to paint a picture that does not deal with reality.

What alarms me are the constant attacks on Orange Halls and on churches of all denominations. Those attacks need to be rigorously stopped, and no clergyman should have to stand up and say that people are wrecking his church, and that he took a photograph of those who did it, only to have the police say they cannot use it.

Dr Farry: 'The Cost of Division — A Shared Future Strategy' has been sitting on the shelf for almost five months. We have important decisions to take regarding the Budget, the Programme for Government and the comprehensive spending review. Can the First Minister give me a guarantee that, at this very late stage, with a closing window of opportunity, the results of the report will be fully taken into account in the consideration of those important matters, so that we can start to save money by avoiding duplication and re-invest money in improving the quality of public services for the entire community?

The First Minister: I inform the hon Member that it is not our report. It is a report that has come to us, but no Member has voted for it. The report must be

discussed in the Assembly, and go through the proper process of proceeding to establish by legislation what Members agree with.

We have heard that the report has not been largely circulated. The first thing that we should do is see that it is largely circulated and that people know what it asks. However, there is no easy way to bring the matter to fruition. That could be done by legislation, but that does not mean that it will be brought to real fruition until it is carried out and conformed to.

Interdepartmental Liaison

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to identify which specific operational areas required close liaison between staff working for OFMDFM and staff working for other Northern Ireland Departments. (AQO 42/08)

18. **Mr McCallister** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister how many staff in OFMDFM are involved in co-ordinating the work of the Northern Ireland Departments, and to identify examples of the kind of work that co-ordination entails. (AQO 87/08)

The First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer questions 2 and 18 together.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was first established as a Department on 1 December 1999, but has changed significantly over the last eight years as its role and responsibilities have continued to develop. As additional roles have been added, the Department has had to grow to accommodate them.

On 1 December 2000, the Department had 283 staff. Figures published in September two years later showed that that figure had risen to 417 just after devolution was suspended. Under Mr Trimble, the figure had almost doubled. Current staffing levels are broadly similar to those of the previous devolved Administration. As of 1 September 2007 there were 408 staff working in the Department, therefore fewer.

It should be recognised that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is a fully functioning Department of the Northern Ireland Administration. Its work can be divided into several separate, but interrelated, roles. It provides administrative support and facilities for the operation of the institutions of Government: the Executive; the British-Irish Council; and the North/South Ministerial Council. It also has a wide range of policy responsibilities, some of which were conferred on it by statute. It has a policy-making remit for economic policy, which takes in the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI). OFMDFM also works with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the

Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to assist in the implementation of an effective investment strategy for Northern Ireland and in the development of a comprehensive Programme for Government.

The Department also has significant policy responsibilities in the areas of rights, equality and good relations. Those include legislative and non-legislative programmes that cover anti-discrimination and equality matters, and cross-cutting policy in such areas as race, disability, gender, children, young people, victims and survivors and community relations.

Mr McNarry: *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: The Member wants a solution to a problem for which his party was responsible. That party brought in all the extra workers. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that they should not speak from a sedentary position. The First Minister is speaking.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not taking any points of order, Mr McNarry. The Member should resume his seat.

The First Minister: I am surprised that the hon Members should be alarmed to hear the truth today. I did not appoint any of the OFMDFM staff: they were in their posts when I took the position of First Minister. By the grace of God, not all of them will be there when I leave, because we must look at our own house and see how money can be saved.

The Department provides a range of central services for the entire Northern Ireland Administration through the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington and the Brussels office, and by taking a lead role on cross-cutting issues such as providing advice and guidance on the machinery of Government, drafting legislation, civil emergencies, planning, sustained development, the review of public administration (RPA), freedom of information and public appointments. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister also serves the needs of its Ministers. For that purpose, the Department maintains a small private office that supports the business needs of four Ministers. In order to carry out those roles effectively, it is essential that our staff work closely with colleagues in other Departments, employees of public bodies and representatives from organisations in the private and voluntary sector. In short, OFMDFM is a unique Department that plays a central role at the heart of the Northern Ireland Administration.

Mr Gardiner: I am sure that I will hear that sermon another time. The First Minister will be aware that one man's co-ordination may be another man's duplication. In light of that, will he make a public commitment that he will take all steps to simplify the process of government and end all instances of duplication?

Will he consider reporting back to the Assembly, and to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, on progress on that front?

2.45 pm

The First Minister: All I can say to the Member is — yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: I was almost exhausted listening to the First Minister's answer. With that workload, I am glad he is giving up one of his other roles.

Does the First Minister accept that, before new appointments are made in OFMDFM, a review of current staffing levels should take place in what many would regard as a very overweight Department?

The First Minister: That is a bigger job than the hon Member imagines. I am sure that he would not want us to cut down on the planning machinery when we need more help in that area. We have to look at the matter over the broad line, and do whatever is necessary after careful consideration.

Mr Gallagher: Does the First Minister know of any liaison between his staff and other Departments on the issue of health screening for young people participating in sport? We are all aware of the recent tragic deaths, particularly in County Tyrone and elsewhere in Ireland, within a matter of days. Will the First Minister tell us — particularly as it has implications for the Departments of Health; Education; and Culture, Arts and Leisure — whether there has been liaison on the matter?

The First Minister: The Executive are meeting this week, as the Member knows, and that is one of the matters that we will have before us.

Mr Irwin: What action did the First Minister take in support of the Department of Agriculture during the foot-and-mouth crisis?

The First Minister: I did my very best, as did my deputy, to be on the spot. We called a meeting of the Executive, and both of us used the contacts that we had in various offices and Government bodies, and I believe that we were very successful in what we did, especially in losing so little time in getting our agricultural produce not out of the market, but into the market. We did very well indeed.

Equality Agenda

3. **Mr Molloy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline how it intends to address the equality agenda. (AQO 6/08)

15. **Ms Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister how it intends to address the equality agenda. (AQO 115/08)

The First Minister: With permission, I will take questions 3 and 15 together. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is fully committed to achieving equality of opportunity for all citizens of Northern Ireland. We will continue to promote equality of opportunity through legislation where appropriate, and through a range of policy initiatives based on objective need. The framework of anti-discrimination legislation has been strengthened recently in a number of areas, for example on age and disability. We will develop proposals for further legislative change with Executive colleagues and the departmental Committees as appropriate. In addition, work aimed at promoting social inclusion for vulnerable groups is continuing, and we will endeavour to make further progress in that important area.

Mr Molloy: Does the First Minister agree that the promotion and protection of the rights of older people is an essential component of the equality agenda? Recently, I listened to a presentation by Help the Aged on issues concerning older people. What progress has been made on the appointment of a commissioner for older people?

The First Minister: I have to declare an interest in elderly people and speak for them, which I do gladly. When I look at people who are a lot younger than I am, I think that my health is doing fairly.

Yes, a view can be taken that there should be a commissioner for older people. However, it needs careful consideration and debate, and we must also look at the timing. I cannot see it happening in the next two years, as it will require a lot of work. Nevertheless, the subject should be kept before us, and I will be happy if it happens earlier.

Mr Donaldson: In the light of the First Minister's response, will his Department, in co-ordination with all Departments across the Executive, ensure that tackling poverty among our elderly citizens in Northern Ireland is made a priority? Although a commissioner would be welcome, we do not need one to achieve that. The matter requires urgent attention. There are far too many elderly people living in poverty, and fuel poverty is a big issue as we approach another winter. Will the First Minister give an assurance that tackling poverty among the elderly will be a priority for the Executive in advance of appointing a commissioner for the elderly?

The First Minister: The Member is correct. It is very important to tackle poverty among the elderly: those in poverty must be brought out of poverty, and that will be a task on its own. I have not had almost 60 years' experience in pastoral work not to know how many poverty-stricken families we have, and the difficulties that they face — especially one-parent families. It is almost impossible for a single parent to do a job, get the children to school and get the housework

done. We should all be sympathetic to that and do our best to alleviate those circumstances. As the right hon Member knows, it cannot be done easily. We must apply ourselves to it. I said to a man the other night that Northern Ireland needs a good injection of cash. I hope that something will persuade the Prime Minister to realise that he has a responsibility when we come to settle our budget.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the First Minister's comments about the framework for tackling inequality. In the absence of an interim Programme for Government, will the First Minister tell the House what measures are being taken to tackle poverty and the lack of social inclusion, and how often they are reviewed? Will the First Minister give further details of when the strategy for sexual orientation will be published and assure Members that the time frame for the introduction of the single equality Bill will be brought before the House in 2008? Will he further ensure that the comprehensive spending review will not adversely affect — directly or indirectly — the most disadvantaged in our community?

The First Minister: Of course we must have a Programme for Government. All parties must take part in that debate and bring forward their proposals. That matter is underway, and we must press on. I want to see the Programme for Government, and what steps will be taken on those issues, as soon as possible.

Single Equality Bill

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to report on the progress of the single equality Bill. (AQO 61/08)

13. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what progress had been made on the single equality Bill, including the time frame for introduction of the legislation. (AQO 21/08)

The First Minister: With permission, I will take questions 4 and 13 together. Policy proposals on single equality legislation are being developed, and Ministers will consider the options in consultation with Committee and Executive colleagues over the coming months. This is an important issue, and there has been significant consultation with the public, key stakeholders and international experts. It is a complex area. Officials are working on detailed proposals for a single equality Bill, which Ministers will, of course, wish to consider in full detail.

The Executive will also consider any other legislative priorities and will decide, in consultation with the Assembly, business planners and Committees, when legislation is to be introduced. It would not be appropriate to set firm dates for the introduction of

such legislation before Ministers had taken decisions on those issues.

Ms Lo: The proposal was put forward more than six years ago, when I was a commissioner in the Equality Commission. Will the First Minister now firmly commit to a timetable for single equality legislation or will he, once again, put it on the long finger?

The First Minister: I cannot commit myself to a timescale — I wish that I could. I would like to do it tomorrow, but that is not possible. We must take time. The Member was once a commissioner, so she knows how long it has been since a single equality Bill was first proposed. However, even with her smile and personality, she was unable to move the Equality Commission. She would not expect a tough old man such as me to be able to sway the Assembly.

Mr D Bradley: Will the First Minister at least provide Members with details of the progress that has been made on a single equality Bill?

The First Minister: I will be able to do that when proposals are put before the Executive. At present, we have not received proposals. If the Executive accept proposals, they will be discussed in the House.

Mr Wells: In his answer to Ms Lo, the First Minister indicated how complex the issue is. Will he assure Members that the views of the Assembly will be taken into account before any decision is taken on this important issue?

The First Minister: Absolutely. There must be a proper debate that brings together all sides to hear their views. Members must then fight for consensus, and, in the end, I trust that that is the way in which a decision will be taken. There will then be a Bill before the House that will encourage Members to achieve the objectives that they have in mind.

Civic Forum

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress had been made on the restoration of the Civic Forum, and to produce a detailed timetable and action plan. (AQO 8/08)

The First Minister: The Deputy First Minister and I are agreed on the importance of continuing to seek the views of civil society in developing policy. However, the previous Civic Forum had many critics, and, as the nature of civil society has changed over the past five years, we have decided to undertake a fundamental review to consider the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with civil society. We have written to the former members of the Civic Forum to ascertain their views on reconvening the Civic Forum while the review is being carried out. We are

also consulting on the terms of reference for the review process with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The review will progress as quickly as possible.

Mr P Ramsey: The SDLP welcomes the First Minister's commitment to continue with the Civic Forum. Almost 50% of those who were previously involved in the Civic Forum wish to be part of it again. They wish to help and advise Members on a range of cultural, social and economic matters. Under a review, why can we not have the Civic Forum reconstituted in operational terms?

The First Minister: The Member should not misunderstand me. I did not say that we will have a Civic Forum. I said that we will consider the matter and suggest proposals. It is now accepted that the previous Civic Forum was not representative of society in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the hon Member would wish it to be representative of all sections of the community. That situation must be remedied, and Members know that everyone must fight for their place on it. In the previous Civic Forum, its members represented only three facets of life in Northern Ireland.

Other people did not have any representation at all. Those matters must be dealt with if we are to have a Civic Forum —

Mr Speaker: Sorry to interrupt, but Question Time is over for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Renewable Energy

2. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to increase the use of renewable energies within the agrifood and rural communities. (AQO 5/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I refer my colleague to the renewable energy action plan launched by my Department on 29 January 2007. That action plan, which was produced after comprehensive consultation, focuses on promoting opportunities afforded by the sustainable development of renewable energy in the agrifood and forestry sectors and in the wider rural economy.

Key actions in the plan include support for profitable energy production, supply-chain development, forestry products and by-products, use of agricultural waste for energy production, deployment of renewable energy technologies within the wider economy and energy efficiency. To ensure successful implementation of the action plan, work has begun to set up a renewable energy policy unit in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). That unit will promote active, effective and inclusive engagement with stakeholder interests.

To highlight opportunities presented by renewable energy technologies to the land-based sector and to raise awareness of energy efficiency, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), in conjunction with stakeholders, hosted a renewable-energy industry open day in August. That successful event provided invaluable information to more than 500 individuals, mainly representatives of the farming and wider rural community.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her detailed report. What new assistance will DARD make available to the rural community for development of renewable energy projects and to help people get on board with the development of the industry, as has been seen throughout Europe?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. As the Member has pointed out, this is a fast-developing opportunity for farmers. Axis 1 and Axis 3 of the 'Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013' include measures aimed at supporting renewable energy projects and energy-efficiency technologies. In particular, funding will be available for the establishment of further willow coppice, as well as support for market development of the end product.

The Department is proposing to establish an energy from agrifood waste challenge fund, co-financed under the EU Structural Funds Competitiveness Programme to encourage the livestock and food-processing sectors to develop a range of sustainable technologies that will utilise manures and food-processing waste to produce renewable energy.

The Department plans to spend £10 million over four years to support that programme, which is due to commence in 2008. Detailed information on all those measures is being developed.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give details of any initiatives or incentives that she and her ministerial colleagues plan to bring forward for the use of renewable energy, especially in rural schools and businesses?

Ms Gildernew: Since 2003, DARD has committed £4 million in grant assistance to a range of renewable energy projects and technologies, including short-rotation willow coppice, across the North. In 2004, DARD's Forest Service established a three-year challenge fund

to encourage landowners to establish willow coppice for energy production. Under that scheme, 950 hectares of willow coppice were established, or approved for establishment, by 45 rural businesses.

The aid for energy crops scheme provides support of €45 a hectare to growers of energy crops in the North. As a keen advocate of renewable energy, I will work closely with my Executive colleagues, including the Minister of the Environment, to examine ways in which we can expand new opportunities. However, technically, aid for schools is outside my remit.

Mr T Clarke: Why is DARD proposing to spend millions of pounds on the regeneration of ex-military bases and on providing childcare places and programmes for children and young people? Does the Minister not agree that her Department ought to be helping farmers, who are under immense financial pressure?

Ms Gildernew: That question is not technically about renewable energy. However, the fact that the Department is called the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development points to the need for rural development and further schemes. We are looking at huge challenges, particularly in the red-meat, pig and poultry sectors.

Where I can help to develop new opportunities for farmers who want to consider other ways of using their land, it is incumbent upon me to do so.

There has long been a belief in rural areas that the need for childcare has been overlooked. It would be a great help to farming families, as well as to the wider rural economy and community, if provision of rural childcare were improved. I will work with ministerial colleagues in the Department of Education and in the Department for Social Development to find ways of enabling people — and women in particular — to become part of the workforce if they choose and to train to become more involved in society. That is enormously important to the rural community and economy. As Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, it is my job to enable them to do so.

Planning Problems

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to planning problems experienced by people involved in rural diversification businesses; and in relation to the introduction of appropriate changes to planning policies. (AQO 12/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I understand that some people involved in rural diversification businesses have experienced problems with the rural development programme. I appreciate that those

applications must be considered in the context of relevant planning policies and procedures. My officials continue to work with the Planning Service to ensure that those responsible expedite consideration of applications, especially where businesses are reliant upon planning permission to avail of grant aid.

An interdepartmental group has been established by the Executive to develop a revised rural planning policy. I will ensure that rural economic development is fully considered as part of that review.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her reply. Her colleague Mrs Foster, the Minister of the Environment has written a "Dear John" letter, telling me that all decisions are made under current planning policies. Given that reply, will the Minister of Agriculture tell the Minister of the Environment in no uncertain terms that the criteria for establishing businesses in rural areas are hopelessly out of date? Will she fight the corner for rural people; stop their being criminalised by enforcement officers; encourage changes that are essential, given the decline in agriculture; and then report to the Assembly?

Ms Gildernew: I will fight the corner for rural businesses, for rural people who wish to diversify and for farmers who wish to diversify into other projects. There is much to be done.

In the new dispensation, where members of the Executive work well together, I will co-operate with my colleague in the Department of the Environment to find the best way forward for rural businesses, particularly the economic opportunities available to them. I am vexed when I hear of projects that fail because time constraints on grant aid have been exceeded as a result of planning problems. I am considering that issue, and will work with ministerial colleagues to resolve it.

Mr Elliott: The Minister can do something about the criteria used for on-site planning applications where a farmer needs a second home for a member of his family or for a farm worker. Those criteria are assessed directly by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

What plans does the Minister have to change an outdated system that causes heartache for many young families in the Province?

Ms Gildernew: The farm viability criteria to which the Member refers are implemented only as part of wider planning policy. A farm dwelling, or second farm home, may fall under restrictions such as ribbon or green-belt development or lack of integration; it does not fail on the farm viability criteria alone.

I discussed farm viability criteria recently with officials, and asked whether they are necessary. I want the interdepartmental working group to discuss them. The Planning Service has worked closely with my

Department, particularly on the farm nutrient management scheme. In that respect, it was able to relax aspects of planning policy that govern the building of slurry tanks. The Assembly has expressed concerns about that in the past, and my Department has worked with officials in the Department of the Environment to eradicate difficulties.

The Department will examine all of the issues of rural planning, whether they are domestic, or business, farm buildings or slurry tanks. We will work hard to make sure that the transition towards getting planning permission is as smooth, seamless and pain-free as possible.

Mr Shannon: Everyone in the Chamber is aware of the recent landmark judicial decision in regard to PPS 14, and welcomes it. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, with special reference to the recent repeal of PPS 14, and have they taken into account the effects that that will have on the applications for diversification and planning matters for the rural community?

Ms Gildernew: Gabh mo leithscéal. I hope that the Member will appreciate that, so far, the morning has been busy, and will forgive me for not having had the time to discuss the issue with the Minister of the Environment.

I am very concerned about the issue for two reasons. First, we need to see an understanding of the needs of rural communities. PPS 14 was draconian, and did not suit the needs of rural communities, and had a real potential to disintegrate rural communities.

However, we still need to be balanced and measured in planning policy. We have something special in the North, and we want planning policies that enable visitors and local people to enjoy our countryside. We must be careful that we do not go too far in the next round, and that, through the interdepartmental working group, we find a balanced approach to rural planning commensurate with the needs of the area. There are different needs for strategies and adjustments where rural planning is needed, and also care and consideration where there may have been too much planning in the past. We will try to find a balanced approach, where we protect the countryside, as well as keeping it a living, breathing and working entity.

Local Farm Produce

4. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the major supermarket chains in Northern Ireland in relation to giving priority to the stocking and selling of local farm produce. (AQO 39/08)

Ms Gildernew: A Cheann Comhairle. The multiple retailers are major markets for food and drink produced in the North, and I have made it a priority to engage with them to discuss their policies for local sourcing and promotion of local produce. In June I met senior representatives of two of the major retailers, and plan to meet others in the coming months. During the meetings I encouraged the retailers to support the sustainability of local supplies chains, and to take account of rising input costs faced by producers and processors, and I encouraged them to increase the amount of produce sourced from the North for their stores, both locally and in Britain.

Moreover, I have just issued a letter to all of the local supermarkets, seeking their views on the increase in the price of feed and expressing my concern about the potential knock-on effects on producer margins.

I am committed to helping farmers develop strong and profitable relationships with their supply-chain partners and my Department has been proactively facilitating such communication through the supply-chain awareness programme for the past four years. We are also providing facilitation and support to groups of producers exploring market-focused initiatives.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for her answer. I will preface my supplementary question with a comment about a sector in the food supply chain that is often forgotten: the local butcher. The loyalty of the public in going to the local butcher is something that has been retained in the Province. For example, in Ballymoney there are six or seven butchers, where people go to buy local produce. Whatever we do in the retail sector, we must never forget the importance to the local farming economy of the local butcher.

I move to my supplementary question. Is it not preferable to have a structured relationship with Sainsbury's, Tesco, and the other retail chains where they may be obliged on a twice-yearly basis to submit the supply of local produce that they put on their shelves, and, as a low-pricing policy can be bad for local producers, to comment on their pricing policy?

I suggest that the Minister and her Department should consider setting up a structure with the major retail chains like Sainsbury's, Tesco, and the smaller ones, where they have to submit biannually to the Department the amount of local produce stocked, so that the general public is informed and can help the producers by buying at good farmgate prices.

3.15 pm

Ms Gildernew: I thank Mr Burnside for his supplementary question. He is right in his comments about butchers. Members all know butchers who are proud of the fact that they seek the best local produce to sell in their shops. It is important that that part of the supply chain is retained.

It is outside my remit to tell supermarkets what to do. I am not in a position to enforce price structures on them. However, I will continue to work on behalf of the industry with supermarkets, producers and retailers to try to ensure a better deal for farmers. My Department wants supermarkets to stock local produce. In my discussions with them, they tell me that that is often a response to the consumer, who wants to be able to purchase local produce.

At present, much can be done by my Department in the way of education and promotion. However, EU rules are changing. My Department will not have the same flexibility in one or two years' time, but it is often consumer demand that leads to the promotion of local produce. The Department will continue to work with all parts of the supply chain. Supermarkets are an important part in that given the amount of local produce that they sell. They are keen on the idea of contracts, whereby a farmer buys into a contract for a set period and will, therefore, know what price he will get. Although they are a good idea, contracts must reflect outside variables, such as the price of feed, for example, which has been a topical subject in today's debate and is likely to be again. Contracts must be able to reflect outside variables that might not necessarily be apparent one or two years in advance. The Department wants to work with supermarkets to ensure the position of everyone in the supply chain.

Mr P J Bradley: The Minister has touched on my question in her last comments. In discussions about supermarkets with farmers in my area, they have told me that they believe that supermarkets operate a cartel when contracting and purchasing. Does the Minister share that view?

Ms Gildernew: Mr Bradley is aware that I could not possibly comment on such a claim. My personal thoughts and feelings do not come into the matter. I am the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I must, therefore, do my best to ensure the supply of good, local food to wherever it can be sold. Supermarkets are an important link in that chain. My Department wants to maintain a good working relationship with them. To fire insults at them in the Assembly will not help me to do that. I will certainly do all that I can to improve the producer's part in the development of the supply chain.

Agrienvironment Schemes

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers that are participating in agrienvironment schemes in Northern Ireland; and the number that have not been able to participate in the last two financial years, due to lack of funding. (AQO 66/08)

Ms Gildernew: Agrienvironment schemes include the environmentally sensitive areas (ESA) scheme and the countryside management scheme (CMS). In April 2007, the numbers of ESA and CMS scheme participants were 4,318 and 8,858 respectively, which is a total of 13,176. The rural development plan for 2000-06's agrienvironment programme expired on 31 December 2006. All eligible applications were processed and, subsequently, all agrienvironment scheme agreements were issued to applicants by 31 December 2006. No one was excluded due to lack of funding. No further applications for agrienvironment schemes will be accepted until the new scheme opens under the current rural development plan 2007-13.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the importance of maintaining and expanding a good, clean, green environment in Northern Ireland, and efforts to attract both tourists and inward investors, will the Minister ensure that there will be sufficient funding in the future for whatever new schemes that come along, bearing in mind the objective that the Assembly wants to reach?

Ms Gildernew: I absolutely agree with the Member. I have seen great examples of the schemes, such as when I spent a day in the Mourne. I am keen on the agrienvironment schemes and appreciate the work that they do to enhance the local countryside. I want funding to go to those schemes and as many farmers as possible to take them up. I will ensure that the Department works closely with farmers in a co-operative manner in order to get the best out of the land and to enhance biodiversity and the rural environment.

I am enthusiastic about agrienvironment schemes, and I hope that they continue long into the future.

Grain Prices

6. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to help to protect the intensive livestock sector from increased grain prices. (AQO 51/08)

Ms Gildernew: I acknowledge that there has been a significant rise in grain prices. That is primarily the result of adverse weather conditions in Europe, increasing biofuel production and rising demand for cereals, particularly in Asia. It is a critical issue for our local producers, and they cannot be expected to continue to make losses against the massive, and increasing, input cost. They are in a precarious situation and fear for their future, and I am extremely worried about that. I have called for an open discussion among producers, processors and retailers to see what can be done to reflect better, in retail prices, those increasing costs that jeopardise the entire supply chain.

Dr W McCrea: Members recognise the global increase in the price of grain and the serious problem that it poses for the intensive livestock industry in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister take urgent steps to protect the farming industry by making representations to the processors and retailers to ensure an increase in farmgate prices, because the present financial reward to farmers is unacceptable? Farmers cannot be expected to produce an excellent product for a price that is below production costs. That situation cannot continue.

Ms Gildernew: I agree. That work has already started and will continue. It is a challenging time for the industry. We will not feel the effects of some of the changes that the Department has already brought in — for example, the set-aside legislation — until next year. I am concerned about that, given that many people in the industry have already bought their grains at a fixed rate. I am hugely worried about the impact that next year's costs will have on the industry.

I am also working particularly closely with the pork sector, because it will be the first to feel the impact; I am also working with other sectors, such as the poultry sector. The rise in grain prices will have a detrimental impact on the industry, and prices will rise very shortly. Last week, I warned that if the price of food does not rise to reflect the Member's comment about the farming industry, producers could go out of business, and there could be food shortages. I do not want that to happen. We need a fair price for a product that has been born or grown here. I want farmers to get a better price for their products.

Mr Burns: What level of increase in grain prices, over what period of time, would be required before the Minister would introduce protective measures to ensure the continuing success of our meat and dairy farming sectors?

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what protective factors the Member is referring to. I will work closely with stakeholders and with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on how to tackle those challenges. I am very concerned about the increase in costs. The price of grain has almost doubled in one year, and that is having a knock-on effect, given the number of food products that rely on maize, corn, barley or oats. There will be an increase in prices. We will work, at every level, to try to help the industry as much as we can.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister appreciate the urgent need to help those people who remain in Northern Ireland's pig industry — the fourth-largest industry in the food sector? In the past few days, 18 producers have moved out of pig production. The Minister said that she was fighting to help rural businesses and that she was distressed when they failed. However, Northern Ireland's pig industry is failing. Pig farmers are in a

similarly dire situation in Germany, where it costs £21 to produce a pig and £24 to produce a weaner; there, farmers are given a subsidy of £17 per pig by the German Government. Those farmers are still gassing pigs.

Does the Minister want that to become the picture in Northern Ireland? She found over £3 million of funding for potato growers who found themselves in circumstances beyond their control. Will the Minister consider doing likewise for the pig industry in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I take it that the Member has a supplementary question?

Mr Kennedy: I heard several anyway. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Gildernew: I do not have the details of that, but I will look into it. There are rules around intervention, so I would like to see how Germany got around that. Generally, the Government do not get involved in the determination of farm-gate prices — that is a matter for the parties concerned. As I have already said, I will work very hard with all aspects of the supply chain to ensure that we get a fair price for farmers. I assure the Member that the challenges that face the pork sector are of particular concern to me.

Mr McNarry: Will you answer the question?

A Member: What was the question? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Fishing Industry

7. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans for the December Council negotiations in Europe on Northern Ireland's fishing industry. (AQO 129/08)

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. It is clear that the main issue this year is likely to be the further restriction on fishing effort. I wish to ensure that our vessels have sufficient fishing days at sea to catch their quotas. As part of the review of the cod recovery plan, the European Commission is likely to propose new measures for controlling fishing effort during 2008, and there is a strong case for no significant changes to current effort control arrangements this December.

With regard to fish quotas, we await publication of the main scientific evidence advice on Irish Sea fish stocks in October. We will discuss the implications of that advice in detail with the industry. However, I want to ensure that the significant increase in prawn quotas that was secured last year is retained and that the proposed reduction in the herring quota is reversed.

The industry has also made it clear that an increase in the haddock quota is urgently needed, and we will work closely with Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

(AFBI) scientists and the industry to see if a case can be developed to persuade the Commission. Meetings have already been held with our fishing industry representatives to identify their main issues of concern for this December's Fisheries Council, and there will be further consultations as more proposals emerge from the Commission. I will also meet my counterparts in the other devolved Administrations and in the South to agree a common approach, as far as possible.

Mr W Clarke: A Cheann Comhairle. Many of the scientific assessments for various sea fish stocks are contradictory. What is the Minister doing to address that so that quotas can be increased?

Ms Gildernew: I agree — without proper scientific data, we often get uncertain assessments, which, in turn, lead to precautionary advice to reduce quotas. Therefore, improving the supply of data available to the Commission's fisheries scientists is to our benefit and to the benefit of the industry. That will require close co-operation between official scientists and fishermen, which I fully support.

In June this year, the Commission approved the Irish Sea data enhancement pilot project, which involves scientists and fishermen from North and South of the island, as well as from England, collaborating to produce additional catch-and-discard data to allow better stock assessments to be made. Participating fishermen will receive additional days at sea in return for their efforts, and I fully support the retention of that scheme this December. Such collaborative projects are very welcome, but it is also vital that there is full participation in statutory data collection programmes if we are to develop robust cases for quota increases that will influence the Commission's advisers and give me a strong basis on which to make my arguments at the coming Fisheries Council.

Caseous Lymphadenitis

8. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to introduce a slaughter policy and compensation scheme for caseous lymphadenitis. (AQO 37/08)

Ms Gildernew: I have no plans to introduce a slaughter policy and compensation scheme for sheep and goats affected by caseous lymphadenitis (CLA). Following a review of the CLA situation in 2004, such a policy was discontinued as it was unlikely, owing to the nature of the disease and the lack of a reliable test, that CLA could be effectively controlled or eradicated from our flocks. That continues to be the position, which means that a slaughter-and-compensation scheme is not, at this time, an effective way of dealing with the disease.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will be aware of the serious economic damage that an outbreak of CLA can inflict on the already precarious livelihoods of sheep farmers. Why should the principle of a slaughter-and-compensation policy, which underpins other major diseases, not be extended to this significant area?

Ms Gildernew: My Department's current veterinary assessment is that a slaughter policy would not be an effective way of dealing with CLA. The disease has already spread and established itself within the domestic flock, although the extent of the spread is difficult to quantify due to the insidious nature of the disease. Another key factor is that there is no reliable individual test for CLA, so replacement animals may not be free of the disease, and it is also not possible to ensure that imported animals are free of the disease. It would therefore not be possible to eradicate the disease through a testing and slaughter programme.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

National Lottery Funding

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what are his plans to address the shortfall in funding, in light of the recent decision by the National Lottery to redirect £42 million from Northern Ireland's grant, and channel it towards the Olympic Games in 2012. (AQO 45/08)

16. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to offset the impact on arts and community groups of the reduction in National Lottery funding, due to its redirection to support 2012 London Olympic Games projects. (AQO 33/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 1 and 16 together. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is making bids for funding as part of the comprehensive spending review 2008-11 to support the development of sport and the arts. Those bids will take account of reductions in funding resulting from prioritisation of lottery spending on the London Olympics.

The Department is also making bids for funding for sport and the arts under the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-18. The Olympics will also provide some further funding opportunities for cultural projects associated with the Cultural Olympiad. I will be keen to see arts organisations engage with those opportunities when they arise.

In relation to community groups, the Big Lottery Fund has made a public commitment that, providing forecasted lottery income is maintained, current programmes for community groups will not be materially affected by the diversion of funds to the Olympics. The Big Lottery Fund advises that its undertaking to provide 60% to 70% of its funding to the voluntary and community sectors will be unaffected. That will mean that the Big Lottery Fund will invest a minimum of £60 million in the voluntary and community sectors between 2006 and 2009.

The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has recently confirmed that an agreement has been reached with the Mayor of London under which DCMS should, in time, be able to refund the £675 million additional contribution to the lottery distributors. It is hoped that that will come from the proceeds of the sale of Olympic Park land post-2012.

Mr McCarthy: May I say to the Minister that making bids at this time is no guarantee; nor are hopes useful. Bearing in mind that the loss of jobs will be horrendous, is this not another case of the UK Government sacrificing the interests of the regions to placate those of the south-east of England? The voluntary sector is suffering from a shortfall of £28.7 million; the built heritage sector is £4.83 million short of its usual allocation, while the Arts Council and Sport Northern Ireland are £4.5 million and £4.1 million short respectively. The Minister knows that all of those organisations are already grossly underfunded. What steps is the Minister taking to work with other devolved Administrations to ensure that a similar situation cannot occur in the future in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: In the first instance, all the devolved Administrations stated that they were opposed to the move at the outset, and sought to reduce the amount of money that would go to the London Olympics from those sources at this time. We will vigorously oppose any further leakage of money from Northern Ireland. However, we must concentrate on what we can do now, which is, within our own block budget, to identify how the arts, sport and cultural pursuits can benefit the Northern Ireland community and its economy, and to seek to raise funding for those facilities.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister state which Olympic events, if any, he intends to try to bring to Northern Ireland? Has he made an assessment of how much income those events could potentially generate to offset the loss of any lottery funding?

Mr Poots: There are a limited number of Olympic events that could be brought to Northern Ireland. We have been informed that if we had a stadium that was fit for purpose, we could potentially get three Olympic football matches. However, there are other opportunities associated with the Olympics; in

particular, athletes wishing to acclimatise in the UK could come to Northern Ireland and enjoy the training facilities that will be available.

As part of that, DCAL has set aside money in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) to develop elite facilities. A range of facilities will be developed for those Olympians to come and participate in Northern Ireland.

Mr McGlone: To what extent has funding to Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, the GAA, been affected and can the Minister provide some detail on the bids that have been made to address the shortfall?

Mr Poots: I am not aware that any bids by the GAA have been affected by what has taken place thus far. The Department has dealt with applications as they have come in. Those and future applications will be dealt with after the completion of the 2008-11 comprehensive spending review. DCAL will be able to make decisions based on the outcome of the Northern Ireland Budget.

Irish and Ulster Scots: Funding and Parity

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to (a) establish the overall levels of departmental funding for the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots cultural outlook in recent years; and (b) introduce measures to ensure parity exists for each. (AQO 78/08)

Mr Poots: My Department collates annual returns from all Northern Ireland Civil Service departments and the NIO on the linguistic diversity projects. That includes capital and resource funding for Irish-medium education, funding in Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and Irish language projects, programmes, supported organisations and translations. In the 2006-07 financial year, the provisional funding figures for Irish language activities amounted to £17,064,000, with £639,000 for Ulster Scots. Funding to the North/South Language Body by my Department for 2007 will be £3.43 million, with £1.879 million for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency respectively. The Northern Ireland Executive are committed to affording equal respect and recognition to the Ulster-Scots and Irish languages and to supporting the development of their respective cultural traditions. The funding provided to each reflects the differing range of projects, programmes and supported organisations.

Mr Campbell: Were I a satirist, I might begin my question to the Minister with the words, “Cora my Yogi Bear, a can coca colya.” However, setting humour to one side, the information provided by the Minister confirms what I established from the direct rule Minister last year — that the Irish language obtains 30 times more public funding than the Ulster-Scots cultural

outlook. Given that that is the case, will the Minister confirm that the figures he has outlined to the Assembly today will be taken into account when he is deliberating on future budget allocations on the basis of parity for all of the people with a cultural outlook in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: Funding for Irish and Ulster Scots is a cross-departmental matter. One of the issues is that almost £12 million is spent by the Department of Education on those matters. It is up to the Assembly and the relevant Committees to identify the appropriateness of that level of spending. I will take on board the issues that affect my Department but I ask Members to recognise that the current situation and circumstances are a result of decisions made by direct rule Ministers. There are people outside the House who said they wanted more of that type of activity. I want to equalise things and take them forward in a more balanced way. That is why we are in the House and that is why I am at this Table. I want a more equitable situation in Northern Ireland; others outside the House would prefer discrimination to continue.

Mrs Hanna: I ask the Minister to take into consideration, when he looks at the matter, the most recent census figures, which show that around 10% of the population of Northern Ireland speak the Irish language and only 2% speak Ulster Scots. I hope that those figures will be reflected in the allocation of resources.

Mr Poots: My Department must consider the value of the census. I could probably claim that I speak Irish because I can say a few words, but that does not make me a fluent Irish speaker. I am interested to know how many of those 10% could read and understand a document sent to them in Irish. If those people did not also receive a version in English, I wonder whether it would prevent them from acting as they had intended. That figure would better reflect the true need.

Irish Language Bill

3. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the timescale for the publication of the second consultation on an Irish language Bill. (AQO 126/08)

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he would give an update on his Department's current position on an Irish language Act. (AQO 86/08)

Mr Poots: I think that the Member said, “Question 3”. I am pretty sharp today, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I shall answer questions 3 and 6 together.

The consultation on the indicative draft clauses of the Irish language legislation closed on 5 June 2007.

Over 70% of the 11,000 responses have been processed to date, and I intend to make a statement to the House in the early autumn.

Mr Brolly: I do not accept that the rights of Irish speakers should be subject to consultation. A right is a right. Does the Minister believe that recognising in law the rights of Irish speakers is a positive demonstration of respect for the rights of others? Does he agree that the Irish language and the right to speak Irish threaten no one and that it is not compulsory? Does the Minister agree that the Irish language is not the property of any one section of our people but belongs to everyone?

Mr Poots: I totally agree with the Member that the Irish language is not compulsory and should not become so. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McFarland: Detailed, agreed provision for the development of the Irish language was contained in the Belfast Agreement and subsequently implemented by the former Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, my colleague Michael McGimpsey. Therefore, does the Minister agree that the discussion on timetabling would be irrelevant had he and his party not agreed to an unnecessary Irish language Act at St Andrews?

Mr Poots: I think that Mr McFarland was at St Andrews. The DUP has never agreed to an Irish language Act — not before St Andrews, not at St Andrews and not since St Andrews.

Mr McCausland: The campaign for an Irish language Act has been framed and fronted by Sinn Féin. That has turned the Irish language into a cultural weapon. As Sinn Féin states in one of its publications, it is:

“another bullet in the freedom struggle”.

Does the Minister agree that a divisive Irish language Act should be avoided and that the Assembly should instead seek to develop language through a coherent strategy for the Irish language in keeping with the Council of Europe’s Charter for Regional or Minority Languages?

Mr Poots: I have had the privilege of meeting people from a Gaelic background, including some from a Scots Gaelic background, who happened to be mostly Scottish Presbyterians. Indeed, over 100 years ago, the Irish language was more commonly spoken by those of Presbyterian origin. In recent years, efforts to promote the Irish language that were associated with political movements have not helped it to move forward on a cross-community basis.

Significant steps have already been taken as part of the strategy to enhance, develop and protect the Irish language through the Council of Europe’s Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Irish language is recognised under part III of the charter, which details the 36 provisions that the UK Government have applied solely to Irish in Northern Ireland. Much of the work

on those provisions was done as a consequence of the work of the previous Administration, particularly the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr McGimpsey. Therefore, the process of enhancing, developing and protecting the Irish language has been going on for a long time in Northern Ireland.

Ulster Grand Prix and Motorcycling

4. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the success of the 2007 Ulster Grand Prix week and to outline his plans to support the Ulster Grand Prix in the future.

(AQO 32/08)

10. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he intends to take to ensure the continued development of the sport of motorcycling in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 71/08)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 10 together.

3.45 pm

I was pleased to witness the success of this year’s Ulster Grand Prix at first hand. I would like to take the opportunity to offer my congratulations to all those who offered support, including the Member, and were involved in the organisation of the week-long event.

Future support for the Ulster Grand Prix is a matter for the umbrella body for motor sport, the 2&4 Wheel Motor Sport Steering Group Ltd. This year, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure made an additional £150,000 available to the 2&4 Wheel Motor Sport Steering Group, of which £100,000 was used to purchase safety equipment, which is available for use by the event organisers. In addition, Sport Northern Ireland is currently assisting the 2&4 Wheel Motor Sport Steering Group with the preparation of a business case setting out future funding requirements.

Responsibility for the development of the sport of motorcycling in Northern Ireland rests with the Motorcycle Union of Ireland (Ulster Centre), as represented by the 2&4 Wheel Motor Sport Steering Group. I recently had discussions with the Motorcycle Union of Ireland and the Dundrod club, and they will get back to me shortly with proposals for developing the sport.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for that and join with him in congratulating the organisers of the Ulster Grand Prix, which took place in the most atrocious conditions in the almost 100-year-old history of the race. The organisers and unpaid marshals managed to get water off the course and the race going. I thank the main sponsors — the independent newspapers and the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ — for a tremendous promotional event.

Minister, there are three great international road races left in the world: the North West 200; the TT, which is unique to the Isle of Man; and the Ulster Grand Prix. Two of these are Northern Irish. The North West 200 has become a family-orientated, Province-wide tourist attraction. The TT is unique. The Ulster Grand Prix is constantly being squeezed and has little financial backing. I ask the Minister to make a special case for the Ulster Grand Prix in his discussions with the organisers and the 2&4 Wheel Motor Sport Steering Group because the race must be retained for the Province and this sport.

Mr Poots: The first issue of road racing is the safety of riders; that must be paramount. Spending and funding should be dedicated to safety first. The second issue is the success of the event. The race itself is spectacular, and we receive support for marketing, corporate branding and maximising corporate hospitality. There are lots of opportunities for the Ulster Grand Prix to progress. Not all of it is related to funding; it is also about how we can assist in developing the professional capacity of the Ulster Grand Prix. Work should commence on road racing in Northern Ireland to ensure that it continues to grow and thrive and bring its benefits to tourism and economic development in Northern Ireland.

Mr Hamilton: We all value the excellent contribution made to the sport by individual motorcycling clubs. Does the Minister agree that if we are to continue to progress the sport and maximise the opportunities provided by motorcycling, a strategic co-ordinated approach is important?

Mr Poots: I think the Member is right, and it is as easy to market several of the races as it is to market one, so we can concentrate resources together and make savings. It is the same with some of the management aspects. We need to look at a more strategic approach to road racing. The clubs that organise it do a tremendous job, but many of these people are volunteers, and if we can help them to develop a more professional approach, it will assist in the growth of the sport.

All-Ireland Velodrome

5. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to assess the potential development of an all-Ireland cycling velodrome based in Newcastle, County Down, or in Belfast. (AQO 119/08)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland is currently managing an elite facilities capital programme on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. On Wednesday 5 September I announced that 15 of the 27 applications received by Sport Northern Ireland and the initial expression-of-interest competition had been assessed as suitable for progression to stage 2.

Three of the applications relate to the potential development of a velodrome, and the proposed sites include Newcastle, Belfast and Newry. A strategic outline business case is being prepared seeking budget approval for the elite facilities capital programme, and, subject to approval of the business case, the three velodrome applicants, along with the other twelve, will be given three months to prepare an outline business case for their individual projects. Following assessment of those business cases by Sport Northern Ireland, a recommendation will be made to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. A further selection process will then take place, and successful applicants from the fifteen will be invited to proceed.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply. What measures will he put in place to develop infrastructure for cycling, including mountain biking?

Mr Poots: The development of a velodrome, which would be hugely significant for cycling, was identified as a priority in the ISNI bid for the development of elite facilities. With regard to mountain biking and other aspects of cycling, my Department recently wrote to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to open up discussion on the use of its facilities for cycling, because we have some wonderful assets in Northern Ireland for such activity and we would like to make full use of those resources.

Lord Browne: I welcome the fact that Belfast is through to the next stage of the competition for the design of the velodrome. The proposal for Belfast is more innovative than the others, because the design is not only for a cycling track but for a multi-purpose facility that can accommodate other sports such as judo, boxing and table tennis. However, the question is: how much money will be available for the elite facilities capital programme? The site identified in east Belfast would be the most cost effective, as much of the necessary infrastructure is already in place.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his bid. I am not sure whether he had anything to do with filling in the application form, but I understand that it was well completed, so perhaps he did have something to do with it.

The velodrome will be built in County Down, because the proposed site in Belfast is also on the County Down side of the city. Having said that, we will consider all the applications and they will be judged fairly, on merit and on value for money. Fifty-three million pounds has been set aside in the investment strategy to deliver the velodrome, but that figure is still to be finally negotiated with the Department of Finance and Personnel. Ultimately, the swimming pool will be the first project to receive funding from ISNI, and North Down Borough Council will work up a plan for the delivery

of that project. Those decisions will come further down the line.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Sports Coaches

7. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to increase the number of sports coaches. (AQO 122/08)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for establishing the strategic development for coaching in Northern Ireland. In that capacity, it has been involved in the development of — and has endorsed — the UK coaching framework 2003-2017, a 3-7-11 action plan that sets out a UK-wide plan for the development of coaching over the next 10 years. Sport Northern Ireland is also working with the Irish Sports Council on the development of a coaching strategy for Irish sport. In addition, coaching has been identified as the key target area in the new 10-year draft strategy for sport and physical recreation, which is being developed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland. I hope to publish the draft strategy for consultation in the near future.

Mr P Maskey: In the past few days, four young people have died while participating in sport. Will the Minister make any provision for defibrillators in sporting facilities and for training coaches to gain medical expertise?

Mr Poots: I understand that defibrillators were available where both young boys died. First, I express my personal regret at the death of the two boys, and extend my condolences to their families. The Ulster secretary of the GAA, Danny Murphy, has raised the issue of screening young people before participating in sport, and that would have to be considered by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Such a measure would have an additional cost, but it would be money well spent. It is not for my Department to decide, but it is a big issue that has touched communities across Northern Ireland. It is a tragedy that we want to avoid in future.

Mr Gallagher: Both the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and, earlier, the First Minister covered the issue that I had intended to raise.

Creative Media Industry Clusters

8. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his strategies to provide creative media industry clusters in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 15/08)

Mr Poots: I recognise the increasingly important contribution of the creative industries to a modern,

knowledge-based economy and to sustainable employment. In 2005, Northern Ireland had more than 2,500 such enterprises employing 34,600 people — about 4.7% of total employment. My Department leads in the overarching strategy for creative industries in conjunction with other Departments and Invest Northern Ireland. I am bidding for a creativity seed fund in the comprehensive spending review to assist emerging businesses in the sector.

In the Member's constituency, the Department funds the Nerve Centre, which is based in a former shirt factory and which has developed into a world-class creative hub providing young people with opportunities to develop skills in creative media, including music and digital media technologies. My Department has also been working closely with Ilex to oversee the distribution of the north-west cultural challenge fund to enhance the cultural infrastructure of the city of Londonderry further.

My Department also endorses the concept of the Cathedral Quarter as a creative cluster in Belfast. DCAL has provided funding for a new metropolitan arts centre and for the Black Box, and is also considering a business case from Oh Yeah to establish a music hub in the Cathedral Quarter.

My Department also supports the arts in that area to promote an environment in which creative entrepreneurs can flourish. Northern Ireland Screen has a three-year licence to operate the Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter as a film studio, and plans to carry out a study into the long-term viability of a creative cluster based around the Paint Hall. My Department is working closely with Invest Northern Ireland, which is developing a strategy for the growth of a digital content sector, which will include the development of networks and clusters. My Department also supports work by DETI, Invest Northern Ireland and a special EU programmes body to develop a creative industries support programme in which creative media will feature strongly.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for such a detailed breakdown of his ministerial commitment to the issue. I suggest that the Minister visit the very successful cluster of television production companies based in and around Connemara, County Galway. Perhaps the Minister and his officials could go there to see the models of good practice in creative industries.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for that suggestion. We in Northern Ireland have many opportunities, but to develop them we need the support of the BBC and UTV, and I would like them to step up to the mark. There is a great deal of film production in Northern Ireland, and I would like to see more productions for the television channels that are associated with work in Northern Ireland. Money has gone to such programmes

before, but, unfortunately, most of the filming has taken place in other locations.

Mr Craig: Given the importance of the creative media industry in Northern Ireland, which, as the Minister said, employs almost 5% of the total workforce, what plans does he have to assist its expansion considering that traditional industries in Northern Ireland are continuing to decline?

Mr Poets: Creative industries are increasingly recognised for their growth potential and for the contribution that they make to the national economy. As I said, their contribution to the United Kingdom economy equates to about 7% gross value added, and they employ around two million people. The sector is growing at twice the rate of the national economy and is similar in size to the financial services sector. Cultural and creative industries also bring wider social and economic benefits, and a thriving arts scene acts as a catalyst for the development of tourism, inward investment and regeneration. Furthermore, creativity and innovation are important drivers for success in most industries.

In 2001, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure established a creativity seed fund with Executive programme funds —

4.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I apologise for interrupting the Minister, but Question Time is up. We will resume the debate on the economic development task force.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Economic Development Task Force

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to establish a task force to address urgently the economic development of the west, including the areas covered by Fermanagh, Omagh, Strabane, Dungannon and Cookstown District Councils; and further calls upon the Minister to bring forward a report of the task force by 31st March 2008, to include specific recommendations to tackle neglect, increase investment and maximise opportunities for North-South funding aimed at improving infrastructure and achieving higher levels of employment and employability in these areas. — [*Mr Gallagher.*]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after the first “to” and insert

“investigate with relevant Ministers the economic development of the west, including the areas covered by Fermanagh, Omagh, Strabane, Cookstown, and Dungannon District Councils; and to ensure that these matters, including infrastructure, employment and employability, are taken into account in the discussions leading to the Programme for Government, Budget and Comprehensive Spending Review.” — [*Lord Morrow.*]

Mr Newton: Judging by Members' comments, it is clear that all elected representatives recognise the importance of the economy in taking Northern Ireland forward. Economic prosperity is high on the agendas of all parties. We may differ on how best to address the economy, but it has become a greater priority for all parties.

I identify and sympathise with the problems that Mr Gallagher mentioned, and I understand the issues that he raised. I share his concerns. However, we differ in how those problems should be addressed. Therefore, I support the amendment.

I could quote figures that would substantiate my call for a task force, but I will not approach the debate in that way. Likewise, I could quote figures from areas in East Belfast such as the Newtownards Road and Dee Street where there is an unemployment rate of 6·3%, of whom 40% have been categorised as long-term unemployed. The area around the Mountpottinger Road and the Albertbridge Road is the ninth most deprived area in Northern Ireland. It has an unemployment rate of 9·3%, of which almost 50% are long-term employed. I could continue to quote figures that, for instance, illustrate that 17,000 people in my constituency are regarded as having difficulty with reading and writing.

Every Member who has spoken in the debate has stated that they want to see sound, sustainable economic prosperity in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as the motion specifies. However, if Members are to address the problem overall, they must remember that this is a small area with a population of only 1·7 million people. Within two hours or thereabouts, one can drive to any part of Northern Ireland. That suggests that an economic

task force targeting one area would have less of an impact than addressing the problem overall.

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

When Members are discussing creating a stronger economy through the private sector and commercial manufacturing, I ask them to consider the Varney Review. It would be of great benefit if Northern Ireland were to achieve a corporate tax of 12·5%, the feasibility of which Sir David Varney is examining. I would prefer a corporate tax of 10% for Northern Ireland so that we can separate ourselves from, and give ourselves a slight advantage over, the Republic of Ireland. However, a reduction in corporate tax alone could achieve a great deal in economic growth and should be central to any strategic and political planning.

I empathise with Mr Gallagher. He stated that improvements in the economy will be brought about by investment in infrastructure, roads and health. The Minister dealt adequately with that, in that it does require the review of all the other Departments to produce a holistic policy.

Lord Morrow focused on the issues, referring to WEST and the fact that that is an ongoing area of work. He also referred to the need to seek additional funding for tourism opportunities, but we do not necessarily need a task force to tell us that. Indeed, Mr Molloy indicated that a new approach to the west is needed. The figures that the Minister quoted were revealing. I could argue that TSN is in fact a form of discrimination against my constituency, in the sense that there is no TSN area in my constituency. It has pockets of deprivation that are not being addressed. However, the Minister was able to indicate that while the target is for 75% of investment to be in TSN areas, 80% has been achieved.

Mr Cree concentrated his efforts on UK regional policy. I agree with his comments on what Mike Smyth said about regional policy, which might be identified in some ways as a task force, and is not working —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Newton: OK.

Mr Gallagher: I remind Members that I made it very clear that the purpose of the motion was not to divert resources away from anyone else's constituency or any other areas of disadvantage, but to draw attention to the disadvantage in the west.

My thanks to all the Members who came into the Chamber and took part in the debate. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was present for all the debate. He said that it would present difficulties for him if Members in other areas were to bring up similar proposals, and he was not the only Member who raised that concern. The fact is that no other area in Northern

Ireland has suffered the effects of regional imbalance as acutely as the west. There are specific disadvantages and past neglects that set the west apart.

The Minister did recognise some of the successes in the west, as we all do. That success, and the growing reputation of some of our companies, is due, in part at least, to good support from Invest Northern Ireland. That support has been going to the local indigenous companies, which local people rely on for jobs. INI support is well recognised. However, I do not accept the Minister's claim that INI is bringing foreign investment to the west. That is not happening — and that is not only my view; it is shared by other elected representatives, and by people on the ground. Much more work needs to be done, and there is a very strong view that that is part of INI's brief. The view is that INI is performing very poorly when it comes to getting foreign investment to come in through Belfast, or wherever, and move into the west.

The Minister specifically mentioned the support given by Government agencies where there is disadvantage. It is good to hear that, but he did not tell us how much of that support for disadvantaged areas is going into the disadvantaged areas in the west, for example, Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

The Member for East Londonderry, Gregory Campbell, intervened during the Minister's contribution. He said that assistance for disadvantaged areas should not be based on geography and that he opposed the motion. That is all right. However, the amendment that he supports also refers to disadvantage on the grounds of geography. I cannot make any sense of Mr Campbell's intervention.

Many Members spoke in favour of the motion. It is clear from the issues that arose consistently — roads, decentralisation, inward investment and health — what the important issues are for the west, and that they must be addressed. Many Members commended the work of WEST, which comprises the five councils. I also referred to the work of WEST in my initial contribution, and it does very good work. However, that work needs focus and cohesion, which must come from Departments. It should not come only from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but from the co-ordination and collaboration of almost all the Departments.

I thank those Members who gave reasoned and persuasive arguments supporting the motion. Dr Deeny, in addition to pointing out — quite rightly — that the amendment is weak, raised the issue of health and the concerns about hospitals in the west. If the debate has done one thing, it has drawn attention to the concerns about the travel times of the people in the west to hospitals, especially those in more rural areas. An air ambulance would go a long way towards addressing concerns about the golden hour. There is

potential for expanding a helicopter repair business and associated activities at Enniskillen (St Angelo) Airport — indeed, there is a compelling case for an all-Ireland air ambulance based at Enniskillen. That is one example that would have implications across several Departments.

Several Members speaking in support of the amendment referred to task forces. Members seem to think that because there were task forces in the past, we should not have them any more, as they did not achieve anything. Members are right: the task forces did not achieve anything, but they were not part of the Assembly. No task force has been brought before the Assembly, which is working on behalf of all the people on the basis of equality and addressing social need.

Under direct rule, many Members were involved in the work of task forces for their councils, but that work was placed on a shelf and left there. However, an Assembly task force, with specific recommendations, would have accountability; we could see what our Departments and elected representatives were doing, and the public could see what happens. A task force, with specific recommendations, would be the best way to address economic development in the west. It is not good enough to leave the work to the Executive. The people on the street want to know what has changed since direct rule; they want to know where the £30 million needed to run the Assembly is going and what the Executive are doing.

If Members reject the motion, they will send out the message that the issue will be dealt with somewhere in the heart of Government. If we are around when the papers are released under the 30-year rule, we might find out what went on in the Executive. Members have an opportunity to set out a way forward for the west and to build on the work of elected representatives from all the parties that have sat in local councils in the west and given their stamp of approval to the new strategy for the west at council level.

4.15 pm

As I said, undertaking the task involves collaboration and co-operation. How better can Members show that they are taking the issue seriously and are co-operating on it than by supporting the motion?

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 49; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy,

Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Mrs Hanna.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to investigate with relevant Ministers the economic development of the west, including the areas covered by Fermanagh, Omagh, Strabane, Cookstown, and Dungannon District Councils; and to ensure that these matters, including infrastructure, employment and employability, are taken into account in the discussions leading to the Programme for Government, Budget and Comprehensive Spending Review.

4.30 pm

Tax-Varying Powers

Mr 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms J McCann: I beg to move

“That this Assembly supports the transfer of tax varying powers to the Executive, along with the establishment of an Executive borrowing facility.”

It was heartening during the previous debate to hear the consensus for a strong economy and particularly to hear the comments of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

This debate is also important and it will not end after the vote is taken on the motion — it is too important. How we fund our policies will be at the heart of many of the key matters that Members will discuss in the coming days and weeks.

The budgeting of the Programme for Government and the setting of funding priorities will be the first tests of how we, as local politicians, can make a difference in education, health, housing and the economy. There are further key issues such as water charges, the review of rating, the Varney Review, industrial derating, and the use of public finance for public investment, all of which will depend on our ability to utilise the available financial resources.

The debate on our level of fiscal freedom will be at the heart of all those issues. The demand for tax-varying powers and an Executive borrowing facility are important. We should have the confidence to take responsibility for those matters.

The economic performance of the North of Ireland has been and continues to be poor in comparison to the rest of Ireland, and Britain. It is not just political instability, deep societal divisions and over 30 years of conflict that have caused that situation — there are deep patterns of discrimination and disadvantage, which have resulted in a lack of economic development. The local economy is imbalanced in the relative contributions of the public and private sectors to economic activity. Inward investment is sluggish, and the growth of indigenous business is low. Employment is concentrated in the service sector with low-paid, low-skilled and low-security jobs. Those facts highlight the scale of the problem.

Public spending is responsible for 63% of our gross domestic product. Economic output is approximately 20% below the British average, and has also fallen behind the Twenty-six Counties. As was borne out during the previous debate, the low employment figure

of less than 5% conceals the fact that levels of economic inactivity are far higher. The number of people on incapacity benefit is 74% higher than the British average, and the fact that university graduates are leaving in droves is contributing to a skills deficit.

Clearly, therefore, the tools with which to make a difference are needed.

The case for differential tax treatment in the North of Ireland rests on the fact that existing policy measures are inadequate. Although there is no doubt that the lowering of corporation tax is important to the economy, and a level playing field on the island of Ireland would go a long way towards attracting and sustaining foreign direct investment (FDI), more must be done to deliver investment in people, skills and infrastructure. The bottom line is that local politicians are those who should drive forward the agenda for change, and not British Treasury Ministers.

It should be noted that the debate is not solely about income tax. The Assembly must cast the net wider than that. It must be bold in its approach and consider such incentives as targeted tax reliefs for rural businesses, the manufacturing sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Many hold the view that tax-varying powers could also help to offset investment problems that are created by industrial derating. Initiatives such as plastic-bag tax or other green levies could be considered, some of which — the plastic-bag tax, in particular — have been successful in the South. The Assembly could also examine taxes on inheritance, real estate, gambling and vehicles.

A crucial aspect of strengthening enterprise is the nurturing of new businesses. Part of that should involve lightening the financial burden on those businesses during their start-up period through a system of tax relief for new businesses on the basis of a compulsory, agreed and accountable action plan, particularly for those who locate in New TSN areas.

My party is not alone in seeking much greater fiscal freedom. I do not believe that it is alone in wanting the Executive to have tax-varying powers. It also wants the Executive to be able to develop a borrowing facility. Such fiscal freedoms can unlock the Assembly's potential to set its own funding priorities. They would also be an essential component in the development of a radical plan of action to tackle deprivation and to ensure the long-term economic development that is needed. Without them, the Assembly will be set to fail. There will be huge funding gaps across the public spending programme. It will be forced to rely to a greater degree on private finance to develop investment in essential infrastructure.

The Assembly will face many tough choices and difficulties in the time ahead unless it moves to develop

greater fiscal freedom and strengthen the local economy. I, therefore, ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Weir: I find myself in agreement with one small point that the proposer of the motion has put forward, which is that there is growing consensus that Northern Ireland must have a stronger economy. Indeed, it is for the very reason that my party supports the ideal of a strong economy in Northern Ireland that it will not support the motion that has been put forward by the Members in the opposite Benches. My party regards the motion to be ill-judged, ill-conceived and, indeed, with consequences that I suspect the Members opposite have not considered.

I was somewhat struck by the picture that was painted by the Member — one with which many of us would have a great deal of sympathy — of trying to create a low-tax economy. I am aware that the party sitting opposite is somewhat chameleon-like when it comes to its tax policy. Not long ago, in the Republic of Ireland, its call was to raise corporation tax; then it was to reduce it. By the sound of the nice picture that was painted by the proposer of the motion — that of a thriving low-tax economy — one can detect a nascent conversion to Thatcherite principles from across the Chamber. However, I wonder how deep that commitment is.

Unless the power to vary tax levels will be used as some sort of macho tool that the Assembly can say it has, regardless of whether it actually wants to use it, it can be used only in either of two ways. The Scottish Parliament has shown reluctance to use tax-varying powers. Despite the number of years that it has been in place and the opportunity to vary the rate of income tax by three pence from its outset, the Scottish Parliament has steered clear of those powers.

One of two scenarios can take place with tax variation, either of which the Member who moved the motion seems to have hinted at as being an option, even though she has not said so explicitly. One scenario is that we use tax-varying powers to reduce income tax and reduce the levels of taxation in the country. Obviously, a reduction in the level of income tax could help to stimulate the economy. However, any tax cuts would then be directly related to the block grant.

If we were to reduce our levels of taxation to stimulate the economy in a wider context, and therefore have a reduced block grant, can Sinn Féin Members tell me which programmes they would intend to cut as a result of that tax reduction? Will they list, for example, which hospitals they would intend to close, or which programmes they would intend to axe, to allow for that tax cut?

Alternatively, and this is the second scenario, tax can be varied upwards. That is where the fear lies. We have already witnessed in the Chamber the danger of some parties getting involved in a spending spree. My

colleague Sammy Wilson accused the SDLP of spending the Northern Ireland block grant — through its motions — two or three times over in the space of a fortnight. Inevitably, pressure would be applied to bump up the rate of taxation. Again, the effect on our economy would be to drive Northern Ireland into a much-higher-tax location, thus making it less attractive to business. Therefore, the opportunities on that basis are somewhat ill judged.

There is a further implication. If we were to have a level of tax-varying powers above and beyond that that we have already — to do with the regional rate — pressure would come from Her Majesty's Treasury if, at any stage, we sought funding for a special project or any form of additional investment. If we were not taxing to the highest possible rate that we could, HM Treasury would simply ask why it should give the Executive extra money, whenever we could raise tax by 2p, 3p or 4p in the pound, or whatever our tax-varying powers happened to be.

We might even be faced with a situation in which HM Treasury said that it would cut our block grant, in real terms, because the Assembly had the opportunity to increase taxes if it wanted to maintain current programmes. That is why I believe that the Member's motion is particularly ill-judged.

I also believe that we have made a very separate and specific case. The Department of Finance and Personnel and its Committee have done a great deal of detailed work in making a case for a specific cut in corporation tax. We should stay focused on the tax relief or tax credits that may result from a cut in corporation tax. If we widen the debate to take in the nonsense of a wider tax variation, we will lose focus. We will lose the opportunity to make that strong case for a reduction in corporation tax. I oppose the motion.

Mr Beggs: I, too, oppose the motion. I oppose some of the comments and suggestions that the Sinn Féin Member made in moving the motion. Sinn Féin seems to be saying that a publicly controlled economy with more taxation could do things better than the private sector could do. I fear that that would not be the case. The Sinn Féin Member said near the tail end of her speech that, unless more funding were received, there would be gaps in its expenditure plans. Clearly, Sinn Féin is not talking about tax variation but about tax increases.

As far as I am concerned, one of the key roles of Members in Committee is to scrutinise each departmental budget. We must make best use of our existing funding, and we must do that first. Here we are, on the first day of the new session, and what is happening? A motion has been tabled that asks for more money. That is ridiculous. Our eye is off the ball. We should be concentrating on what we are doing with

our existing money. We should be concentrating on getting the best value from that before demanding more money from individuals or from the private sector.

In an Assembly debate on 15 May 2007, Mitchel McLaughlin — one of the Members in whose name the motion stands — called for tax-varying powers and for the introduction of a system of progressive direct taxation. What is progressive direct taxation? I can think only that he meant income tax or business taxes. It would be helpful if Sinn Féin Members could explain what they meant when they advocated such a system in an earlier debate.

4.45 pm

Some politicians appear to believe that they can solve our economic problems by imposing additional taxes on workers and businesses and by increasing public expenditure. They seem to believe that, somehow, civil servants can help to solve the problems.

For Northern Ireland to progress economically, we must carefully consider what effects any changes we make may have on the real world and the real economy in which people have to earn a living and sell products. We must ensure that we encourage sustainable jobs that are not reliant on state funding.

I recently met an employer who explained that even the proposed rises in industrial rates would be likely to result in a reduction in his R&D and marketing budget. That would call into question his ability to make future investment in his plant and therefore place a question mark over future long-term jobs in the real economy. We must be very careful about what we do.

Tax-varying powers would also mean administrative costs for the Department for Social Development. Our benefits system would have to be modified somehow. New training would have to be provided so that staff in the jobs and benefits offices could know how any proposed new income tax would affect somebody starting or leaving work. Such training would bring costs, too. Furthermore, HM Revenue and Customs would have to change its system and develop a system specific to Northern Ireland, and I suspect that we would have to bear the cost of any such changes. This motion is a nonsense. Can our fragile private sector absorb those costs? Local employers would be faced with additional administrative costs with the introduction of a new local tax. This proposal would mean additional burdens for existing employers.

A recent Scottish briefing paper indicated that, for someone earning £15,000, a 1p increase in income tax would cost about £91 per year, while a 5p increase would cost about £495. For a family with two salaries of £15,000, a 1p increase would cost about £182, while a 5p increase would cost about £910. The proposers of the motion should be honest and say how this proposal

would affect working families. Ultimately, it would be a tax on people who are working and own businesses.

We need to create more business opportunities and more real work opportunities for everyone so that we can survive the long-term changes that are occurring as the Barnett formula starts to converge the current expenditure levels in different regions in the United Kingdom. We must ensure that, whatever we do, we encourage real jobs in the private sector. We must not do anything that will threaten those jobs. New taxes will not create new sustainable jobs.

Thus, rather than debating this motion on our first day back after the summer recess, we should be considering what we can do to improve the current system. Sinn Féin appears to be out of touch with the economic realities of the real world. Let us get back down to work in the Assembly and spend the money that we currently have as best as we can. I oppose the motion.

Mr O'Loan: The SDLP has long believed that Northern Ireland needs tailored solutions to address its unique political, economic, geographic and social profile. That remains our stance as we work with colleagues to plot a way forward for our community after decades of conflict and underinvestment.

Without greater fiscal flexibility, we are limited in the steps that we can take to address difficulties such as the poor state of our infrastructure or the fact that our gross value added (GVA) remains 20% below the UK average. Sharing this island, as we do, with a successful economy and distinct tax regime clearly adds urgency to those issues that affect our competitiveness as a region. In recognition of such challenges, my party has for several years been calling for greater fiscal discretion for the Assembly. Moreover, SDLP leader, Mark Durkan, played a central role in negotiating the low-cost borrowing facility of the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI), to which I will return.

To put this debate in context, the present finance agenda is loaded quite heavily. With ongoing consideration of the rates system, the independent review of water and sewerage, the comprehensive spending review, the Varney Review and a slowdown in public sector spending, this debate may be important, but securing additional powers may not be the most pressing item on the agenda.

Although I endorse the premise of the motion, I am, to a degree, surprised that it has been proposed. Why call for an Executive borrowing facility while opposing the use of the facility that we already have, and which is currently funding approximately £200 million a year of our infrastructure spending — a borrowing power that was introduced despite opposition from the proposer's party? I should point out that the first and only use of the borrowing facility before suspension

allowed us to build a world-class cancer centre without putting a penny on the rates. Does Sinn Féin still oppose that?

The other curious thing about the motion is that Sinn Féin repeatedly argued that we should not seek a borrowing power before we had secured a peace dividend, on the grounds that it would look as though we had given up on securing such additional funds. The question arises: has Sinn Féin given up on the peace dividend? The SDLP believes that to borrow at the preferential rates available to the Government can be part of a cost-effective strategy to stimulate our economy. Such benefits will more than make up for the cost of borrowing.

The suspension of the Assembly in 2002 meant that the terms under which the borrowing power is currently exercised are not to our satisfaction, so we must renegotiate those terms. We want investment to be paid for in a fair and affordable manner. We opposed the old rates system because it penalised those on low incomes. We have been equally clear that the direct rule conclusion to the rating review resulted in unaffordable and unjust rates for a significant number of people.

At its inception, the reinvestment and reform initiative was linked to the creation of the Strategic Investment Board, a body which we proposed to enable a radical new approach to long-term spending commitments so that they would be devised in a strategic manner, refined by expert financial input and agreed in partnership with leaders of civic society. It is surely no accident that the Southern Government have copied that model by establishing a centre of expertise within its National Development Finance Agency to build skills and capacity in the area of public procurement.

In considering the issue of tax-varying powers, my party and I obviously support the idea of greater capacity in the Assembly to tackle unique local circumstances. Consistent with our position on corporation tax, the SDLP has proposals to address competition issues arising from our land border with the South and to expand on existing co-operation on infrastructure.

Although I support the motion, I caution Members that, on such matters, the devil will be in the detail when it comes to negotiations with the British Government. Mr Brown is unlikely to agree to any change that will simply increase our income; he might, in fact, place further pressure on our Budget — a point that has already been made. Should it come to the point of negotiating such developments, our representatives would need to have their wits about them and be confident that any package that is agreed is genuinely to our advantage.

In summary, and in part, in an attempt to ensure that this House communicates with one voice — although I hear the utterances of other voices — I support the motion, in so far as it is competent, given our existing borrowing powers —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Mr O'Loan.

Dr Farry: I support the motion, and in so doing, it is important to stress at the outset that that is not an endorsement of the potential of the current Executive to use such powers wisely, but rather a recognition on the part of the opposition in the Chamber that the ability to deliver real change for the economy of Northern Ireland and its people depends on the Assembly having real fiscal powers. Without those powers, we have only a second-rate form of devolution.

Some Members have already mentioned corporation tax. If there is to be a reduction in corporation tax in Northern Ireland, we will have to have tax-varying powers; that is the way in which the Treasury would envisage that happening.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: No. I have a lot to get through. I will now move to the matter of the regional rate. Members have spoken about the need to avoid irresponsible tax rises, but the regional rate is already used as a form of taxation in Northern Ireland. It is no longer linked to any particular delivery of services, but is simply used by the Executive to balance the books. We have already seen 19% rates hikes in previous years; we will wait with interest to see what happens in the future.

Similarly, water charges are also looming as a means of balancing the books. Although the Assembly deferred water charges for one year, no feasible plans have been put forward to date for avoiding those charges in the future. Our budgets are locked into the assumption of water charges, and to avoid them we will have to divert money from elsewhere.

There are challenges for all of us.

We have to consider the regional convergence of Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK. At present, we are 80% of that average. The current draft regional economic strategy from the previous Administration, but not yet replaced by the current Administration, does not see any meaningful convergence of our economy with the UK average. Despite all the investment into Northern Ireland over recent years, the figures are not changing.

British Government policy may nominally be committed to regional convergence, but it is clear that successive British Governments have prioritised London and the south-east of England as the main driver of the overall UK economy. That area is viewed as something to be protected at all costs, and it seems that the Government are happier to keep the regions of

the UK financially dependent, rather than give them the powers to make a real difference and to make their economies and their financial situations sustainable. Therefore, the real challenge of the Assembly is to stand up to that and demand the powers to make a real change.

Perhaps the real tragedy is that there are people inside and outside the Assembly who seem happy to accept and collude in the preservation of a conservative status quo that will not make any difference to our economy. In the last Assembly, when Alliance raised the issue of tax-varying powers, our calls were dismissed by those in office because of fears that the UK Treasury would use it as an opportunity to reassess the Barnett formula and cut the financial subvention from London. There are those who seem to think that the fact that we receive a subvention of £7 billion a year is a major achievement and something to be protected at all costs. In fact, it is a sign of the weakness of our situation, something that is unsustainable in the long term and something we must tackle rather than simply bank.

It is important to stress that giving this Assembly tax-varying powers is not tantamount to advocating or accepting an overall increase in the level of tax. It is about giving the Assembly the opportunity to do things differently and the assent to engage in effective policy changes, with the full range of options.

As a party, we have made the case to the Treasury, as the Executive and a number of Committees have done, for it to give the Assembly the powers to vary the rate of corporation tax.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: No. I have already said no.

Mr Burnside: Do you not understand —?

Dr Farry: Does the Member for South Antrim not understand the meaning of the word no?

Corporation tax is one of the major pieces of the jigsaw for trying to improve our economy, but it is not the only one. The private sector must be given the ability and the stimulus to develop and attract inward investment. This is not about imposing extra burdens on businesses or families; it is about trying to create the conditions in which we can become a more attractive location for business to operate in.

Alliance also believes that consideration should be given to replacing the regional rate with a local income tax. We are honest about that. The regional rate is not linked to providing local services; it is already, in effect, a Northern Ireland form of taxation that a large portion of the public sees as being unfair. Consideration must be given to finding a better way of doing things.

Alliance believes that much greater use should be made of environmental charges and taxes. The burden

should be shifting away from taxes on income and property towards things that are bad in our society, such as damage to the environment. Tax-varying powers would allow the Assembly to be much more creative.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure there are few topics discussed in the Chamber that fill working families and businesses with as much dread as this one, and what I have heard from the Benches opposite so far has not dispelled that fear. I have no doubt that someone somewhere in the Chamber has the ability to exercise the powers to vary and raise taxes responsibly.

Mr S Wilson: Not on the opposite side.

Mr Hamilton: I am certainly not looking opposite for it; that is for sure. The requisite fiscal responsibility seems to be sorely lacking.

Since its inception in May, the Assembly has called for everything from free personal care to free prescriptions to more investment in the rail network. Those are all worthy causes but, at the same time, Members have resisted increasing revenue streams, whether from business or from ratepayers. It is worth repeating that the Assembly needs a reality check and not more politics of the blank cheque. With the ability to vary tax, I fear — and there is clear evidence for this — that Members would not be able to resist the temptation to raise taxes to pay for each and every demand that is made of them.

5.00 pm

Even if the Assembly were not so immature and some Members were not so fiscally irresponsible, the attitude to taxation of parties in the Chamber — particularly of the party proposing today's motion — would render the proposal utterly unacceptable. No less than the Sinn Féin president let the cat out of the bag in an interview with the 'News Letter' in March 2007. He was asked:

"Your party opposes water charges — but can you categorically say you will abolish the tap tax? And if so, how will you replace the lost hundreds of millions of pounds of revenue?"

Mr Adams responded:

"Obviously, public services have to be paid for, but Sinn Féin is looking for tax varying powers for the Executive."

Even someone with as rudimentary a grasp of taxation and economics as the Member for West Belfast can understand what that means: Sinn Féin intends to pay for services with tax increases.

Further evidence of Sinn Féin's true intentions can clearly be seen when its support for tax-raising powers is viewed in tandem with its commitment to the harmonisation of tax rates on an all-island basis.

In recent times, Members have heard much about the South's competitive corporation tax rate. However, it would be short-sighted to come to the conclusion on

the basis of that alone that the Irish Republic is some sort of tax nirvana. A cursory glance at the Republic's tax rates reveals that its top rate of income tax is higher than that in Northern Ireland, its VAT rate of 21% is 3.5% higher and, at 9%, its top rate of stamp duty is some 6% higher. The tax policy that Sinn Féin wants to foist on Northern Ireland is probably OK as long as people do not own a house, work or buy anything.

It seems to be simple and straightforward. Sinn Féin whispers sweet nothings about incentivising "this" and encouraging "that" through the tax system. However, the harsh reality for those who matter — taxpayers — is that should republicans be granted their wish, their pockets will be hit harder and harder. Given Sinn Féin's socialist and Marxist persuasion — although sometimes their views bear more resemblance to Groucho Marx than Karl Marx — businesses and the hard-working middle classes will be hit the hardest.

Mr Weir: The Member said that Sinn Féin's policies would mean that people would be grand as long as they do not work, own a house or buy anything. In light of that, will the type of people who are attracted to Northern Ireland result in a society of hermits living in caves?

Mr Hamilton: That is a good, well-made point. If Sinn Féin's policy were implemented, the working class would evaporate because no one would work under those conditions.

I became involved in public life partly to assist business and to help those ordinary people in the Province who have been hardest hit over the years by the tax and rates regimes. For 35 years, Sinn Féin's associates in the IRA subjected the people and businesses of Northern Ireland to a war. There is no way that my party or I will support Sinn Féin in subjecting those same people to a war on their pockets.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McQuillan: Other than Sinn Féin Members, few Members in the Chamber will not see the motion for what it is: a cheap, ill-considered stunt to grab a few quick headlines. However, it is important to expose the political and economic hypocrisy that Sinn Féin displays in suggesting the fundamental economic changes contained in the motion.

In political terms, I need hardly remind Members that Northern Ireland is, and will remain, an integral part of the United Kingdom, together with England, Scotland and Wales. Although significant powers have been devolved to those regions, they combine as one nation to consider legislation on fundamental issues of national interest such as defence, taxation and economic policy. As a sovereign nation, it is in our interest that those decisions are taken at Westminster. If Sinn Féin is genuinely interested in influencing Her Majesty's Government on taxation, it should accept its electoral

responsibilities to its constituents by taking its seats at Westminster and advancing the arguments in the proper place. The DUP always lobbies vigorously for the best interests of all classes and creeds in Northern Ireland. However, it does so from within the United Kingdom of which we are all citizens.

The general economic approach suggested in the motion, and the policies that were soundly rejected by the people of the Irish Republic in the recent general election, clearly demonstrate that Sinn Féin has abandoned its Marxist economic principles. It has now turned its attention to Northern Ireland to try to advance its tax-and-spend policies.

Such policies would inevitably lead to higher taxation of working people, increased borrowing, rising debt and loss of stability in our local economy. Equally worrying is the fact that Sinn Féin does not seem to have recognised the potential knock-on effect of tax-varying powers. Does the party truly believe that the block grant from Westminster would be unaffected? Can its members not see the potential impact on Northern Ireland if that level of support is lost?

From the outset, I said that such an approach was ill considered, and I have illustrated that in political and economic terms. What renders the motion more irresponsible is its timing. Just over three months into the life of the new Executive, Sinn Féin appears to have lost touch with reality, seeking more power rather than applying itself to facing the many challenging issues that are before the Assembly. I have no doubt that the people of Northern Ireland want to see Members considering and delivering on those issues before we begin to think about an extension of our powers. I share that view and oppose the motion.

Mr Burnside: Let us assume that the House votes in favour of the motion and that the Minister of Finance and Personnel believes that it a good idea and wishes to negotiate with Her Majesty's Government to obtain total fiscal independence for this part of the United Kingdom. May I introduce a few words that most Members do not seem to realise exist in the English language: the first one being "recession".

Imagine if there were a major recession in the United Kingdom following the transfer of fiscal powers to this local Assembly. All of the taxes will have been increased — for I have not heard one example of tax being decreased; all tax-varying powers are to be used to increase taxes — and Her Majesty's Treasury will to come under great pressure because of the state of the national economy. There is a similar situation ongoing in the United States at the moment. Commentators are referring to it as the sub-prime crisis in the banking community. I do not understand it completely. However, if we were to have a major recession, with job losses — not at the level of 2% that

exists currently in my constituency, but real recession that cuts deep into employment — what would Her Majesty's Government do, if there were independent tax-raising and tax-varying powers in Northern Ireland? They would say, "Bye-bye boys".

England would look towards Scotland, which already has tax-varying powers, and would increase its 2p variation on tax. England would also increase the tax variation that it would have given to Stormont and the Welsh Assembly.

People should realise that if this region of the United Kingdom is given tax-raising powers, and we move into a recession, we would have to pay for that. We do have to do that now because we are in a very beneficial position through being part of the United Kingdom and part of the national economy. Those who say we need more tax-varying independent powers need to grow up a wee bit. It would be a one-way street in which one would be asking for the tax-varying power that Scotland asked for and then asking for more. There would be increased tax powers and increased taxes for Northern Ireland.

I am talking in a pragmatic way, rather than on the principle of devolving and separating the United Kingdom into different tax areas. The Alliance MLA, Dr Farry, did not realise what he was saying in that there would be a Chancellor of the Exchequer here in Northern Ireland with total powers over capital taxation. If he had given way and allowed me to speak, that is what I would have told him that he was proposing. That would be a ludicrous position for us to be in.

The level of corporation tax is set by the national Government, and it will be very difficult to achieve a variation because Gordon Brown will set his face against it. However, we will wait and see the report of the independent review.

We are on dangerous ground. The Assembly is an administration that spends part of the national take for schools, hospitals, and for all the things that we need to do to serve and benefit our constituents. The last thing we need is a variation of tax-raising powers, and I am very concerned that the SDLP and the Alliance Party appear to be going into the Lobbies — if the House is divided — to support independent tax-raising powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly on the basis of an opinion.

We must move slowly in the Assembly and in the Executive and try to administer the block grant — the subsidy and support from our national Government — to improve the services that we provide to our people. This is a dangerous course to embark upon, and I hope that anyone here who is a unionist with a small "u" and who has any leaning towards being part of the United Kingdom will go into the Lobby tonight and oppose the transfer of tax-varying powers. It will

do nothing to help the economy; it will do nothing to help the ordinary working man; and it will do nothing to help businesses in Northern Ireland. It will also weaken the United Kingdom, which is something that matters to me.

Mr S Wilson: The general public would be totally dismayed if the motion was passed and, even worse, if the Government at Westminster decided to grant our wishes. The public have a sensible attitude towards politicians and money, and they want as few chances as possible for politicians to have anything to do with their wallets. I suspect that is even true of my colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who, during his brief time as Minister and during his time on Castlereagh Borough Council, gained a reputation for financial prudence that made Gordon Brown look profligate. Even with his reputation, the public would not want tax-raising powers to be transferred to the Executive.

It has been dressed in the term "tax varying powers", but the promoter of the motion, Dr Farry from North Down, said that it is a chance to make real change, to transform the economy and to spend money on all the things that we need, such as infrastructure, health and education. Having listened to the speeches, this is not about varying tax rates; this is about finding a financial cosh to go out and mug the public with. That is why people would be dismayed if those powers were ever transferred to the Executive.

Mr O'Loan from North Antrim at least tried to get some variation on it. He said that if the Executive had those borrowing powers, we could get cancer units that cost nothing. I think that I am correct in saying that he was an economist, and economists know that there is no such thing as a free lunch. There is no such thing as a free cancer unit either. How did we borrow the money? How did we service that debt? We serviced it by raising the regional rate. It had to be serviced by taking money out of people's pockets; it did not come out of the heavens and appear to us.

The point must be made that if the Executive had tax-varying powers, things would go in only one direction. The Member for North Down Mr Weir pointed out that, during earlier debates, I mentioned that we spent the block grant almost on a weekly basis. Members across the way proposed many things in the first six weeks of this Assembly, including more money for railways, dental care, refuges for battered people, personal care for the elderly, donations for the Irish who are about to get thrown out of the USA, and the appointment of a commissioner for older people. There is a whole list, and I am only a quarter of the way through it. If the Executive were given tax-varying powers, they would not have to make difficult choices — they would just spend the money.

Dr Farry supports the motion, because one member of his party alone could spend all the money in the block grant in a day. Mr McCarthy seems to treat this place as some kind of financial auction room. A Member makes a bid and then he makes a higher bid. Then the next week he is back to try to outbid the person who proposed good things for the public the previous week. His party, especially, would need to be watched if tax-varying powers were ever transferred to the Executive.

There are other reasons why tax-raising powers are not something that we should seek. First, it would be a one-way street. There would be more spending, and I do not know whether there would be any curtailment on people or examination of the real priorities and choices, because the Executive would have no choice; they would simply dip into the taxpayers' pocket more often and take more money out.

Secondly, as Members heard in the last debate, Northern Ireland needs a competitive economy, but we cannot be a competitive economy if our system simply extracts more money. Members who are economists will know all about the Laffer curve — I will not bore the Chamber with it now; I used to bore people all afternoon with it in school. The Laffer curve shows that the more that is taken from people, the less effort they will make, and the end result is less revenue.

The other issue, and it was well pointed out by the Member for South Antrim, is that if we adopt tax-varying powers, we will give Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister, and Mr Darling — who would be no darling for Northern Ireland — the opportunity to tell us that we are on our own and if we want to raise tax, we can.

5.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: I do not normally have to speak after such an impassioned speech, and I will try to raise the temperature even further.

I listened with dismay to the arguments of the three parties on the opposite side of the Chamber. Their arguments were inconsistent, incoherent and incredible; they showed a fundamental misunderstanding of how economics works.

When some Members lecture us that the North of Ireland or Northern Ireland — whatever the title — does not work, they show that they do not understand that we are part of the United Kingdom. All the other regions — the north-east, Scotland, Wales, the West Midlands, the south-west — are in the same financial situation as we are because we operate as part of a much bigger economic whole. Being part of the economic combine that is the United Kingdom gives us the resources of the fourth largest economy in the world. Due to that we can spend £2 for every £1 that is paid in tax. That is why we have our £7 billion.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way, Alex, to show that I can argue with the best, unlike Dr Farry who will not give way.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. Wearing another hat on the issue of industrial derating, the Member wants to vary the take that would be expected of the manufacturing sector. That is a tax- or rate-varying power of the kind that we are looking for.

Mr B McCrea: I am glad that Alex mentioned that, because as the twig is bent so grows the tree. Our economy is built on what happened in the past 30 to 40 years. Removing industrial derating now would ruin our manufacturing, and it would be the fault of the Assembly.

Members cannot have it both ways on corporation tax; they cannot cherry-pick and ask for corporation tax to be lowered but still expect £7 billion to pay for disability living allowance, social benefits, housing and all the rest.

This is an exercise in efficiency; we need to do more with less. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer and current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said that productivity is the key to all economic success, which means doing more with less. Before telling the people of Northern Ireland that we would like more money, we must demonstrate that we can spend wisely what we are already being given.

If people are taxed more, they will leave. Nobody seems to understand that — it is the Laffer curve that Sammy Wilson mentioned, and it applies to industrial derating as well. If too much tax is put on people, they will go elsewhere. The Northern Ireland economy needs more people, more skills and more entrepreneurs. That will build our economy; that is what the Assembly has to sort out.

Perhaps some of the more educated Members will correct me, but I recall that income tax was introduced as a temporary measure to fund the Napoleonic war. The trouble with tax is that, once raised, it never comes down. *[Laughter.]*

The issue is that the big battle about funding social programmes, which is why we are all here, has been fought and won. There is now little difference between the Tories and new Labour. Why? Because the economic question has been resolved: a free market with a social conscience is needed to make sure that there are no excesses. That is the issue.

If Members send out a message that the Assembly will raise taxes, this place will last about six weeks. The people did not put us here to put our hands in their pockets: they elected us to manage their resources as best we can. Northern Ireland has a lot of resources, and

we must manage them properly. I am fundamentally opposed to the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I do not agree with the proposer of the motion, but it is nonetheless useful that the Assembly takes the opportunity to debate such matters. However, I hope that the matter ends here, and that the proposer is merely taking the opportunity to debate the issue and does not push the motion to a vote.

I agree with the proposer that it is necessary to have the tools to do something different and that we need to invest in skills and infrastructure and in the other drivers of our economy. However, I question her suggestion on tax-varying or — as most Members have now defined them — tax-raising powers for Northern Ireland.

I have listened to the debate with great interest, and I think that it would be useful to correct some of the misconceptions and misunderstandings on what is a critical issue for the Executive. I will also set out the nature of our relationship, as a devolved institution within the United Kingdom, with the national Government and Parliament.

I will explain briefly how the Executive derive their funding resources, which are presented in the budgetary process that the Assembly approves. I also want to highlight how the fiscal framework applies to Northern Ireland and what discretion is available to the Executive on issues such as borrowing. The bulk of the public expenditure available to the Executive is provided through the operation of the Barnett formula by which Northern Ireland gets a population-based share of expenditure allocations that Treasury makes to aspects of the work of certain Whitehall Departments. The Barnett mechanism presently accounts for approximately 92% of the resources allocated in the Northern Ireland budget. The remaining resources distributed by the Executive are generated through taxes and charges such as rates and water charges.

Members should also be aware that the Executive have a borrowing power agreed with Treasury — the reinvestment and reform Initiative (RRI) — which allows them to borrow from the National Loans Fund. It allows us to draw down additional capital resources of up to £200 million a year. We have to pay interest on that borrowing, but it is at a more favourable rate than those available in commercial markets.

I confirm what the Member for East Antrim Roy Beggs said about having to pay the interest as well as the loan. Services for the loan have to come from somewhere, and, in this case, the borrowing has to come from the regional rate. This borrowing power must be employed prudently to ensure that we do not

commit to future legacy costs that could be an excessive burden on future generations.

With regard to tax-varying powers, the Assembly has powers, unfettered by Westminster, to increase the level of our regional rate. Members will be aware that on 15 May 2007, I announced a further review of the new domestic rating system that was introduced by direct rule Ministers in April of this year. The terms of reference for the review — agreed by the Executive — reflected my intention to examine a range of options for change. The consultation exercise sought views on what improvements could be made to the existing system in time for next year's rates bill and any possible alternatives to the rating system. One of the issues included in that second strand is the feasibility of tax-varying powers.

In advance of the Executive taking time to consider the outcome of the consultation process, it is premature to be calling for tax-varying powers for Northern Ireland. If the motion were supported, it would undermine the objective open consultation and consideration that the Executive endorsed.

As for generating financial resources through water charges, the Executive await the report of the independent water review panel, which is due shortly. The Executive will then discuss the report's implications further, before the Assembly takes a final decision. As I have indicated, it is wrong to say that Northern Ireland does not have tax-varying powers — in certain areas, we do. Rates and water revenues are already policy instruments that are at the disposal of the Executive. We are also, generally, able to introduce other taxes as long as they do not replicate existing UK-wide taxes. However, I suspect that the motion seeks income-tax-varying powers.

Much of the debate has been about new measures that should be made available to the Executive. However, room for debate in that area is severely constrained by the financial framework set by HM Treasury. Members will be aware of the efforts that we have exerted over recent months to secure a concession from HM Treasury on corporation tax. While we await the outcome of the Varney Review, I ask Members not to underestimate how jealously HM Treasury guards its ownership of fiscal policy. Perhaps, even more significantly, we should not assume that Northern Ireland would benefit from tax-varying powers.

Some commentators have also referred to the use of external bonds to finance public investment in Northern Ireland. That is not materially different to using the reinvestment and reform facility, except that the interest rates that would be applied are likely to be higher. More importantly, the Treasury rules would still score those bonds as Government debt — so we would not be any better off. The only way in which Northern Ireland would benefit from some form of bonds would

be if the assets that they funded were off the Government books. However, that would leave those assets to be formally owned by the private sector. Politically, that has not proved to be an over-attractive option to date.

The tax-varying facility available to the Scottish Executive has also been highlighted as a tax-raising power that the Northern Ireland Executive should seek. The fact that Scotland has never sought to avail of that facility indicates that it does not see that measure as a panacea for its problems. Even if such a power were to be made available through legislative change, it would pose difficult choices.

I am not clear what the true intention behind the call for tax-varying powers is, or whether there is any agreement on it. As I see it, broadly speaking, there are four alternatives. The Member for North Down Peter Weir mentioned two of them.

First, if the purpose for having tax-varying powers is to increase tax, Members must recognise that. Increasing direct taxation would further undermine the region's competitiveness. At a time when we are making economic growth a key priority for the Assembly, it would be wrong to increase the burden on the workforce.

During discussions before I came to the Chamber, I had decided not to mention the details of the Laffer curve, because I was sure that no one would mention it in the Assembly, but it seems to be the centre of our debate. *[Laughter.]*

However, we must take into account the fact that, in the most narrow terms, if one were to increase the tax on anyone in the workforce in Northern Ireland, the automatic response would be that they would seek an increase in wages to make up for the loss that they have borne in taxation. One needs only to look at the repercussive effects of that, particularly in the public sector, and the reduction there would, therefore, be in spend and resources.

Secondly, however, if the purpose is to reduce taxation, it would almost certainly have to be self-financed by the Executive, if my reading of the recent Azores case is correct. It would also be, at best, unlikely, in circumstances where there is a fiscal deficit of around £7 billion a year, that the UK Government would pay for extra tax cuts for Northern Ireland alone. I regard higher taxes in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom as politically unacceptable, and lower taxes, when we already have a £7 billion fiscal deficit each year, as unrealistic.

Thirdly, we may wish to have tax-varying powers without ever actually deciding to use them. That is not a cost-free option either.

The Administration in Scotland pay approximately £8 million a year to keep the necessary systems in place to allow the option to be used. However, it will cost

them about £10 million to activate those systems, and that is money that could be spent on front-line services.

5.30 pm

The fourth option is for a local Executive to use the tax-varying powers to replace the regional rate. I suspect that that is the main thrust of the Alliance Party's argument. However, the impact of increasing income tax and reducing property taxes would be the expectation that those who are in work will pay for those who are not. Although we may not always approve of the details of UK-wide fiscal policy, Northern Ireland benefits enormously from being part of the United Kingdom.

Dr Farry suggested that the availability of tax-varying powers is the step change that is needed to change the economy of Northern Ireland. The amount of money that comes in — or the way that it comes in — is not the issue. A property tax or an income tax could bring in exactly the same amount of money: whatever level the income tax was increased to could be matched by an increase in the rates. The only difference that the motion would make would be to who pays the tax. Any property tax would be paid by those who own residences in Northern Ireland. Those who have no property, or no job — either because they cannot, or will not, find one — would not have to pay under the replacement system that the Alliance Party is offering.

However, the stimulus to the growth of our economy is not based so much on the way that the money brought in is allocated in Northern Ireland; productivity is the key, as Mr McCrea the Member for Lagan Valley indicated. That is the step change that is needed to increase our GVA. I am happy to say that we now have a better GVA than Wales, with the result that we are no longer the worst part of the United Kingdom in that respect.

Members should consider carefully the implications of agreeing the motion. The superficial attraction of tax-varying powers does not stand up to detailed scrutiny. Members should not underestimate the dangers of opening up such matters with the Treasury. I might find myself at odds with Mr Wilson, my colleague from East Antrim, who thinks that the Treasury would be very difficult if we were to approach it with such a proposal. I suspect that the Treasury would say, "Yes, go on ahead; we would be happy for you to have those powers", and wash its hands as a result. However, I hope that the Assembly will not test the Exchequer and the Government on that issue.

We are operating within a complex public expenditure framework, and unfavourable consequences are often associated with what might seem a simplistic policy action. As well as my concerns about the principle behind tax-varying powers, I do not believe that the timing is right. It is prudent to await the outcome of

certain exercises, such as the rating review, before considering a motion as complex as this. If the motion is pushed to the vote — and I hope that it will not be — I will oppose it for those reasons. I urge Members to do the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Question is —
[*Interruption.*]

I am sorry; Mr McLaughlin should have his right of reply. [*Laughter.*]

I call Mr McLaughlin to make his winding-up speech on the motion. I am quite sure that Willie Hay would not have done that.

Mr McLaughlin: In winding up the debate, I speak in my capacity as economic spokesperson for Sinn Féin, despite my being a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

In her earlier remarks, my colleague Ms McCann detailed the argument for greater economic autonomy for the Executive. I welcome and acknowledge the fact that some Members who contributed to the debate have demonstrated a commitment to put the old politics — the politics of the past — behind them. Those politics meant that whichever party sponsored a proposal was of greater priority than the issue itself, with the effect of predetermining either support for, or opposition to, a motion.

Perhaps that indicates that some in the Assembly are emerging from the travails of a deep-seated conflict and are developing a more mature and pragmatic approach — a form of politics based on a democratically grounded, inclusive process that acknowledges the need to seek and find agreement in the wider interests of the community. There are others who have yet to embark on that process.

I call on Members to vote on the motion based on its merits and for the benefits that it would deliver to all sections of our people. That will be the politics of the present and the future; the politics of change that reflects that which Members are collectively achieving.

Last week, many people in Ireland voted in the People of the Year awards. They recognised the leadership that was necessary to achieve the restoration of the Assembly and to re-establish the primacy of politics over conflict and division. At times, that leadership was difficult. It was constantly challenged and criticised by those who lacked courage or vision or who simply were deeply troubled because they did not understand. Painful decisions had to be made, and long-standing friendships were put at risk. I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, who were nominated on behalf of all Members, for their achievements, along with Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, in bringing the process to this point.

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will there be a ruling that Members speak somewhere within the parameters of the motion?

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

Mr McLaughlin: A little patience will show the connection that I wish to make.

In the context of my earlier comments, Sinn Féin recognises the pressure and pain involved, and appreciates and applauds the resolve shown across the Chamber that has made progress possible and secured advances that have benefited the entire community. From conversations and contacts that I have had with people from all walks of life — business, social, political and academic — all are agreed that the biggest barrier to building a sustainable economy in the North is the fact that fiscal policy, taxation and public expenditure are all determined in London. All are agreed that that must change, and Members have an unmistakable mandate from the electorate to deliver that agenda.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No, I have a lot to say and I have lost time already.

All are agreed that the situation must change, and we have an unmistakable mandate from the electorate to deliver that agenda for change. An economic policy that is designed and administered by Whitehall will always be delivered for the benefit of the island of Britain, invariably with inadequate consideration of the special needs of the North. Although inherently unjust, that is perfectly understandable. That is the status quo. Our needs will always be peripheral and coincidental to those of Britain — an afterthought, for want of a better expression. Simply put, that is why the status quo must change if Members are to successfully plot a trajectory of economic recovery for the North.

Not only are we excluded from the economic advances in the rest of Ireland because we are locked into the one-size-fits-all approach of the British Treasury, but Members must work within the parameters of the inadequate and unfair Barnett formula, which has already been referred to, and a privatisation agenda that has been imposed by politicians who will never be held accountable to the electorate in the North.

In their engagements with Gordon Brown, the British Treasury and, latterly, with the Varney Review, all parties — including Sinn Féin, to correct some of the misrepresentation from across the Floor — argued for a more competitive level of corporation tax. It does no service to anyone to completely and wilfully misrepresent the positions of the respective parties. We are all in this together.

In any event, Executive Ministers will require a more realistic mechanism to calculate the block grant

that will effectively take those factors into account and ensure the allocation of funding on the basis of need and a fairer distribution of resources. I particularly welcome today's comments from Ian Paisley, who made it clear that the Executive would have to seek additional resources to address the issue of poverty and its underlying causes. Hear, hear.

In debates in the Programme for Government Committee, set up in the Hain Assembly, and in the Preparation for Government Committee, all parties clearly and consistently supported the introduction of tax-varying powers in order to grow the regional economy; develop and target tax incentives towards areas of high unemployment; encourage small businesses; and enable other specific sectors, such as the social economy sector.

Recent consensus reports from the Programme for Government process demonstrated that the parties shared a clear understanding of the imperative need to acquire the tools necessary to reinvigorate the private sector of the economy.

It is vital that the parties sustain that consensus as the Varney Review team prepares to report to the British Government. In that context, I welcome the presence of the Minister, and I would like to respond to his comments at the end of my speech.

A succession of unionist spokespersons — and I can see no distinction in the unionist position — appeared to argue that the North has a basket-case economy and that we dare not interfere with the subvention. It seems that we can only exist on the basis of —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: No, I am sorry I will not.

It seems that we can only continue to exist and project into the future on the basis of that dependency.

Ultimately, we must consider whether we can make a better fist of government than direct rule Ministers, and that we can deal — as we will have to deal some time — with the underperforming economy in the North. Somebody must explain to me, as no one across the Floor has done so, how supporting an argument for reducing corporation tax to 12.5% is not an argument for tax variation. I accuse Members of responding to the authorship of the motion rather than to the issues that they are supposed to discuss.

In the course of many discussions, Sinn Féin also made clear its aspiration to see the introduction of an unrestricted borrowing facility to replace the RRI. That proposal was not supported, and Sinn Féin supports the democratic outcome of that discussion. In the event, all the parties, including Sinn Féin, supported a minimum of the separation of the RRI facility from the so-called convergence principle, under which the Treasury had introduced the water-charges policy.

I note that the SDLP spokesperson took credit for RRI, yet the SDLP must take responsibility for the fact that that measure and the strings and conditions that were attached was exploited to introduce water charges. Thankfully, the need for the separation of RRI from the convergence principle was successfully impressed upon the Treasury and Gordon Brown.

The Northern economy has always suffered from the disadvantage of peripherality. Most regions in Britain have enjoyed an economic head start over the North. The British Government's statistics bear testimony to the failure of Whitehall policy over a period so extended as to be absolutely undeniable. The current policy simply does not work for the North. It will not, and cannot be made to, work.

In addition, intense competition between and within the regions on the island of Ireland is also an unavoidable reality — particularly when trying to attract inward investment. Sinn Féin would prefer that we were working towards harmonisation of tax regimes across the island and a level economic playing field. However, that is another day's work.

In any event, Sinn Féin wants to see greater local autonomy over the setting of objectives and goals in expenditure and investment. These are only some of the issues that support the impetus for tax-varying powers to be given to the Assembly. Ultimately, it is up to us to decide how they are applied.

I ask the Assembly to support the motion. The point made by the Minister deserves a response, and Sinn Féin will not push the House towards a Division, although it supports the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 11 September 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I want to say something about the statement that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development made yesterday. Mr Ford raised a point of order, asking why two members of the Executive were called to ask questions of an Executive colleague. The Deputy Speaker Mr McClarty was in the Chair at the time, and he undertook to raise the matter with me. I have given it some consideration.

Members will be aware that Standing Orders do not preclude Ministers from asking questions of other Ministers. However, page 36 of the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion' — I am sure that everyone has a copy with them — shows that such questions were not the usual practice in the previous Assembly. However, I believe that ministerial statements offer Members an important opportunity to hold the Executive to account. In future, therefore, I intend to call members of the Executive to ask questions following a statement from a ministerial colleague only in special circumstances. I may still call them as private Members, referring to them by name rather than by their ministerial office.

I hope that that clears up that matter. It was a very good point of order, and I must say that points of order of that nature are scarce in the House.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Football Offences Act

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

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly congratulates the Irish Football Association on its campaign against sectarianism and, in order to strengthen powers of sporting bodies to deal with sectarianism and violence in sports grounds, calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to commence consultation, with a view to introducing to Northern Ireland an Act similar to the Football (Offences) Act 1991.

I want to begin by stating clearly that the Alliance Party's position is that any legislation designed to address the conduct of spectators at sporting events should not simply consider association football but must cover all sports that are played competitively in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has a long and proud tradition of achievement in all sports. All sections of the community can be justly proud of that legacy. Sport can be a unifying and positive force for good in our society. Northern Irish football, for example, is currently on the crest of a wave — if we ignore Saturday evening's performance against Latvia — and it brings a tremendous sense of pride and enthusiasm to everyone. As with all sporting success, the football team represents an opportunity for this country to be seen in a positive light across the world, helping us to demonstrate that we are emerging from a troubled past, working towards a brighter future and welcoming people from all religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds into our society.

I stress my understanding that the vast majority of spectators and supporters want nothing more than to enjoy the atmosphere of a competitive event and to support their chosen team, or player, in a peaceful manner. Indeed, I wish to recognise and commend the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs on its outstanding work and, in particular, its Football for All ethos, which is promoted by the Irish Football Association (IFA) and encourages participation by everyone, regardless of political affiliation, cultural identity, gender, religious background or disability. I congratulate the amalgamation on being awarded the Brussels International Supporters Award 2006 for this vital work and also its efforts for charity.

I note remarks made by Michael Boyd, the IFA's head of community relations, that efforts to combat

abuse have had a positive impact on the number of spectators attending Northern Ireland football matches, with regular sell-out games. The Northern Ireland shirt is now flying off the shelves, which is good news; let us hope that the shirts are manufactured locally.

The Gaelic Football Association (GAA) and other sporting bodies in Northern Ireland have also made positive outreach efforts, which is a welcome step. We congratulate all those organisations. However, we must sadly acknowledge that all too often local sporting events have been hijacked by groups of individuals and used as an outlet for disturbing expressions of bigotry, hatred and intolerance. Those allegations have also been made against individual players.

The Government have acknowledged the need for movement in their action plan on a shared future; a specific action point in that plan is that, after a consultation period, the provisions of the Football (Offences) Act 1991 would be introduced to Northern Ireland. Although any legislation should cover all spectator sports and will require tweaking to address specific Northern Ireland issues, the 1991 Act is the best place to start.

That tough legislation has helped to stamp out a culture of hooliganism and hatred in English club football.

Northern Ireland's recent past has witnessed a catalogue of shameful incidents in which there have been actual and alleged instances of sectarian threats and abuse. The result has been that talented young sportspeople, such as Neil Lennon, who plays soccer, and Darren Graham, who plays GAA sports, withdrew from sporting life in the Province, leaving it the poorer for their absence. However, I am delighted to report that Darren Graham has now returned to play the game that he loves.

Players who come from ethnic minorities have also been subject to outrageous abuse. That should not — and cannot — be tolerated. The excellent work of the IFA in tackling such issues has been encouraging, particularly its campaign to kick sectarianism out of football. I also welcome its Football Without Frontiers initiative, which has been designed to combat racism and sectarianism and which brings together experts from the UK and Ireland to work on those issues.

International bodies such as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) have disciplinary regulations on discrimination. Those measures are welcome and should be introduced in Northern Ireland. The Assembly should support those measures through its legislative process. The Football (Offences) Act 1991 provides a useful template for any legislation, as its remit covers any act that occurs at a ground, including events that take place in the two hours before the advertised start of a match and up to one hour after it

has ended. The 1991 Act also makes offences of indecent racial chanting, throwing missiles and entering the playing area.

The football banning orders that have been imposed in England, Scotland and Wales can guide us when we come to devise penalties for offences. Such is the seriousness of some offences that, in certain cases, a lifetime ban from domestic and international events would not be inappropriate.

Positive steps to eliminate discrimination in sport have been proven not only to have real societal benefits but commercial benefits. I understand that society must also address discrimination, but that is a longer-term objective. However, with the prospect of a multi-sports stadium being built in Northern Ireland — I use the word “prospect” deliberately — sport here is entering a new era. We should do everything that we can to support it.

I recognise that discrimination in sport is dealt with by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the NIO, given that the latter's remit encompasses public order and incitement to hatred. However, I encourage the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who, I am glad to see, is with us today and is paying particular attention to what I am saying, to take the lead on this important issue. As elected representatives, we must send the clear message that there is no place for hatred in any part of society in Northern Ireland and that competitors and true fans should be allowed to enjoy and participate in sporting activities, free from persecution of any kind.

To date, legislation that our Executive have made has been sparse, to say the least. Our new Assembly now has an opportunity to begin to do what its representatives were elected to do, which is to legislate. I ask for Members' support for the motion.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first “sectarianism” and insert

“, urges all sporting bodies in Northern Ireland to undertake similar initiatives against sectarianism; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to commence consultation with a view to introducing legislation to address sectarianism, racism and violence associated with all sporting events.”

The Ulster Unionists welcome the opportunity to debate sectarianism, racism and violence in sport. I am sure that the House joins me in thanking the three Members in whose names the motion stands.

Our amendment is intended to do nothing more than strengthen the motion, and, in doing so, it will inject into the debate an immediate sense of bounce and vitality by tackling the ability of legislation to correct at source. We must, therefore, lay responsibility at the door of the Northern Ireland Office and say to it that a serious problem exists, which it must approach with a

clear objective. That clear objective is to introduce quickly the legislation that is necessary to support those who are working to stamp out the evils of sectarianism, racism and violence. As ever, I am pleased to see in the House the Minister who is responsible for sports. No doubt, however, he will confirm that such legislation is a reserved matter.

Moreover, I hope that he will confirm his willingness to encourage the NIO to act swiftly to introduce the legislation that the Assembly requires.

10.45 am

That legislation, in the words of our amendment, would take Northern Ireland beyond a single sports Act to distilling an all-embracing law that caters for multiple sports events. Regrettably, however, that legislation carries with it evidence of our society's inability to overcome sectarianism and racism without resorting to, and depending on, new laws — evidence that points equally to failings in society itself.

We cannot be proud to admit that laws are now required to deal with the yobs and louts who give sport a bad name. It is a pity, too, that bias, ignorance, intolerance and downright bloody-minded unwillingness prevent some from appreciating the talent and great skills of sportsmen and sportswomen, let alone serve to obstruct others from the pleasure and pride of competing for the team because they love, and want to play in, a game of sport.

The Ulster Unionist amendment was tabled to widen the scope and impact of new laws, and to ensure that they will contain a decisive mechanism to remove sectarianism, racism and violence from sport. The motion singles out one sport through a call to introduce legislation similar to the Football (Offences) Act 1991; our amendment, however, intends the same law for all sports, because none should, or can, be excluded — not even tiddlywinks in the leisure centre or croquet on the public lawn — as long as sectarian, racist louts can, and do, stalk even that kind of sports event.

Our amendment asks the House to send a serious and significant signal to all sports. That should first be done by highlighting and complimenting the Irish Football Association's magnificent efforts. Secondly, all should be alerted to the fact that no sport can be complacent, because none is free from sectarianism and hatred. Sectarianism, racism and associated violence are not confined to soccer, nor are those problems only for the IFA to address.

To call for legislation is correct; however, let us do it properly, by covering all sports, including Gaelic games, which are among the highest spectator sports in Northern Ireland, and at which recent appalling incidents of sectarianism made headline news. Those headlines shocked and rocked the sport, and caught the attention of those with little interest in, and knowledge of,

Gaelic sports. They were a timely reminder of the brutality of sectarianism — a wake-up call to knock us out of complacency, highlighting how a young player can be harmed to the extent that he stated a desire to quit the hurling game that he loved so much, because he could take no more sectarian abuse.

Such incidents have no place in sport or society, and must be stopped. Although I support the introduction of legislation to stop the ugliness of sectarianism and racist abuse, I suspect that enforcing such laws will not be an easy task. That must be examined in the consultation that will follow this debate.

Earlier, I mentioned sending a signal to the NIO. I trust that today the House will couple that with a strong message to the louts and yobs that they are not wanted at sporting events. It would be better for both sport and society if there were no need to bring in new laws to protect against sectarianism, racism and violence in sport, both on and off the field.

However, the harsh facts of reality tell us otherwise: there is a need. Today, that need has been strongly identified, just as the demand for a sporting culture free from sectarianism and yobbish behaviour has also been made, and, I sense, just as strongly.

As with all matters where change can make a positive difference, we may not see an immediate improvement, but we can content ourselves in the knowledge that tomorrow's young players and tomorrow's supporters will surely benefit from the decision that I trust Members will take today.

There is not a great difference between the motion and the amendment; however, the difference is sufficient. The motion does not refer the issue of legislation to Northern Ireland, where ultimately the responsibility will rest for the foreseeable future. The amendment is, therefore, more suitably prescriptive and more exacting in its representation of the Assembly's views. I ask the sponsors of the motion to consider fully the merits of the Ulster Unionist amendment and the House as a whole to support it.

Mr McCausland: Today's motion addresses sectarianism in sport, which is but one facet of a problem that surrounds us — sectarianism in our society. I am happy to support the amendment, because it broadens the debate from just sectarianism to include racism and the violence associated with all sporting events. The IFA is to be commended for the good work that it has done in tackling sectarianism. There is also a recognition that the two other main sports — rugby football and Gaelic games — must be considered when dealing with sectarianism.

I support the introduction, through the Northern Ireland Office and Westminster, of a sports offences Act that would cover all the principal games. It should cover not only violence, sectarianism and antisocial

behaviour in and around the grounds, but address the involvement of alcohol in some of that antisocial behaviour.

Today, we have been able to commend the IFA. However, I want to focus on something that Mr McNarry touched on — the situation regarding Gaelic games. The case of Darren Graham highlighted a problem with Gaelic sports. His presence shows that the GAA is not a totally Roman Catholic organisation; clearly, there are people from the Protestant community who take part in Gaelic games. However, although the organisation is perhaps 99% Roman Catholic, it is 100% nationalist. That is the key issue. The GAA introduces something to sport that should not be there. It has, built into its constitution, a nationalist ethos, ambition and aspiration. A careful reading of the GAA's constitution shows that very clearly to be the case.

That nationalist, and, in some cases, republican, aspiration is reflected in several ways. Many GAA grounds are named after republican heroes or, as people from my community would certainly view them, terrorists. In addition, there are not only grounds — I have a long list, but I would not be able to cover them all in five minutes — but clubs named after republicans. There are also competitions named after republican terrorists. Even the two premier trophies in the Gaelic world — for Gaelic football and hurling — are named after men who were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

It is often pointed out by propagandists for the GAA that Sam Maguire came from a Church of Ireland background in County Cork. In fact, Sam Maguire was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a gunrunner, a terrorist —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: I have one minute and 20 seconds remaining, so I do not have time. I can discuss matters with the Member later. I have a long list with which to deal.

It is important that we deal with this issue. The premier GAA trophy is named after Sam Maguire, and it was taken around this Building by one of the leading Sinn Féin Members. Indeed, the Deputy First Minister has had that trophy in this Building in the past.

It is not surprising that one finds a difficulty with the republican ethos in the GAA when the premier trophy is named after someone who was implicated in the murders of members of society in London and elsewhere. Sam Maguire was an intelligence officer in the Irish Republican Brotherhood who set up people to be murdered. He used his position in the Post Office in London to bring guns into Ireland. All of that tells me that there is a problem that is peculiar and unique to the GAA. That is not an issue that arises in football,

where clubs tend to be named after the local town or a particular place. That is perfectly normal practice elsewhere in the world. In rugby football, a similar situation prevails, but the GAA is an organisation that is 100% nationalist, and I hope that when dealing with the wider issue, that matter will be addressed.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá sa díospóireacht seo. I wish to commend and congratulate the Members who brought the motion before the House. However, I am disappointed with the remarks of the previous contributor. We are supposed to be discussing a motion that covers sports, but the Member went into history in great detail. Fair play to him for his knowledge and his learning of history. However, it is a shame that his speech addressed just one particular sport.

I take this opportunity to wish both the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland soccer teams well in their European Championship qualifying endeavours. I hope that both teams qualify for the championships.

I hope that, one day, we will see an all-Ireland football team. We should look at the example of rugby, which has shown great leadership and courage in the past. An all-Ireland football team would show great leadership and courage to all the fans on the island of Ireland, would further reduce the level of sectarianism and would help the integration of newcomers to our society.

I wish to commend the IFA on its campaign against sectarianism. I congratulate Michael Boyd and the community relations department on its achievements. That department has been proactively out in our communities, delivering programmes to reduce sectarianism and to make football a more inclusive sport. Unfortunately, there are still individuals who chant sectarian songs and fly flags in the grounds. That deters some sections of the community from attending games.

I visited the IFA's website at the weekend and read its Football for All section. The IFA's community relations policy statement states:

"The IFA respects and values diversity. We endeavour to provide an environment which values and enables the full involvement of all people, in all aspects and at every level of Northern Ireland football, regardless of perceived cultural identity, political affiliation or religious beliefs. We believe in the philosophy of Football For All."

That is an important statement, which shows that the IFA is taking the matter seriously.

I also wish to congratulate the GAA on its response to the incidents in Fermanagh, to which other Members have referred. Both the IFA and the GAA deserve congratulations. However, the fact that this motion is before the House is a clear message that there remains sectarianism, racism and violence in sports grounds. We must stop that.

The Football (Offences) Act 1991 makes it an offence for fans to throw missiles or to chant indecent or racial slogans. That is good, and we can support that. However, sporting bodies, associations and clubs have a responsibility to stamp out such behaviour. Sectarianism and racism come in many forms and must be stopped immediately. If it comes to the attention of clubs or associations that someone — a fan, a player, or a club official — is acting in a sectarian or racist manner, officials should act immediately and bar that person from future games.

11.00 am

We must ensure that sport is open to everyone and that everyone is made welcome whether they are taking part or are just spectators.

In concluding, I support the motion and commend the Members who tabled it. However, it must be recognised that reducing sectarianism will not be achieved by just introducing legislation — indeed, if we had our own justice powers, we could make such legislation ourselves and not have to invite outside bodies to do so. A lot of hard work will be required by the sporting bodies to introduce anti-racism and anti-sectarianism programmes, education programmes and other initiatives to their members, players, officials, fans and associations, and to show real leadership in stamping out racism and sectarianism. Let us all give racism and sectarianism the red card. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: I commend Kieran McCarthy for tabling the motion. If it were not for him, we would not have had the amendment that was moved by David McNarry. The SDLP will be supporting the motion and the amendment because there are clear reasons for doing so.

It was extremely disappointing that Nelson McCausland used almost four and a half minutes of his speech to have a go at the GAA. The GAA's presentation to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure was, without doubt, the most extensive with regard to raising young people in a holistic way in areas such as discipline, health, education and social engagement. That view was accepted by the Committee, and that language was used by the DUP. I did not think that his speech was fair given the approach that he took during the presentation to the Committee.

The Football (Offences) Act 1991 deserves serious consideration in Northern Ireland. Despite the considerable efforts being made at association level in soccer, rugby and Gaelic, sectarian, racist and abusive chanting is the reality at sports grounds across Northern Ireland week in and week out. The Act makes it an offence to make indecent or racialist chants at a football ground. The Act also defines indecent or racialist

chanting as being such that is abusive or insulting to a person by reason of his colour, race, nationality or creed.

Central records of prosecutions under the Act in Britain have only been kept since 2001. According to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 93 people were convicted for racist or indecent chanting between the beginning of the 2001-02 season and 2005. Unfortunately, that figure would have been considerably higher had the legislation been introduced into Northern Ireland during that period. However, simply extending the Act to Northern Ireland may not be adequate for two reasons: first, it does not specify sectarian chanting; secondly, it only applies to soccer.

I welcome the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's announcement yesterday to market Northern Ireland as a region in which athletes can prepare for the 2012 Olympics. That will be hugely important for the quality of life here. However, the negative impacts of sectarianism, as reported in the press, do not go down well, particularly at international level.

The IFA, the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and the GAA deserve to be supported in their ongoing efforts to stamp out unacceptable behaviour. Over the past decade, significant steps have been taken to address sectarian perceptions. The GAA has abolished rule 21, and the IFA's Football for All campaign has been rightly praised by Members and has gone a long way towards putting an end to sectarianism. The IRFU introduced 'Ireland's Call' as a unifying common anthem for Irish rugby.

There is no acceptable level of abuse in society, and there can be no place for it in sport. It is the Assembly's job to provide legal protection to those who are tasked with enforcing the standards that we set for ourselves. Had appropriate legislation been in place during the summer, those who taunted Darren Graham, a young Protestant who had played football and hurling for Fermanagh at under-21 level, could have expected to face prosecution, and the Ballymena supporters, who, in the words of Linfield manager David Jeffrey, hurled abuse at his Catholic players, would be facing the prospect of not seeing an Irish league match for quite some time.

Young people are not born bad, and they are certainly not born with sectarianism in their blood. As politicians, it is our job to set an example. However, unfortunately, at times, we have heard sectarian comments and chants in this Chamber, which is not a good example for the leaders of the community to be setting.

The Minister should issue a consultation document at post-primary level and at all-spectator level for discussion in the community. The community wants the leadership that such consultation would provide. Young people, irrespective of background, should feel

free, content and comfortable when playing whatever sport they want in Northern Ireland.

Lord Browne: I support the amendment. The majority of sporting events in Northern Ireland pass off without any trouble, and only a minority of fans, on a few occasions, are involved in sectarian abuse or violence. Unfortunately, there have been occasions when religious sectarianism has come to the fore in every sport, along with sporadic outbreaks of hooliganism — no sport has been immune from antisocial behaviour. Recently, in rugby, Welsh players allegedly suffered racial abuse from spectators and players, and in GAA, a Down player was abused at Casement Park. Tackling this deep-seated problem is not easy, and legislation will not provide the whole answer. We must all take action and work in partnership, using educational and promotional methods, with sports governing bodies, local clubs, the police and the community itself.

Major steps have been taken in Great Britain as regards legislative controls, investments, and improvements in infrastructure. Unfortunately, those steps have not been taken in Northern Ireland, and a principal difficulty for clubs here is that legislation making it an offence to carry drink on supporters' buses or bring alcohol onto the terraces applies in other areas of the United Kingdom, such as Scotland, but does not apply here. The police here are powerless to act in such circumstances.

It is important that the safety legislation introduced in 2006 is fully enacted, as well as ancillary public order legislation, which regulates spectators' behaviour in relation to hooliganism and excessive drinking. That legislation should apply to all major stadiums: rugby, GAA, football and so on.

The Glentoran Community Trust is an organisation in my constituency that may provide an example of how the problem can be tackled. It is the first trust of its kind to be set up in Northern Ireland, and during the short time that it has been established, it has enrolled 400 members and launched an initiative to encourage cross-community interest. The trust has involved Glentoran Football Club, which has established good relations with the principal of St Joseph's Primary School in St Comgall's parish, Ballyhackamore, with a view to encouraging pupils to visit the local football club. The school has an enrolment of 160 pupils, of which 40% are from the Filipino and Polish ethnic minorities. Glentoran Community Trust and Glentoran Football Club have brought pupils to the club and published information in both languages. Such educational initiatives encourage people to take an active part in tackling sectarianism. The trust has also obtained grants and replaced paramilitary murals in east Belfast with portraits of the Glentoran greats.

However, I must declare that I am a member of Linfield Football Club. That club is to be congratulated on its scheme, Support for Sport, through which it has attempted to address the issues also.

Linfield Football Club has allowed the local ladies' camogie team to practise on its ground under floodlights. Belfast Harlequins Rugby Football Club has also been encouraging in that area, and all those actions help to promote a love of sport.

Linfield — the current Irish League champions — have undertaken a great deal of hard work. Some Members already have congratulated the IFA on its Football for All programme, which has been very successful because of its community relations officer. I am happy to support the amended motion.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be brief as I do not want to repeat anything that has already been said. An important point that Wallace made is that action on the issue should start at club level. Legislation is not the answer to any of the problems. We must get to a point at which nothing happens that makes us think that legislation may be necessary. Linfield Football Club has done great work, as has the IFA, and I appreciate that great work.

However, of all the sports played in Ireland, soccer is the only one that is not played to any extent on an all-Ireland basis. Although not a panacea, it might remedy the problem of sectarianism to some extent if soccer followers were exposed to more all-Ireland competition.

The Setanta Sports Cup is an important competition that has had a big influence on the more successful teams in the North, particularly Linfield. To leave the cocoon of the Six Counties may help supporters to broaden their minds and see sport as sport, rather than as a means of exhibiting narrow-mindedness and sectarianism.

Miss McIlveen: I am in favour of the amendment. Some Members who spoke mentioned the possibility of one team for the island. Were they to attend, or even watch, a Northern Ireland match, they would realise that there already is only one team in Ireland — that being Northern Ireland, of course.

Since 1998, the IFA, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland — now Sport Northern Ireland — and the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs, has worked to remove sectarianism from football through the Football for All community relations programme.

As a Northern Ireland supporter who has attended home internationals in Windsor Park since the late 1980s, I have witnessed first-hand the change in atmosphere at the stadium, where there is now an inclusive,

family-orientated, football-focused environment. That is due in no small part to self-policing by the Northern Ireland supporters clubs. I congratulate them on the work that they do in that regard.

Anyone attending Windsor Park will be serenaded throughout the 90 minutes with such modern classics as 'Away in a Manger', 'We're not Brazil, We're Northern Ireland' and 'Stand up for the Ulstermen'. Fans now recognise that we are the twelfth man, and the positive atmosphere and support that we generate has helped our national team to famous victories against England, Spain and Sweden.

However, as supporting the team becomes more fashionable, a danger exists of attracting a thuggish element. I had the great pleasure of accompanying the green and white army on its excursion to Latvia at the weekend. Although the result did not go our way, the noise and carnival atmosphere generated by Northern Ireland fans in Skonto Stadium was reminiscent of the wonderful nights that I have experienced at Windsor Park.

Speaking to fans before and after the game, I was made aware of scattered incidents of clashes with local police. That was a result of a combination of heavy-handedness by the Latvian authorities and of drinking and stupid behaviour by a small proportion of Northern Ireland fans. That is a worrying development. Northern Ireland fans are proud of their title of best fans in Europe, and they do not want that kind of behaviour to tarnish their good name.

The Football (Offences) Act 1991 introduced several offences aimed at removing missile throwing, indecent and racist chanting, and pitch invasions.

11.15 am

Other legislation has been promulgated since then to strengthen the football authorities' grip on the hooligan element. The Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999, which amended the Football (Spectators) Act 1989, not only concerns itself with domestic football, but gives the courts the power to impose banning orders at domestic and international games. Coupled with that are tighter controls on ticket touting, which are contained in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. The Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc.) Act 1985, now amended by the Licensing Act 2003, prevents drunk people from entering a football ground when a designated football match is taking place; the consumption of alcohol on certain coaches, trains and motor vehicles travelling to a designated football match; and the possession of fireworks, flares and similar items at designated matches.

Sadly, although the IFA has sought to deal with the problems that were evident in domestic football and at international matches, the GAA is perceived as an inherently sectarian organisation. Several Members

have mentioned the recent example of Darren Graham, a young Protestant who simply wants to play the sport that he loves. Had he not highlighted the bigotry that he faced, does anyone believe that he would have been given the apologies and assurances that it would not happen again? I do not.

Rule 7(b) of the GAA's constitution states that the association should be non-sectarian. However, supporters are led by example. What chance do they have when GAA grounds and competitions are named after IRA volunteers who murdered their way through decades of sectarian violence? Sectarianism must be stamped out of all sports. Perhaps the GAA will follow the IFA's lead. I look forward to a "GAA for all" initiative and a "kick sectarianism out of the GAA" campaign.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member agree that it is not simply a matter of tackling sectarianism on the terraces, but of tackling the institutionalised political sectarianism that is embedded in the constitution of the organisation to which she has just referred?

Miss McIlveen: I absolutely agree with the Member and I thank him for his intervention. A wide range of legislation must be introduced in order to be effective. I, therefore, support the amendment, which calls for a package of legislative measures. Furthermore, I agree that such legislation should encompass all sports so that all sporting bodies are given the tools to deal with sectarianism, violence and all forms of antisocial behaviour.

Sporting events should be about what is happening on the pitch or field and about the pleasure and anguish of competition, not abuse and intimidation.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá sé in am dúinn uilig an cárta dearg a thaispeáint do sheicteachas sa spórt. Tá mé ar aon intinn le Paul Maskey ar an ábhar sin. I agree with Paul Maskey, who said that it is high time to give sectarianism and racism the red card in sport. At the outset, I wish to say that Armagh supporters are not in any way biased: they do not care who beats Tyrone.

There are great rivalries and battles in sport. I commend Wallace Browne for being able to transcend that great divide between Linfield and Glentoran football clubs, which must have taken huge effort. I also commend Kieran McCarthy for proposing the motion and David McNarry, who said that there is no room for complacency on this matter. The motion specifically refers to the IFA. I acknowledge the good work that has been done by its Football for All campaign.

During the summer, I visited Whiterock leisure centre in west Belfast for an imaginative and well-organised fun day. I went there in the company of Professor Eric Saunders, who is the Cathaoirleach of Sport NI. We witnessed a great occasion during which young sport stars were introduced to their own community; people

such as Jane Adams, who is a camogie all-star several times over. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there are young people from that community who are on the books of, for example, St Paul's Gaelic Athletic Club and Linfield Football Club at the same time. Apart from anything else, those young people are extremely busy making a positive contribution to sport. I found it significant to learn that young people are on the books of both a Gaelic football club and Linfield Football Club. Good work must be acknowledged and commended.

Sport can be a tremendous unifier. It is no excuse for abusive behaviour of any kind. Like Francie Brolly, I pay tribute to those clubs that, at local level, exert hugely positive influences on young people — which are clearly seen — in the areas of health and responsibility. I witnessed those influences when I met the GAA's Ulster council and learned about all the work that is carried out at a local level. The introduction of defibrillators in clubs throughout Tyrone and Armagh is a good example of those clubs' influence on health matters. The extent of that scheme is being widened.

The GAA, the IFA, and all the responsible bodies, have a lot of work to do. They do good work. Members know that Gaelic games are my code. One issue that has not been raised in the Assembly, and which I feel strongly about, concerns international soccer. Darron Gibson has recently come under a lot of pressure because he opted to play for the Twenty-six Counties team. Darron comes from Derry. He made the choice to play for that team. I hope that FIFA will catch up with the Good Friday Agreement in respecting the right of any individual to determine his or her own national identity, and not to penalise anyone involved in those matters.

Basically, action must be taken to ensure that sectarianism is given the red card, as Paul Maskey has said. There should be no equivocation in the matter a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Shannon: The issue of sectarianism in sport is one that I feel strongly about. I support the amendment put forward by the Ulster Unionist Party. I have been an avid fan of Northern Ireland's football team since my youth, which was not yesterday: I go back a few years. I have travelled to foreign lands to watch the Northern Ireland team play. I did not go to Latvia, which was just as well. I have stood in rain and shine to cheer on my team. I have remained proud of my home team throughout all their efforts.

Some Members may know that I watched the Northern Ireland team play in Spain in the 1982 World Cup. That was one of the best teams that Northern Ireland has ever had. I also supported my home team in Mexico in 1986. Therefore, I have been around when it comes to supporting Northern Ireland's teams. I have watched

many players come and go. I have seen some of the greats wear green and white — and manage the team.

In recent years, I have seen a change in the way that things are handled. It has been a good change. Since 2001, there has been a concerted effort by team members and fans alike, facilitated by the IFA, to stamp out sectarianism and to go back to the roots of team support — a love for the team and the beautiful game. No longer are songs like 'The Billy Boys' resounding throughout Windsor Park. We cheer songs such as 'We're not Brazil, We're Northern Ireland', which I do not intend to sing. I suspect that, like my colleague, Michelle McIlveen, I would not sound very melodious. I would probably bring the rain on.

Mr McElduff: The slogan 'We're not Brazil, We're Northern Ireland' could have been applied to the foot-and-mouth crisis as well.

Mr Shannon: I do not think so. Obviously, Barry has a different sense of humour from me.

We no longer leave our children at home, but bring them with us to support the country. My sons, who are now young men, no longer have to leave the game early in case of violence, as they did when they were wee boys. We can now watch to the glorious or the bitter end, depending on the score. That change has also been remarked upon by others. That is why Northern Ireland's fans are the best fans in Europe. That is not me saying that — it was attested by the award of the Brussels International Supporters Award of 2006. The Football for All initiative has reaped its reward.

However, only so much can be achieved by the IFA. The motion has been proposed to put powers into place that will back up the Football for All initiative. However, I do not believe that the motion goes far enough, in two respects. The first is that the three main offences under the Football (Offences) Act 1991 — pitch invasion; indecent or racist chanting; and the throwing of missiles — do not fully address all the issues. The obvious omissions begin with sectarian chanting, alcohol control, ticket touting at matches, and the important football banning order, which would ensure that our team falls into line with legislation that governs other European football teams.

Our Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure Mr Poots is making an effort to address that issue. He is working with the NIO to introduce those measures so that sporting bodies, in their efforts to stamp out the nonsense in the matches, can have the backup of the PSNI and the Home Office. Thus the game can once again become one that father and son, mother and daughter, and so on, can enjoy the victory and spoils of the event.

The IFA has achieved a fan base that realises that to support a team means to do exactly that — support it, not drag others down. Those fans want the prerequisites for attending matches to be a simple love

of the game and a desire to create a family atmosphere — and not the fact that a fan comes from a particular background. Those efforts need to be backed by further legislation — and more than simply the Football (Offences) Act 1991.

There is no doubt that sectarianism in GAA sports is very much in the spotlight following the recent revelations about the young Protestant, Darren Graham. My colleagues and other Members have already mentioned the matter, and the young man's experience has been well documented, so I do not intend to dwell on it. However, it is unacceptable that he should feel that he has to leave the sport, and the GAA's attempts to ensure that such an incident does not happen again must be given power by backing up the PSNI and legislation to ensure that the sport is player-friendly and supporter-friendly and can be enjoyed by those from all backgrounds.

Many young men of my age — I say young men, but perhaps the word “young” is not entirely accurate — would have enjoyed watching a Gaelic match in years gone by, but yet would feel uncomfortable doing so now. Most Protestant young people do not know how the game is played or what the scoring rules are. Those issues must be addressed.

The IFA has brought Northern Ireland fans from a dark place into a brighter place. The GAA should take note and apply the same principles so that it can achieve the same result. Our children need to support all sports in which we as a nation participate. They should enjoy the victories of Northern Ireland and view them as a way of letting others see that we are more than a small country — we are a small country with a big heart and soul.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets): Mr Speaker, I thank you for giving the Assembly the opportunity to have this debate. I welcome the opportunity and appreciate the fact that the motion and amendment have been brought forward today, while recognising that there is a need to address issues of sectarianism, violence, racism and antisocial behaviour at sporting venues across Northern Ireland. However, sectarianism and hooliganism are not simply a problem for the world of sport and football; they are societal problems that sometimes find their voices at sporting venues. It is, therefore, a complex matter that requires the introduction of a wide range of measures if it is to be successfully combated.

Against that background, I wish to pay tribute to the IFA's excellent work to tackle sectarianism and hooliganism in soccer as part of its Football for All campaign. Since 1998, the IFA has had a full-time community relations officer who works in partnership with the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, Sport Northern Ireland and the Amalgamation of

Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs. Tribute should also be paid to the amalgamation for the support that it has given to the IFA in dealing with those issues. Members should be aware that, last year, delegates from UEFA and the European Union awarded the amalgamation the Brussels International Supporters' Award 2006 for its efforts to stamp out sectarianism.

It is widely accepted that the work of the IFA, supported by the amalgamation, has gone a long way towards reducing the incidence of sectarianism and hooliganism in soccer. That work strongly complements what the Government are trying to achieve through their 'A Shared Future' initiative, particularly with regard to promoting equality and good relations across all communities. The IFA's Football for All initiative continues to reaffirm my belief in the contribution that sport can make to the promotion of the objectives in 'A Shared Future'. I have sought to reflect that belief in the new draft strategy for sport and physical recreation, which should be published in the near future.

However, if we want to maximise the contribution that sport can make to those objectives, we must also examine closely the problems that it faces. All our major sporting venues are dated and fall short of modern standards for safety and comfort. That situation is not conducive to encouraging either good attendance or acceptable standards of behaviour among spectators. That is one of several issues that must be addressed if we are to tackle successfully problems of violent and disorderly conduct among spectators.

11.30 am

In response to those issues, my Department has already introduced an initiative on safety at sports grounds, including new legislation in the form of The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which is designed to promote safety at major sporting venues. Over the past three years, my Department has also provided £9 million to Sport Northern Ireland to assist with the introduction of its stadia safety programme, the aims of which are to help clubs improve the standard of facilities at their venues and to promote responsible management of major sports events.

The improvement of the physical infrastructure of sports grounds is, of course, only one dimension. The human dimension is equally important. Since my appointment as Minister for sport, I have received representations on the need for legislation to deal with hooliganism and sectarianism at sports grounds. Having given those matters careful consideration, I am now satisfied that offences must be created around unauthorised pitch incursion; offensive chanting and missile throwing; bringing bottles, flares and fireworks into grounds; the carrying and drinking of alcohol on special public transport on the way to and from designated matches, and during such matches; and

ticket touting. The introduction of a football banning order regime for Northern Ireland will be critical when we qualify for next year's European Championship finals tournament.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: Members will, however, appreciate that those measures, although related to sport, are in fact public order measures. The power to introduce them into Northern Ireland, therefore, does not lie with this Assembly. Those are reserved matters, and remain the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office. In light of that, I wrote recently to the Minister with responsibility for criminal justice at the Northern Ireland Office, Paul Goggins, informing him of my keenness to make early progress in this area, in the interests of both sport and public safety. I have also asked Mr Goggins for his co-operation in taking these matters forward as expeditiously as possible.

I am pleased to report that I have received a letter from Mr Goggins in which he says that he will be happy to work with me to agree an appropriate package of measures. I intend to meet Mr Goggins later this month with a view to taking the issue forward with the Northern Ireland Office.

Mr Campbell: The Minister has mentioned some of the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Office and said that he wants to make pitch incursion an offence in the proposed legislation. Is it not the case that many people in Northern Ireland believe that a similar Order could and should have been introduced by a previous incumbent in the Northern Ireland Office — Mr Peter Hain, the Secretary of State? Had he introduced such legislation, however, a great deal of attention would have been paid to his past activities, including pitch incursions at sporting events many years ago, and embarrassing questions might have been asked.

Mr Poots: The Member knows that Ministers are not privy to the papers of their predecessors, but I understand his point.

In conclusion, I welcome the Assembly's interest in this matter. I assure the House that I am doing all in my power to ensure that early progress is made in the introduction of new public order offences relating to sports grounds. I firmly believe that they have a key part to play in improving safety at sports grounds and in combating sectarianism, racism and violence in sport and in society at large.

Progress in this direction will also go a long way towards making our major sports venues more attractive to a larger and wider audience, which is critically important for the development of sport in Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson: It will be difficult to amend the motion in the light of the Minister's statement, which

was very welcome, and which described the work that his Department and the Northern Ireland Office are doing to grasp the nettle of sectarianism and racism in sport.

I will summarise Members' contributions. Members across the Chamber have co-operated on the issue, and I welcome the fact that all parties appear to support the UUP amendment, which was designed to add breadth to the original motion. Everyone has recognised that sectarianism and racism are problems in our community but that those issues do not reside only around sports grounds, of whatever code. Unfortunately, sectarianism and racism are endemic, and they must be treated in various ways by all sections of society. Legislation may play a role in defining some of the necessary moves, but, for progress to be made, the clubs must make the real moves with individuals and associations across the cultural divide.

Most Members have taken a modern approach, but Jim Shannon almost stole my thunder. I think that I am one of the oldest Members present today —

A Member: You are.

Mr K Robinson: I admit to that.

As a schoolboy, I went to the infamous Northern Ireland versus Italy match, when the referee and linesmen failed to turn up. Sixty thousand people in Windsor Park were waiting for the match, so a local referee and linesmen were thrown into the den. The match took place and finished up in a riot because of some Continental tactics that had never been experienced in Northern Irish soccer. The match was eventually replayed, and Northern Ireland won, going on to play in international competition in Europe. In those days, the facilities were non-existent, and the toilets were medieval. As a young fellow, my feet were lifted off the ground, and I was carried out through the gates on the backs of thousands of people who were squeezing their way out of the grounds. Fortunately, grounds and safety levels have improved over the generations. The Minister's comments this morning indicate that his Department will prioritise the future safety of grounds.

Over the past 16 years, the Northern Ireland Office failed to grasp the opportunity to address the problem of sectarianism and racism. The initiative shown by the IFA and its supporters is to be welcomed. The GAA's moves to address sectarianism in County Fermanagh are also to be welcomed. The behaviour that is reported in the media seems to focus on soccer and, sometimes, on Gaelic sports. However, there are also problems with other sports, either before or after the match, which are referred to as a "bit of laddism". I wonder whether hotel proprietors, who have to put their premises back together after certain festivities, see that sort of behaviour as laddism or as vandalism. Are the working-class followers of soccer, in particular, being singled out for attention?

Sometimes the offences are blown out of proportion by the media. I am not saying that such incidents do not, or should not, happen, but a knee-jerk reaction sometimes follows those incidents.

An in-depth consultation is needed. The University of Leicester has produced a good paper, which attempts to identify the social problems of young males and problems in sports grounds in England. There is much useful information in that report.

I thank the Minister for his statement, which is helpful and encouraging. There should now be a widespread and meaningful consultation, with no point scoring. If the problems can be solved, everyone can enjoy attending sporting events with their families — in my case, with my grandchildren. Sport provides a good public image, and I wish the Northern Ireland team success in tomorrow's match in Iceland; I was most disappointed that the team lost its match against Latvia on Saturday. I want a continuation of a positive approach to sport.

Mr B Wilson: As a long-standing and long-suffering supporter of Bangor Football Club and of Northern Ireland, I also wanted to mention the riots after the 1957 Northern Ireland versus Italy match, but Mr Robinson beat me to it. Riots are not particularly new.

Mr K Robinson: Was the Member at the match?

Mr B Wilson: Yes, I was.

Mr K Robinson: Was the Member at both matches?

Mr B Wilson: Yes, I was. I have been to thousands of matches over the past 50 years.

Therefore, I can speak with some authority on football. I do not have the same level of experience of GAA and rugby, because I have attended only a few matches. However, the legislation that the motion proposes the introduction of should not be restricted to football. Although Members have referred to the Football (Offences) Act 1991, any new legislation should not be restricted to that one sport. The 1991 Act is a template on which that legislation should be based, but it should apply to other sports.

The situation faced by Darren Graham has already been mentioned. However, there is also, as far as the news is concerned —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I am pleased that those who delivered the winding-up speeches on the motion and the amendment have acknowledged that we all have a responsibility to tackle sectarianism in sport. I am sure that the proposers of the amendment and substantive motion did not intend to allow the DUP to engage in its favourite pastime of GAA bashing. It is a pity that Mr McCausland failed to reflect on the timing of the formation of the GAA. It

was formed after centuries of ethnic cleansing of all things Irish, including our language and our culture.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree that there was a tendency to GAA-bash during the debate. There has been quite a number of attacks on referees at GAA matches, and so forth. However, the legislation could be useful to all sports. Therefore, the motion is not trying to tie any new legislation to football, other than its stating that the Football (Offences) Act 1991 could form the template for that legislation.

I first became aware of football in 1948, when Jimmy Jones's leg was broken during rioting at Windsor Park. My father was at that match, and he was in quite a state when he got home. Belfast Celtic withdrew from the league as a result of that incident.

There has been sectarianism and violence at Irish League matches for the past 50 years. As a Bangor supporter, I remember once being surrounded by a group of fans. They were not Linfield supporters, but they started singing 'The Sash', and so forth, to try to provoke us good Protestants into attacking them, or something along those lines — I am not sure what their exact intention was. However, there was certainly a need for change then.

Mr McNarry's amendment is fine, and we can go along with it. Several points that he made may delay legislation, however. Mr McNarry said that our motion was specific to football — its intention was to include all sports in any legislation. The tendency for other Members to attack the GAA during today's debate is counterproductive.

Pat Ramsey said that there was sectarian chanting at sports grounds across Northern Ireland "week in and week out." I have attended quite a few matches recently, and I think that Mr Ramsey was exaggerating. There is some sectarian chanting, but the situation has changed dramatically in recent years.

Michelle McIlveen talked about the change in atmosphere at the IFA. That change has actually been happening since the 1980s. During the early 1980s, I used to take my two sons to Windsor Park to see all the international matches, and I was pretty disgusted with some of the fans' behaviour. When the Irish Republic beat Northern Ireland 4–0, I had never felt so intimidated at a football match in my life, even though the fans causing the trouble were supporting the same team as me. I had to take the children home halfway through the match.

Since then, the IFA has done wonderful work and brought about dramatic changes, for which it has not been given full credit.

11.45 am

Mr McElduff and Mr Brolly said that local clubs should become involved in promoting anti-sectarianism. Ten years ago, I did not think that I would ever give credit to Linfield Football Club, but it has done a good job in trying to promote anti-sectarianism. In fact, the team now probably has more Catholic players than Protestant, which it would not have done 20 years ago. The club has links with the GAA, it has hosted camogie training sessions and it is also involved in the Dunfield initiative, which is a cross-border youth league bringing together football teams from Northern Ireland and the Republic. That initiative has been successful in changing the fans' attitudes. Fans who attend internationals at Windsor Park now do not recognise it from 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago.

Ms Lo: I wish to add my congratulations to a local club. I do not go to football matches very often but, last week, I went to Donegal Celtic Football Club in west Belfast. The club opened its grounds and turned them into a mini Chinatown to welcome the Chinese community. The team played a friendly game with a Chinese football team. I do not want to tell Members the score, but it was a huge humiliation: 5-0 to Donegal Celtic. Everyone enjoyed the game, and it was a wonderful night. I also pay tribute to Linfield Football Club, because it has also worked with the Chinese community. Donegal Celtic said that it hopes to play a Polish football team next. I hope that they also have a good night.

Mr B Wilson: That illustrates the progress that those clubs are making in tackling sectarianism and racism. I also recall a Northern Ireland match against the Republic where black players from the Republic team received horrible racial abuse.

The violence must also be tackled. FIFA is now getting much stronger on violence. In the past couple of years, two international teams have had matches cancelled because of violence in their stadiums. A football offences Act would benefit the IFA, and Howard Wells of the IFA has said that he would support it. We must get rid of sectarianism, racism and violence.

Turning to the amendment, it is true that criminal penalties for football offences would have to be introduced in Westminster legislation. This is a cross-cutting issue, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has the lead on anti-racism and anti-sectarianism in football. In England, while the Home Office leads on the criminal side of football offences legislation, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport leads on anti-racism and on building a culture of tolerance and inclusion in sport.

I am glad that the Minister intends to meet his NIO counterpart later this month to discuss the possibility of introducing legislation. I find it hard to imagine that

the NIO will rebuff a unanimous view from the Assembly and the Executive that action is required on such an important issue. There is no reason why the Minister and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure cannot drive this issue forward and get the NIO moving. The general public are always asking what politicians do to earn their money. This is an issue where recent events have shown that action is necessary now, and passing the buck to the NIO will not endear us to them.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly congratulates the Irish Football Association on its campaign against sectarianism, urges all sporting bodies in Northern Ireland to undertake similar initiatives against sectarianism; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to commence consultation with a view to introducing legislation to address sectarianism, racism and violence associated with all sporting events.

Attacks on Orange Halls

Mr 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. 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 for the winding-up speech.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns all attacks on Orange Halls and calls on all political parties to use their influence to stop such sectarian attacks.

In proposing the motion, I wish to make it clear that I am a proud member of the Orange Order in north Down. The Orange Order is a religious organisation that is dedicated to the promotion of civil and religious liberties for all. It is, of course, an exclusively Protestant organisation that honours the memory of all those who, through many centuries, cherished the pursuit of liberty, equality and freedom to worship, according to one's conscience.

The Orange Order bases all its teachings and actions on the teachings of holy scripture, which it accepts as the supreme authority on all matters relating to Christian life and teaching. It supports and seeks to uphold the constitution and monarchy of the United Kingdom, and is no more political or exclusive in nature than the Roman Catholic Church or the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Throughout Northern Ireland — and indeed in the Republic of Ireland — there are many Orange Halls, which perform an important social function. They are not only used for lodge meetings, but as an important resource for a multitude of community groups, clubs and organisations. It is reprehensible that those buildings — which support activity at the heart of Protestant, unionist and Ulster-Scots life — should be subject to constant and apparently organised sectarian attacks. Often, during those attacks, vandals and arsonists destroy priceless historical records, artefacts, lodge banners and memorabilia. Such attacks do not destroy the spirit of Orangeism — on the contrary, they make members more determined than ever to develop their distinctive culture and heritage.

In a recent letter from the PSNI, I received statistics that showed that, in 2005-06, there were 62 recorded attacks on Orange Halls. In the past year, that number has escalated to more than 70. By contrast, in the past two years, there has been only one recorded attack on an Ancient Order of Hibernians building.

Mr Irwin: In my constituency of Newry and Armagh, there have probably been more attacks on

Orange Halls than anywhere else in Northern Ireland. In the run-up to the Twelfth of July period this year, there were three such attacks. Does the Member agree that many Orange Halls are used by community groups and religious organisations, and therefore the attacks on them are seen locally as attacks on the wider Protestant community?

Mr Easton: I concur with my colleague on all those points. Attacks on Orange Halls and on churches have cost taxpayers £4 million in the last five years. It is also reprehensible that any organisation — orange or green, Protestant or Roman Catholic, unionist or nationalist — should be on the receiving end of wanton destruction and damage. However, to the unionist community, it seems that Orange Halls are being singled out as a target by members of the nationalist/republican community.

It has not been an easy road for the unionist people over the last 40 years. They believe that they have been on the receiving end of a vicious, violent and sectarian assault on the physical and commercial infrastructure of the Province, the institutions of Government, and their lives. In those years, unionists have always found it difficult to imagine what perceived or real problems existed in Northern Ireland that could have justified such a prolonged and determined campaign of terror, which resulted in the loss of so many lives. It has been difficult too that, in the cause of peace, we have to sit in Government with Sinn Féin /IRA. We have reluctantly accepted that that is part of the price that we must pay to shape a peaceful and prosperous future for all our children. However, it is vital in this new dispensation that there is tolerance and respect for all our distinctive Orange, unionist and British culture.

Today, we will hear much about equality, justice, respect and a shared future. We are often lectured by Members opposite on those very principles — almost to the point that one might think that nationalists and republicans subscribe to such principles.

Parity of esteem is a two-way process. It is incumbent on all nationalist and republican politicians and community leaders to use their influence to stop elements of their community from directing sectarian aggression against the Loyal Orders. The displays of violence and hatred directed against Orange Halls in particular must be stopped.

Perhaps someone from Sinn Féin can explain why a member of that party was caught on the roof of an Orange Hall in Newcastle in recent weeks. Did he think that he was Spiderman or Superman, or did he merely want to admire the Union Jack? What action will Sinn Féin take against that party member? Sinn Féin has failed to educate its people, and it has failed to stop those in its community carrying out attacks on Orange Halls. Furthermore, its MLAs have failed in

their duty as public representatives to deliver on the matter. It is time for them to deliver. It is easy to talk the talk, but it is not so easy to walk the walk. Actions speak louder than words.

Although I support the content of the Sinn Féin amendment, I feel that it was tabled to detract from the motion and the debate on attacks on Orange Halls. The amendment is a means to detract from the point that the DUP is trying to make. If the amended motion were tabled as a substantive motion, I would have no problem supporting it, but I notice that the amendment does not call on politicians to use their influence to stop sectarian attacks.

Unionists have given much to further the cause of peace in our Province. There is a huge responsibility on the nationalist people — especially on the republican community and its leaders — to show that they can respect our rights as British citizens in Northern Ireland to pursue our culture, cherish our identity and celebrate our distinctive heritage in an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. Sectarian attacks from any side of the community on a community facility or hall are wrong. They must stop now, and republicans must stop them now.

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out “all attacks on Orange Halls” and insert after “condemns”

“attacks on all homes, property and community facilities, including Orange Halls.”

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I do not agree with everything that Mr Easton has said, but I welcome the measured way in which he has approached the opening to the debate. It is, understandably, an emotive issue for Mr Easton as a member of the Orange Order, and I hope that the debate continues in that tone. Today, Members want to work out a way in which to ensure that sectarian attacks against Orange Halls stop.

The Sinn Féin amendment was not tabled to dilute the DUP motion. I have no difficulty with the content of the motion. The amendment is to ensure that we encompass sectarianism in society and that Members, as political leaders, bring it all to an end. We do not want Members to engage in “whataboutery” during or after the debate, and ask about incidents that happened in their area. Today should see the start of a debate on the issue among Members, as political leaders, and among wider society on how to stop sectarianism. I agree with Mr Easton: there has been a sustained increase on attacks against Orange Halls, and those attacks must be condemned and stopped.

Mr Easton mentioned a newspaper report that alleged that a member of my party was caught on the roof of an Orange Hall. If anyone produces substantive evidence that proves that that incident took place, the

party will deal with the person involved. The DUP has its disciplinary procedures, and it has recently had to deal with several high-profile cases. Matters relating to those cases were before the judiciary, so the DUP could not proceed with any action until the court cases had concluded. Mr Easton, therefore, must look at the alleged incident in Newcastle with an open mind. Sinn Féin cannot deal with the matter until substantive evidence is brought forward, and the allegation proven. The PSNI may also conduct a criminal investigation into the incident, and that would mean that Sinn Féin could do nothing until the investigation's completion. The DUP has had to do that in many instances.

Mr T Clarke: Would the Member support any PSNI investigation into that matter?

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

Mr O'Dowd: I certainly would. I urge everyone who has information on anyone who is involved in criminal activity against Orange Hall property to give it to the PSNI. I have no difficulty in saying that. As I said previously, political leaders have a responsibility on such matters. Mr Easton spoke about tolerance and respect, and that is what we all must display.

12.00 noon

We must understand each other better. Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party must engage with each other to change the nationalist and republican community's views of the Orange Order.

I learnt more about the Orange Order, and what an Orange Hall is used for, from listening to a five-minute interview on ‘Talkback’ than I have from spending 20 years in politics. The interview was with a young woman who runs a youth centre and a child's crèche in an Orange Hall in Kilmore, which is in my constituency. That hall was burnt down and was attacked again recently with paint. She spoke for those five minutes about what she used that Orange Hall for. I came to understand that it was more of a community facility that had been attacked than a place that housed the Orange Order. If, after 20 years of being involved in politics, I can learn that information in five minutes, what could we learn if we spoke to each other about such matters?

I ask Members on the other side of the House not to entrench themselves in the politics of the past. They clearly remain suspicious of Sinn Féin's motives and lack of leadership where attacks on Orange Halls are concerned. Although Sinn Féin has major difficulties with the Orange Order and its marches, such as that on the Garvaghy Road, which is also in my constituency, I tell the House sincerely that my party is serious about stopping attacks on Orange Halls. Mr Irwin, a DUP Member, intervened to say that such acts of aggression are seen as attacks on the Protestant community. The halls are used as crèches and youth clubs, and they are

used to host dinners for pensioners. Orange Halls are used for all those activities that we in the wider political circles have not provided. Everyone in the House who represents a rural community knows that no council, or anyone else, provides community facilities in those areas — it is either the GAA or the Orange Order that provides them.

I appeal to Members to understand that Sinn Féin is serious about stopping attacks on Orange Halls. Members can remain suspicious, but they should take the extra step of sitting at the table with us so that we can all discuss — and find a way to resolve — the issue. Sinn Féin's amendment does not serve to undermine the motion; instead, it encompasses the problem of sectarianism. We do not have to get involved in "whataboutery", but we must tackle sectarianism and the attacks on Orange Halls head on. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome this important debate. At the outset, I am proud to confirm that I am a member of the Orange Order in County Armagh.

It cannot have escaped the Assembly's attention that the motion is being debated on 9/11, the anniversary of the appalling attacks in the United States of America that ushered in a new, and very terrible, age of world terrorism. That new age began at a time when we thought that our own Troubles were coming to an end. That is why the clear evidence of continuing sectarian bigotry that manifests itself in attacks on Orange Halls is so unacceptable.

Attacks on Orange Halls represent an attempt by republicans to intimidate, bully and threaten the unionist and Protestant cultural tradition. Those attacks are entirely out of place in an age — and in a new dispensation — when all cultural traditions should be mutually respected and equally valued. It is a "Brits out" policy taken to one of its most extreme forms, and it is just not on.

No tolerance should be shown to those who carry out such attacks. It does not take much common sense to see that they could cost the Province the prosperity to which it is entitled after so many hard years of conflict. We must not — and cannot — give the mindless cavemen and women who carry out those attacks any opportunities to jeopardise the relative peace that we now enjoy. Their actions have no place in any decent society. That is why there is no reason to protect the people who carry out those attacks. They are dangerous people who must be apprehended and convicted by being given long prison sentences. Communities must not shield them, and republican political leaders must demonstrate their credibility as peacemakers by making every effort to have those responsible handed over to the lawful authorities — the PSNI. That means that all the community influence

that a political party wields, which, in some cases is considerable, must be used in stopping or good attacks on Orange Halls.

None of us can be half in or half out of the process — an à la carte approach to law and order only when it suits, and when it does not upset any of our supporters. There is nothing more insidious and damaging to the whole political process here than a partial application of the principles of law and order. Make no mistake: the world is watching. Every attack on an Orange Hall and every sectarian incident is logged by overseas investors and reported in the world's press in the most unlikely places. The eyes that are scrutinising those events are not casual observers — they are potential investors. We had better take notice and listen when they ask whether the Troubles have really stopped.

We cannot afford to have a society frayed around the edges, with the residue of lawlessness hanging over it from its troubled past. Our potential to attract inward investment must not be harmed. The best way to effectively marginalise individuals or groups who indulge in attacks on Orange Halls is to inform the police — that is the way to deal with these activities. If the nationalist and republican communities were to do that, it would help to build a lasting peace and to convince the unionist-minded community that nationalists and republicans are sincere about a shared future.

I heard what Mr O'Dowd the Member for Upper Bann said, but actions are needed at this stage, not words. No one who wants peace and order in a new shared-future society will want these attacks to continue. The many hundreds of attacks over the years, which bizarrely accelerated after the original IRA ceasefire, leading right up to the attacks this summer, do nothing to create a just or lasting peace.

There are few things that really annoy the unionist people more than the deliberate act of malicious damage against their Orange Halls, which effectively serve as community halls, whether in Carnagh, Crosskeys or Mullintur — halls attacked this year in my constituency — or in Seagoe, outside Portadown, which is home to the most recently destroyed hall in County Armagh.

I say to those in the House, particularly republicans: stop burning our Orange Halls and start building real peace.

Mr O'Loan: The SDLP chose not to table an amendment because it felt that the proposers of the motion had a valid point to make and we did not want to dilute that in any way. However, since an amendment has been tabled, the SDLP will support it, because we recognise the range of attacks on various community premises.

Like other Members, I have spent a fair bit of my political life standing at the scenes of attacks on private houses, schools, churches and sports grounds — including GAA grounds. They were often premises

owned by Catholics or related to the Catholic community, but that was not always the case. I am aware of the full range of attacks on many community premises. However, I accept that a genuine and valid issue has been raised by the proposers of the motion in relation to attacks on Orange Halls, and the figures speak for themselves.

Lavin Orange Hall, which is not far from Ballymoney, is in my constituency. It was burned out on 12 July 2006 and, until recently, it remained as a burned-out shell. I have driven past it many times. The more I drove past it, the more I thought that the burned-out shell of the hall was a very eloquent statement of how wrong it is to burn down such premises. It highlighted the fractured state of the community. Politicians have a job to do to put that right, and I will talk about that later.

I am glad to see that site work recently started on Lavin Orange Hall; however, the period of time during which the ruin stood served as a statement of significant value. Members must not forget that message.

In the nationalist community, we can see that there is more of a two-way problem with sectarianism than we might have conceded in the past. Largely, sectarianism was seen as something that Protestants did to Catholics. That overview was not without some validity. However, when Members consider recent events in their local communities, many incidents have given cause for concern. In many cases, those acts are committed by young people with antisocial motives, who often attach labels to themselves — almost as flags of convenience.

There is no doubt that some of those incidents are deliberately sectarian and specifically anti-Protestant by nature, and are a cause of shame to those of us who come from the Catholic community. Significant as they are, there is a danger that people can read in too much of a conspiracy theory, or attach a republican label to those incidents. I am aware that antisocial elements in my area have attached republican and dissident republican names to themselves that have little basis in reality. However, there is a problem with sectarianism that all Members must face.

I commend the recent work of the Orange Order, which is changing significantly, and Members must allow it space to continue to change.

In this debate, Members utter a message to the community, but we must, furthermore, utter a message to ourselves. Members of the Assembly are important leaders of the community, and what we do here will send important signals to the rest of the community.

Mr Lunn: Naturally, the Alliance Party supports the motion. In doing so, it expresses mild disappointment that it goes only as far as mentioning Orange Halls. However, Mr Easton is entitled to make that specific point, and the Alliance Party does not disagree. At the same time, it supports the amendment, because it — correctly — expands the demand for condemnation to

all types of community facility, including homes and property. I note that the amendment does not call on all political parties to use their influence. The Alliance Party's amendment did that, but it was not accepted.

Mr O'Dowd: To clarify that point, I have checked with the Speaker's Office, and the Sinn Féin amendment includes the last line: "all political parties to use their influence to stop such sectarian attacks."

Mr Lunn: I am glad that the Member clarified that point. That is good news.

The amendment extends to all homes and property. It is not necessary to specify every type of property, but, by implication, churches are included.

Attacks on Orange Halls are disgraceful, not only in the damage that is done, but in the outrage, hurt and tension that they cause. That is precisely what is in the minds of the perpetrators when they do such things. Physical damage can be restored. I acknowledge the point concerning banners and memorabilia, which are much more difficult to restore — some are lost for ever. However, the damage to the community is long-lasting. That applies whether the attack is on an Orange Hall, GAA hall, church, chapel or any other type of facility, including a home.

A few days ago, in my area of Dunmurry, an attack, involving a pipe bomb, caused substantial damage to a small Housing Executive home. The fact that the house contained only female adults, one of whom is in the advanced stages of dementia, and a child who suffers from cerebral palsy, did not make any difference to the attackers. They probably regarded it as a bonus, because it increased both the publicity generated and community tension, which is what they wanted.

12.15 pm

Since 2000, the Alliance Party has pushed for the NIO to introduce comprehensive hate crime legislation similar to that in England and Wales, and it was finally introduced through the Criminal Justice (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. I am sure that Members are familiar with it, but its main provisions are: first, where an offence involves hostility based on religion, race, sexual orientation or disability, on conviction, the court must take that into account when sentencing; and secondly, the court's sentencing powers in relation to specified crimes of violence are increased. For example, the maximum sentence for putting someone in fear of violence increases from five years to seven years and the maximum sentence for criminal damage increases from 10 years to 14 years.

Such legislation, I am told, has been widely used in England, Wales and Scotland and is highly relevant to the type of attacks that we are talking about. Members may correct me if I am wrong, but I cannot remember a case in which that legislation has been specifically

invoked. Has anyone who has been charged with criminal damage also been prosecuted for it as an aggravated offence under the hate crimes legislation? The Assembly should be looking at that as a matter of urgency. If we cannot stop the attacks, much as I wish that we could, at least we might be able to properly punish the perpetrators when they are caught.

The Alliance Party condemns all attacks, whether they are against Orange Halls, Hibernian halls, GAA clubs, churches or homes. I am sure that all Members will agree. However, I hope that the proposers of the motion might now be inclined to accept the amendment. It does not dilute the motion in any way; it simply, and correctly, adds another layer to it. The Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment.

Lord Morrow: By bringing this motion before the House, the proposers have attempted to focus directly on Orange Halls. We are not saying or implying that there have been no attacks on private homes or other properties. We have sought the opportunity to bring a specific issue before the House. Unfortunately, Sinn Féin has tried to thwart that — not for the first time, I suspect; nor the last.

I have a list in my hand, which reads as a litany of attacks on Orange Halls. It details 276 attacks on Orange Halls across Northern Ireland, and it dates back to that infamous day in 1975 when five members of the Orange Order were murdered in their Orange Hall in Tullyvallen.

I have another list of 32 attacks of a different nature, but, ultimately, they are all attacks on Orange Halls, which can be read as attacks on the Protestant community. I suspect that if such attacks were happening on the opposite side, there would be a cry to high heaven. However, Orange Halls are just not that important.

I listened to Mr O'Dowd. He went to the trouble of tabling an amendment; he sought to colour the whole debate by saying that attacks are not only carried out on Orange Halls. That is correct; other properties are being attacked and destroyed also.

However, we are specifically dealing with Orange Halls, the list of attacks on which is endless. That does not happen by accident. Headlines such as "Shinner falls off Orange hall roof", in the 'News Letter' of 31 August, hardly instil confidence in the unionist and Protestant communities and in those who hold to Orange culture.

I fully accept that there is a due process that has to be gone through. However, actions will always speak louder than words, and Sinn Féin has not come up to the mark on this issue, but has deliberately dragged its feet. It strikes me, as it strikes others who come from the same culture and background as I do, that Sinn Féin sees this matter as not being that important. Yes, Sinn Féin will condemn attacks — but it must do more. It must show, in an emphatic way, that it is against such behaviour, and it must totally support the police

in bringing to court and to justice those who indulge in such attacks.

Mr O'Loan said that the SDLP had not tabled an amendment. I took heart from that, but he discouraged me immediately with his next phrase, in which he said that the SDLP was going to support the Sinn Féin amendment. I thought that, for once, the SDLP was going to show a bit of courage, distance itself from Sinn Féin for a turn, and stand out as different. Mr O'Loan went on to cite an Orange Hall that stands as an epitaph to hatred. It has been burned out, and the remaining shell is a striking testimony to what is going on in our society. What a pity that he did not say that, for that very reason, the SDLP would support the motion.

The motion deals directly with attacks on Orange Halls. Here is an opportunity for all those who feel that they cannot come out and say that this must stop. Of course it must stop, along with all attacks on church halls and other such buildings. I do not care what side of the community those attacks come from; I have never been lacking in my condemnation of attacks on church halls, GAA halls, or any other community halls. I have stood up and sought to give leadership. I say to the nationalist representatives in the House that this is their chance: their golden opportunity to give real leadership and acknowledge that it is Orange Halls that we are dealing with, and the attacks must stop.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú. I support the amendment.

Sinn Féin condemns all sectarian attacks utterly and without reservation. I want to make it clear that attacks on Orange Halls are wrong. Attacks on Protestant and Catholic homes are wrong, and attacks on places of worship are wrong. There is no equivocation; all sectarian attacks are wrong. I want to make that clear so that there is no confusion in the Assembly today. Anyone who has information about sectarian attacks should go to the PSNI. Whether sectarian attacks are made directly against young people, old people, their homes, or families who wish to live in peace with their neighbours or pray in their respective churches, they are equally wrong, and destructive of all that we are trying to build through the institutions of power sharing.

Sinn Féin condemns sectarianism as the cancer that lies at the very root of the injustice and impoverishment of our communities, which our Executive are, above all, dedicated to changing. However, condemnation is easy and cheap. Sinn Féin has long declared that political parties must give leadership in their communities. When members of political parties attempt to approach all issues along sectarian lines, they are creating the conditions that fuel sectarianism in our community. Some people, including Members of the Assembly, have contributed to keeping the two communities apart.

The Orange Order also has a responsibility. Commitment to the power-sharing Executive means that we make an honest and open effort to transcend the differences that have divided us in the past and promote the interests of all people equally. We must not allow any attempt to bury sectarianism, when it stares us in the face, and pretend that it no longer exists. It is important that we face reality —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members, please return to your seats.

Ms Anderson: It is important that we face reality and do not attempt to bury racist or sectarian crimes under a catch-all category of hate or knife crimes. We will not advance the important battle against sectarianism through denial.

We are all aware of a litany of sectarian crimes: the murders of the Quinn children and of Michael McIlveen, and the attempted murder of young Paul McCauley from Derry, who is fighting for his life as we sit here in the Chamber. Whether it is areas such as the Fountain in Derry that are the focus or origin of sectarian attacks, there is one question that we must all answer: how can we bring sectarian crime to an end?

Members have stated that they wish to see action. Sinn Féin has drawn up a charter for unionist engagement. We believe that that could allow us all to move to a humane common ground and give political leadership in the communities towards delivery for all our people. On the ground, in Derry and elsewhere, there has been dialogue among communities, politicians and Church leaders. Today, I want to extend an invitation to the Orange Order — there are many prominent members of that institution on the Benches opposite — to engage in direct dialogue with Sinn Féin.

It is the duty of the Executive and the Assembly to promote tolerance, inclusivity and equality, to eradicate sectarianism, racism and other forms of discrimination, and to promote a pluralist society in which difference is celebrated and cultural diversity is encouraged. Sinn Féin believes that that is the best way in which to achieve common ground.

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

Ms Anderson: I support the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will know that the Business Committee has arranged to meet as soon as the Assembly suspends for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Newton: I was greatly surprised to hear some of Mr O'Dowd's comments this morning. He said that he had learnt more about the Orange Order from a five-minute radio interview than he had at any other time in his life. He must think that Members on this side of the House are naive. That statement makes me wonder what sources he uses for his speeches.

The motion reflects an important issue for the Protestant community. The Orange Order represents that community's cultural identity and embodies Christian principles such as charity and tolerance. Sinn Féin puts about a myth that the Orange Order comprises bowler-hatted bigots who just want to march down the road. However, over generations, the Orange Order has played a significant role in society, and its members have made important contributions. Such members include: Dr Thomas Barnardo; William Massey, a former Prime Minister of New Zealand; Harry Ferguson, the inventor of the tractor; and Earl Alexander of Tunis, a First World War general. Those people represent the calibre of person who underpins the character and ethos of the Orange Order and maintains its principles.

It is sad that many Orange Halls have been attacked. That is not a recent phenomenon; the trend started in, and has accelerated since, the 1960s. It had one objective: the cultural annihilation of the Protestant community. Republicans thought that such aggression against the Orange Order's facilities and halls was the best way to attack Protestantism and Orange culture. However, that is only because republicans have perceived the Orange Order as being a major part of the British presence in Ulster. There have been numerous attacks on Orange Halls across Northern Ireland — 260 since 1989. Approximately 14 halls are burnt every year, which equates to more than one a month. The Orange Order estimates that 311 of its members who are current or former members of the security forces have been targeted and cruelly murdered because they were Protestants and members of the Orange Institution.

In my own constituency, such attacks have been occurring since the 1960s. In two instances, attacks were mounted from the grounds of St Matthew's chapel. However, I am not in any way blaming the priests who were in charge of the chapel on either of those occasions. A council colleague of mine, May Campbell, was shot and wounded in one of those attacks. Those assaults were part of a process of ethnic cleansing that culminated in severe attacks on the small Protestant enclave of Cluan Place on the Albertbridge Road. Such attacks, and those against Orange Halls, are all part of the same orchestrated campaign of aggression.

As sickening and bigoted as the attacks on Orange Order property and the murder of its members are, it is

more appalling that a party whose Members sit on the other side of the Chamber glorifies those deeds by naming, and turning into heroes, those who have murdered and attacked the Protestant community. Indeed, we witnessed that a few weeks ago in Belfast city centre.

If trust is to be built, the Orange Order must receive a sincere and unequivocal apology not only for the murders of its members but for the attacks on its property. That type of bigotry must cease.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and, at the outset, I declare an interest. I am a member of the Orange Institution and proud to be so.

Over the past months, attacks on Orange Halls and on the orange community in general have escalated. Today we focus on Orange Halls, and I am pleased to speak about that. However, the Orange family has suffered greatly as well; over the Twelfth we witnessed flags, bunting and arches being damaged and ripped from their poles.

It was interesting to hear Ms Anderson say that people in this Chamber have contributed to keeping people apart. I agree with her on that; for a generation or more people have bombed, murdered, burned and intimidated the Protestant community and the Orange family in Northern Ireland. Yes, I agree with Ms Anderson, and if some people in the Chamber look at themselves they will perhaps recognise who has contributed to that past and that division in our community.

Orange Halls and, on many occasions, church halls are used by a huge list of organisations, such as Cubs, Scouts, Brownies and Guides, as well as the Women's Institute and credit unions. However, that has not stopped many in our community from attempting the ethnic cleansing of Protestant communities throughout Northern Ireland. I have referred to that on many occasions. It is relevant in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and more so in Armagh, parts of Belfast and the greater Belfast area, where people just "do not want a Prod about the place". Sometimes it is as simple as that.

I am heartened by Mr O'Loan's comments and by his recognition of the Orange culture and tradition in this Province.

The upkeep and maintenance of Orange Halls is often difficult enough, and represents a significant financial investment from local people. Volunteers give of their free time to ensure that the premises are maintained to a very high standard and can be used by other organisations which, on many occasions, have nothing at all to do with the Orange Order.

Mr O'Dowd said that he had learned about the Orange Order and the use of Orange Halls from a five-minute interview on the radio. I wonder how much effort and emphasis Mr O'Dowd put in to finding out anything

about the Orange Institution and the use of Orange Halls before he heard that broadcast. Over the last few years, as a representative of the Orange Institution, I have engaged in several discussions and debates on community relations and cultural diversity. Many of the people involved were from what I call "the opposite tradition", from such organisations as the GAA.

In the run-up to this year's Twelfth of July celebrations, I, with other community representatives, worked extremely hard to ensure that the various marches in my constituency could take place as a spectacle for everyone to enjoy, irrespective of religious persuasion. I am pleased that, in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the Twelfth celebration was enjoyed by everyone who attended.

No-one should be under any illusion; these matters require further work from all parts of the political spectrum. My experience is that the Orange Order has become increasingly accommodating and willing to work with, and in, communities. That must be seen and respected by Government. On many occasions, positive plans and proposals by the Orange Institution for the benefit of the future leadership, responsibilities and community role of the Orange Order have met with a mixed response.

On a few occasions, people working for the Orange Order received a positive approach. However, on many occasions, they have not even had a reply to their request. Many of those requests and proposals would benefit the entire community, not just the Orange Order.

Mrs M Bradley: I am saddened to think that we even have to discuss such a subject, given that we are supposed to be living in a new political era that should give rise to only peacefulness, prosperity and genuine cross-community collaboration.

In this new political era, we, as politicians, must remember that we are measured not only by our actions but by our words. An attack on any community building — in this case, on Orange Halls — is an attack on the entire community. Orange Halls can be, and are currently being, used for cross-community purposes such as playschools where, in some areas, children from both sides of the community come together to learn and to play. Perhaps we should all go back to that age, where creed, colour and denomination play no part in deciding whether we participate with one another.

I feel that it is best to leave this issue with an example from Cavan in the South of Ireland. When an Orange Hall was vandalised and put beyond use, Catholics and Protestants collaborated to rebuild the hall. The Government saw fit to encourage those actions and gave grant aid of €30,000 to complete the project, as should happen in any civilised society. The Orange Hall was rebuilt and re-established.

Therefore, let us today encourage cross-community condemnation of attacks on any community building,

and let us not dwell on the past. I hope that we have all learnt something about progressing the issue and that, most importantly, we learn to respect all buildings, irrespective of who owns or uses them.

I support the amendment.

Mr Shannon: I wish to declare an interest as a member of Kircubbin LOL 1900. The Orange Order stands for religious and civil liberty: religious liberty for everyone, Protestant or Catholic; and civil liberty for everyone, irrespective of political affiliation, where they attend on Sundays or where they work.

There is no doubt that the figures for attacks on Orange Halls draw a vivid, colourful and disturbing picture. Since 1989, there have been 260 reported attacks — over 14 every year. The number of attacks in 2007 is higher than in the past seven years. We are supposed to be moving forward, but some people are trying to take us backwards.

The severity of the attacks has varied, ranging from tearing down flags to vandalising halls. Sectarianism in any shape or form cannot be an acceptable part of the business of this country, and the Assembly must support the intent of the motion.

I am sure that I am not the only Member who has heard the story about the Shinner falling off the roof. As absurd as the situation was, it is understandable that some people might think that it is the first line of a joke. In reality, it is not a joke; it is a very serious matter. Tearing down a flag from an Orange Hall is an act of vandalism and disrespect. It is no laughing matter to the member of the lodge who paid for the flag or handed it down from his father's time. It is not a joke that part of that hall's history was torn down in a moment by an act of contempt. To the women who sewed the flag to show pride in their culture and heritage, it is nothing less than an insult — a slap in the face. That kind of action is not an isolated matter; the Orange Order and Orange Halls face the same problem, month after month.

Those events are not unconnected. Recently, there was an attack on Seagoe Orange Hall in Portadown. The hall had just been refurbished at a cost of £15,000. That is not the only instance of a refurbished hall being burnt down in order to make a statement. Such behaviour might have been expected in the 1970s, but it has no place in Northern Ireland today. The hall is used not only by the Orange Lodge but by local people for community programmes and events.

2.15 pm

How many times have we watched members of the public on television, sifting through the rubble of a hall to see what part of their history could be recovered? The answer is a very sober one: far too many. For too long the Orange Order and the halls have been used by many as scapegoats for their anger, fear and malice.

For too long the Orange Order and the halls have had to accept their lot of damage and wanton destruction to their property — and even worse has been done to history. I read the words of Fr Martin McAlinden, the parish priest of Moyraverty near to Seagoe Orange Hall, and I fully agree with what he said:

“The destruction of a building that represents the culture of a particular group in this area is shameful and an attack on the Orange Order and the community of Seagoe.”

I suggest to Members who have spoken and made a commitment that they tell the police what they know and encourage their supporters to tell the police what they know. Give us the proof of the pudding by eating it. Show us what you can do. The hall at Seagoe was not a place of hate; it was a place of history. It was not a place of war; it was a place of life, and those who destroyed it destroyed a little part of their community. Such behaviour is nothing less than shameful and disgusting, and the Assembly must unite and proclaim it as such.

As well as that, those who are affiliated with the Assembly should treat it with the respect and reverence that all members of the community believe should be given. All parties must stand by their words and ensure that those who are caught in any form of attack, whether it be chanting sectarian slogans, breaking windows, tearing down flags or engaging in more sinister behaviour, are reported to the police. Terrorism in any guise will not be tolerated, and it is the responsibility of the Assembly to take steps to end that form of terrorism by more than mere words. There must be no more cowardly attacks on culture and heritage by intolerant and bigoted people determined to destroy something merely because they cannot stand, or accept, a right to the celebration of the history of this nation. I support the motion.

Mr Moutray: At the outset, I declare that I am a proud member of Corcreeny LOL 91 in the district of Lurgan.

Sadly, attacks on Orange Halls in Northern Ireland are nothing new. As figures show, the systematic targeting of halls has been to the fore of the republican campaign for many years. In the early 1990s when IRA activity was rampant throughout our land, the average number of attacks on Orange Halls each year was 15. Yet, strangely enough, after the 1994 ceasefire the number of attacks rose to an average of 40 each year, a figure that is being exceeded at present.

Brownlow House Orange Hall, in my Upper Bann constituency, the world headquarters of the Royal Black Institution, has come under sustained attack and has been severely damaged on numerous occasions. I want to pay tribute to the brethren for restoring this glorious building, part of which dates back to the seventeenth century. Last weekend Brownlow House played host to

hundreds of visitors of all faiths as part of the Environment and Heritage Service's open day programme.

Eight Orange Halls have already been attacked in County Armagh this year. I think particularly today of Seagoe Orange Hall, which my colleague referred to. It was seriously damaged only a few weeks ago. I think too of Kilmore Orange Hall in the countryside near Lurgan that was gutted by fire last year. It has been there for over 200 years, and I am delighted that it was reopened on Saturday last after an intense programme of work by the brethren and in spite of a recent paint bomb attack.

Kilmore Orange Hall is used almost daily and is the hub of an isolated rural community. It is used by both sections of the community. The brethren there seek to offend no one. They want to live peacefully and enjoy their culture. Like many lodges throughout the Province, Kilmore has raised thousands of pounds for charity.

Recently, we have heard of Sinn Féin councillors turning up at Orange halls in the aftermath of attacks to sympathise with Orangemen while, on the other hand, Sinn Féin members have been reportedly falling off the roofs of Orange Halls in other constituencies in the early hours of the morning.

Members of the Orange Order do not need the sympathy of Sinn Féin politicians. We need them to take action, and after incidents such as the one at Newcastle Orange Hall the following question needs to be asked: "What sanctions will the Sinn Féin leadership take against the people involved?"

Sinn Féin's work on the ground created the likes of Breandán Mac Cionnaith, who now single-handedly holds up progress on a resolution to the Drumcree parade dispute. The policies, actions and example of Sinn Féin made attacks on Orange Halls acceptable to some people. That is why words are not enough on this occasion. Can Sinn Féin truly live in peace with its neighbours? Only time will tell. Sinn Féin's response to issues such as this will go a long way towards answering that question. It is entirely up to Sinn Féin to act now.

Despite the legacy of attacks that have been inflicted on it, the Orange culture is alive, strong, vibrant and here to stay.

Mr McNarry: I too declare an interest as a loyal and proud member of the Orange Institution. Only a few hours ago, the House came together to reject sectarianism and racism in sport. However, here we are, with some Members unable to reject outright the sectarianism that is under debate and which lies behind attacks on Orange Halls. Those Members are unable to stand together, as we did a few hours ago, behind the single-issue motion before the House. Going by the comments of some Members, they are, patently and regrettably, unwilling, so far, to combine to use their

influence to put an end to those attacks. I hope that those Members will think again.

I, here and now, on this single issue, offer a choice to those who support the amendment. Show to my community — the Protestant, unionist and Orange community — a preparedness to demonstrate in this, the House of the people, that they will work with all parties and bring their influence to bear. The choice is theirs to take today; I make no demands of them. I ask them to be reasonable, because they ask me to swallow that which they have brought to this House: a new era of reasonableness. I honestly say that I find a lot of that hard to swallow, just yet. However, if the beginning that I see here — and some of it is unbelievable to many from my tradition — of a Democratic Unionist First Minister and a Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister working together is to be the way forward until the next time that the electorate meets to make its mark, I ask Members opposite to take a step forward by setting aside what I can understand they find great difficulty in letting go. Will they stand together with us and condemn attacks on Orange Halls?

We all reject attacks on homes, schools, churches — attacks on society. However, from the perspective of our tradition, attacks on Orange Halls are an attack on the Orange family. Only by being a member of that family can I ask Members to appreciate what it means to me. Attacks on Orange Halls are attacks on communities that come together in that greater family.

I have heard things said in this House that I find unbelievable. I hear a big play for corporate decisions: that is what this Assembly must bring to Northern Ireland politics. I heard junior Minister Paisley applauded by Members opposite for saying not once but twice in the House that he is representing a caring Executive. I want the House to tell everyone that, collectively, we care about attacks on Orange Halls.

This morning, there was a call for leadership. On this matter, it is over to those in republican and nationalist seats to show us in the unionist seats some real leadership.

I say: do it, and be prepared for a response from the family that I and many here are proud to represent. At this moment, the amendment smacks of begrudgery, and I sincerely ask Members opposite to withdraw it. Make today's decision a collective one. Members can return to what they need to say about attacks on other properties, and we will join with them. This is a specific issue, and I ask Members — humbly — to stand with us and send a signal that we can take to our people and that they can take to theirs.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the motion on behalf of the Executive. I unreservedly condemn attacks on

Orange Halls. I was taken by the words of the Member who spoke previously. There is a unified voice from the Executive on this issue.

We are totally committed to moving society forward and to making a real difference to the lives of all our people. I am sure that all parties in the House share the vision for a future based on tolerance, equality, mutual respect and respect for the rule of law. Many Members have spoken precisely on those subjects.

There is no place for the type of behaviour that we have been discussing today if we are to build a society in which there is respect for all cultures and traditions. That applies equally to racist attacks on the houses of members of ethnic minority communities; attacks on the places of worship of those with different faiths; and on any venue with cultural purposes.

A few weeks ago, the Assembly debated a motion on the shared future framework document. During that debate, our vision of that shared future was spelled out by the First Minister, who said that the dream of people living together in harmony can and must become more than a dream; it must become a reality. The First Minister said that we need a stable society in which:

“children can play together, in which people can work together, and in which families can live happily side by side, regardless of their community or ethnic background or their religious beliefs.”
— [Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p295, col 2].

Go raibh maith agat.

In every society, how people live together is a major challenge for Governments and individuals. For a society that is moving out of conflict, that challenge is all the greater. However, we can draw positives as to how our society is changing from our current political dispensation. This institution and the Executive point the way forward for this society. Building an equal and inclusive society is an Executive commitment, and if we are to deliver real and equitable improvement in the lives of local people, we must deliver real and tangible change. That will mean physically regenerating interface areas, providing decent housing for those in need, and building new relationships across society.

I recognise the point that Mr Kennedy made earlier. Our desire for a prosperous society, which benefits everyone, is not helped by any sectarian or racist attack.

We all know that a more tolerant, more inclusive and more cohesive society will not happen overnight. There is no magic ointment that can be applied or pill that can be taken that will produce instant harmony. The fact remains that there are differences in our society. That is not a bad thing, as some would have us believe. In my view, differences must be recognised, appreciated and celebrated. The view of the world that, with an end to conflict, everyone here should share exactly the same values, views and aspirations is wrong. We need to create a society in which people can feel

comfortable expressing their views, opinions and aspirations, and where institutions such as the Assembly can give expression to them.

In my view, everyone has a responsibility and a role to play in creating such a society. Those of us who are here through the vote of the electorate must reciprocate the faith with which the people who voted for us have entrusted us.

We must see this through. By making Government work and by building a shared society, we pledge to do all in our power to ensure that our work makes a real difference to the lives of all the people.

The challenges and opportunities that our position affords are immense in their potential, not only for us, but for generations to come.

2.30 pm

Sectarianism, racism and intolerance still exist, but they will remain only if we let them. That is why attacks on homes, businesses, Orange Halls, other buildings belonging to the Loyal Orders, GAA premises, and all other cultural and religious premises must be condemned.

The Executive have already recognised the importance of creating that new society. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister underscored their commitment to building a new inclusive society through their unequivocal statements that intolerance, sectarianism and racism — or violence because of them — have no place in this or any other society. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have demonstrated their personal commitment to supporting people who are the victims of sectarianism or racist attacks and those who assist them in the aftermath of those attacks. For example, following an attack on premises there, Martin McGuinness visited Rev Peter Thompson in St Patrick's Church of Ireland in Donaghmore. In May, Dr Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness hosted two receptions — the first in this Building since restoration of the institutions — for representatives of minority and ethnic groups, as well as for those from the community and voluntary sectors who are involved in that important work.

Whereas it is the responsibility of the PSNI and the courts to deal with the perpetrators of attacks, there is work for us all in helping to stop attacks on premises that have important cultural value for our people and communities.

Through promoting cohesion and diversity, and through building good relations among the different sections of our community, and between communities and Government, we will tackle the root causes of the problems that manifest themselves in sectarian and racist attacks. That process will require much hard work and commitment, but it is necessary work from which, I am sure, no party in the Assembly will shy away. Attacks on symbolic premises can serve as a

barometer of the state of community relations, and it is worrying that there is an overall upward trend in the number of those attacks in the six years up to 2005, and thereafter, although the number of attacks remains relatively small. The attacks were on Orange Halls, churches and chapels, GAA and Ancient Order of Hibernian properties, and schools. The Executive are closely monitoring the problem.

A clear and tangible sign of the Assembly's commitment to the new future is the way in which we conduct our business to build a better future for everyone. I acknowledge the concerns that Members raised and will ensure that a copy of today's Hansard report is sent to the Secretary of State for his information.

I repeat my opening statement that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister unreservedly condemn the recent attacks on Orange Halls. Furthermore, given that the issue was raised by Members on several occasions, I declare that there is no division in the Executive or in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) over the propriety of bringing information to the PSNI on any of those attacks.

I am confident that all the members of the Executive agree that, if we are to build a society in which there is respect for all cultures and traditions, there is no place for such behaviour. As I, and other Members, have said already, condemnation is not enough. We have a responsibility to build the sort of prosperous and equal society that will ultimately undermine the mindset that gives rise to those unacceptable attacks.

Leadership starts here. That leadership has been demonstrated by many Members. Let us continue to demonstrate it collectively. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr John O'Dowd to make a winding-up speech in support of the amendment.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for being on my feet as you spoke.

The debate has been most interesting. I said earlier that, although the subject is clearly close to his heart and he has good reason to be emotional, Mr Easton had opened the debate in a measured way. He opened a debate — conducted in reasonable terms, for the most part — on what we want to achieve. Sinn Féin did not table the amendment to distract attention from the issue of attacks on Orange Halls. It is clear that the vast majority of sectarian attacks on property over the past few years have been on Orange Halls. That must stop.

There is — *[Interruption.]* If Gregory would let me finish, he might be enlightened. *[Interruption.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: Stop interrupting.

Mr O'Dowd: I am sorry. I have lost my train of thought because of Gregory's interruptions.

What we want to achieve is a measure of action. Any Member who proposes a motion or an amendment wants action. He or she wants that issue, about which he or she cares so deeply, resolved. In this case, we need to stop attacks on Orange Halls.

For that reason, and because of the reasoned contributions from across the Chamber, Sinn Féin withdraws the amendment. Sinn Féin will not vote on its amendment, because a message must come from the Chamber today.

Mr Adams: Would the Member agree that the amendment has been withdrawn because Sinn Féin listened intently to what was being said from the Benches opposite? The attacks on Orange Halls are wrong and should stop. The perpetrators should be made available to the PSNI and be subject to due process.

If I may, and in the spirit of John's withdrawal of the amendment, I ask the Members opposite, please, to listen to what Sinn Féin says on the issue.

Mr O'Dowd: That is an important point, and I agree with all that my party leader has said.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I know the feeling that is in the hearts of all those in the Chamber today. It is a good thing that the debate dwells on the issue of attacks on Orange Halls. We will have another opportunity to dwell on other attacks. We are just as much against the attack on a Roman Catholic place of worship as we are against the attack on an Orange Hall. The decision from across the Bench will be an encouragement to people who look to a future in which we come to an end to all of this, and to better things for our people.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for that contribution, First Minister. Mr Newton said that I believe that he and his colleagues are naïve. I do not believe for a second that they are naïve; if I did, then I would be naïve, and I do not believe myself to be naïve.

There are difficult days ahead for all of us involved in the new beginning for politics on the island of Ireland. To be honest, the DUP is not my first choice for a partner in Government, but the party has been elected, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that the institutions work and that the decision of the people is carried through. One Member said that because we must bring peace to this island, we must make difficult decisions. There are going to be difficult decisions today, tomorrow, and in the future, and unless all Members start working for a little bit of trust between parties, those difficult decisions will become unsurmountable.

In relation to attacks on Orange Halls, I recognise the contribution given by David McNarry. For a moment, I asked myself if the softly-spoken gentleman in front of me was David McNarry, because it is not David's usual style, but he made a good contribution.

There is a responsibility on the Members opposite, just as much as there is a responsibility on Members on this side, to tackle sectarianism from within their own communities. Sectarianism must be tackled, and I acknowledge the contribution that the First Minister made to that in his comments. We must do it together. The end of today's debate should not be the end of the subject. We need to work together to end sectarianism, because, whether it is in sport or society, sectarianism is the biggest hindrance to us all.

Finally, although the amendment will be read out, Sinn Féin will not vote on it, and we will support the motion as placed before us.

Mr McCausland: Like others, I declare an interest, as I have been a member of the Orange Order for more than 30 years.

In proposing the motion Alex Easton said that, in spite of the peace process, there have been more attacks on Orange Halls in recent years. The number of the attacks and their increasing frequency led to the proposal of the motion. Although the DUP condemns all attacks on places of worship, or any property, there is a need to highlight the unique situation regarding the Orange Halls.

In April 2007, in my constituency, there was an arson attack on Greencastle Orange Hall on the Whitewell Road, which followed an attack that had taken place two months earlier. The hall had also been targeted by arsonists on three previous occasions, and was destroyed by arsonists seven years ago. That situation could be repeated across all constituencies.

In his comments, John O'Dowd said that he supports PSNI investigations into attacks on Orange Halls and said that information should be provided to the police to enable them carry out those investigations. However, consideration of the cause, the nature and frequency of those attacks suggests that they are, in large measure, the legacy of decades of demonisation of the Orange Order by those in the republican community.

The other day, on the Oldpark Road — again, in North Belfast — I saw a wooden republican placard of a PSNI officer wearing an Orange collarette, underneath which said, "same old force". If that is the message that republicans send out to their own community day after day, it is not surprising that people respond to that message by launching attacks on Orange Halls. The removal of such signs would be a positive step towards dealing with the problem. John O'Dowd asked what should be done. That is precisely the sort of action that should be taken.

Danny Kennedy talked about the need for a shared future. That is truly important. A shared future must involve a place for the Orange Order in cultural life. The streets must be spaces that the Orange Order can share with others. Declan O'Loan gave us a stark description of a burned-out Orange Hall in his constituency. Lord

Morrow reminded us about how republican terrorists have murdered Orangemen inside Orange Halls or when leaving them. In the early days of the Troubles, an IRA sniper shot down the secretary of a lodge when he was leaving Ligoniel Orange Hall. Subsequently, the hall closed down and the Protestant community moved down the road. Martina Anderson condemned all sectarian attacks; although, as one of my colleagues put it, she sounded like Hans Christian Andersen in doing so. Not everyone shares that particular colleague's sense of humour.

Pious platitudes will not suffice on this matter. I draw attention to the point that was made by Mr Newton, who told of a Sinn Féin parade that took place in Belfast several weeks ago — in the centre of a shared city — during which IRA terrorists were glorified and were depicted on Sinn Féin banners. Those are the type of issues that must be dealt with and where changes must be made.

The Orange Order faces a legacy of decades of demonisation, which had justified sectarian attacks in the minds of republicans. That is expressed in several ways; for example, in republican opposition to Orange parades. The person on the street in that community might well ask himself or herself, "If I oppose the parade of those awful people who I do not want to walk down the road in my area, what is the problem in attacking their hall?" That opposition is also expressed in nationalist criticism of the amount of televised coverage of the Twelfth celebrations. If the Orange Order should not be on television, what is wrong with attacking their hall?

The Orange Order and its culture must be brought in from the margins to the mainstream. That can and must be done in many ways; a good example of which was shown by the Smithsonian Institute's festival in Washington, in which the Orange Order had a role to play. I also want to commend several schools in the Roman Catholic community, including Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School in Newry, which has invited representatives from the Orange Order to speak to its pupils.

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

Much work must be done. The Orange Order is happy to take part in that. However, there must be an end to the demonisation of the Orange Order, which only republicans can bring about.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns all attacks on Orange Halls and calls on all political parties to use their influence to stop such sectarian attacks.

National Minimum Wage

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The Member proposing the motion will have 10 minutes in which to speak, with 10 minutes being allowed for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will be allowed a maximum of five minutes.

2.45 pm

Mr McClarty: I beg to move

That this Assembly opposes any attempt to replace the national minimum wage with regional variants.

The issue raised in the motion has the potential to have disastrous consequences for the economic well-being of Northern Ireland. At the outset of the debate, it is safe to assume that Members in the Chamber will universally reject any attempt to have regional variants of the minimum wage.

The introduction of the minimum wage in 1998 was preceded by a debate during which fears were expressed that it would cost jobs. There is little evidence that it has done so in the UK as a whole. The minimum-wage scheme has, by and large, been exceptionally successful. However, over the summer, it has emerged that our new Prime Minister, Mr Gordon Brown, is considering implementing a strategy that would end the concept of the national minimum wage and allow the minimum wage to be regionally variable. Although that proposal has not been implemented as yet, that does not mean that it will not become a reality.

It is probably safe to assume that, going on the present Labour Government's track record of cutting wages for public sector workers in areas where the cost of living is lower, the possibility of their varying the minimum wage may not be a long way from becoming a real probability. The Prime Minister has undoubtedly been influenced by research carried out by Professor David Smith of the University of Derby. In a report for the Economic Research Council he recommends a new variable minimum wage. He recommends that the UK adopt similar systems to those in the USA and Switzerland whereby local authorities set not only the minimum wage, but benefits and the salaries of public sector workers.

Professor Smith's study recommends that the minimum wage set for Londoners should be increased to £6.90 per hour, while workers in the north-east would have their hourly rate reduced by 57p to £4.78 per hour. He recommends that the minimum hourly rate for those in Yorkshire should be reduced to £4.95 per hour, while in Wales it should be reduced to £4.84 per hour. He also recommends that the minimum wage in Northern Ireland should be £4.80 per hour.

Should Professor Smith's research be acted upon it would, potentially, have dangerous consequences for Northern Ireland's economy and our attempts to get people back to work. Northern Ireland has an exceptionally high level of economic inactivity. The Assembly has a huge job on its hands to get people off welfare benefits and into employment. Hence, if central Government in London were to introduce regional variants of the minimum wage it would make that complicated task so much more difficult.

The Member for North Belfast Mr Fred Cobain made an excellent point recently when he said:

"Getting people off welfare and into employment is good for them, good for local communities and good for our economy. It beggars belief, then, that Gordon Brown should be considering doing the exact opposite by penalising work."

I agree wholeheartedly with my hon Friend's comments.

It is critically important to remember that any variation in the minimum wage would have to be accompanied by variation in regional rates of benefits — particularly that of unemployment benefit. If that were not to happen then a cut in the minimum wage in Northern Ireland would lead to more people deciding that it is not worthwhile working. It is reported that Gordon Brown is now convinced that a common minimum wage — currently, £5.35 per hour, rising to £5.52 per hour in October — is uneconomic.

However, just how economic is it to have a lower minimum wage in this region of the UK, where we have the largest proportion of economically inactive people as a share of our potential workforce? The proposal merely removes people's incentive to find work. That makes absolutely no economic sense. It is preposterous and reckless.

One of the main arguments that Professor Smith deploys in order to justify his conclusions is that the cost of living is lower in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, and thus our money supposedly goes further. However, such an argument is deeply flawed as the figures used to support it are already out of date — for example, he quotes the average house price here as being about £140,000; indeed, he says that it is £45,000 less than the UK average.

I want to touch briefly on the effect that those proposals would have on our attempts to bring more jobs into the Province. Would a lower minimum wage create more jobs? In theory, anything that lowers costs should lead to more people being employed. However, the available labour market data suggest that the impact could be small, and it can legitimately be asked whether any gain would be worth the associated social cost.

Furthermore, of what quality would those jobs be, and would they be sustainable? It is important to keep in mind that pitching low labour costs as our competitive advantage could never be a long-term objective and

that Northern Ireland simply cannot compete on those terms with India, China or some of the African countries. Simply put, proposals to lower the minimum wage in Northern Ireland are economically irresponsible and will do very little to improve the economic prosperity of our people. It would be a foolish move that would do little to enhance the competitiveness of Northern Ireland's economy.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome today's debate and commend the proposers of the motion for bringing this timely debate to the House.

I will start by making a few points in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and then I will make a few personal remarks.

The proposal to replace the minimum wage with regional variants came to the Committee's attention during the summer recess, in a meeting that was held on 25 July. It followed recent press reports that have already been mentioned, so I will not go into them. The Committee expressed extreme concern about the proposals for the minimum wage for several reasons. In a letter that I wrote to the Minister for Employment and Learning on 31 July, I stressed the Committee's concerns and asked for the Minister's views on the matter. The Minister replied to my letter on 16 August, and the Committee will discuss that reply in its meeting tomorrow.

In his letter, the Minister reminded us that the minimum wage is a reserved matter, but he stressed that it is of interest to the Executive, and I welcome that. He assured me that he strongly opposes the regional variants, and that he will raise the matter with his Executive colleagues. It is clear from discussions in Committee and from this debate that there is consensus on the issue. The Committee will work in support of the Minister — he will be glad to know that — to ensure that any movement towards regionalisation of the minimum wage will be challenged.

I want to quote Chris Franks, a Member of the National Assembly for Wales:

"This proposal should be rejected outright. Low wage levels in Wales already contribute to many of the most pressing problems that our communities face. The minimum wage is vital in lifting people out of poverty and ensuring equal opportunities are available for all."

The deputy leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) at Westminster, Stewart Hosie MP, said:

"This proposal is barking mad. The SNP campaigned for years for a minimum wage in order to make work pay and allow people to lift themselves out of poverty."

I hope that we will send out the same message today.

The minimum wage exists for a reason. Several reports on poverty have been published in recent times,

and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has produced strategies to combat poverty. However, mechanisms must be put in place to do just that. There are people working for a minimum wage, some of whom are working to survive, rather than working to live, and we must examine that situation.

There is broad acceptance of the need to tackle economic inactivity and promote equality by using prosperity to target need and existing patterns of disadvantage. However, if that is true, how will cutting the minimum wage achieve that stated aim? The minimum wage should be increased so that people can be allowed to work to live: society and this Assembly should strive to make that change.

I thank David McClarty for proposing the motion, and the Minister for Employment and Learning for coming to the House and listening to the debate. Given the debates that we have had today and yesterday, I hope that all parties can agree on the motion and support it. The Committee for Employment and Learning will be discussing the issue tomorrow and will be presenting its proposals to the Minister. Go raibh maith agat

Mr Newton: Like the previous contributor, I congratulate Mr McClarty for proposing the motion. It is timely, in the light of recent statements made by, and on behalf of, Mr Gordon Brown. It is important to recognise that back in 1999, the minimum wage, which was designed only to provide a decent minimum standard, was being used as part of the Labour Party's election strategy. The minimum wage was an attempt to provide a degree of fairness in the workplace, and some semblance, small though it was, of equality of treatment.

In making the point about the minimum wage, it should be realised that various industries pay minimum wages that are generous, but in the context of a national minimum wage, although it is to rise on 1 October to £5.52 for persons aged 22 and over, it will not make its recipients rich or affluent. The situation is even worse for 18-to-21-year olds, who will move from £4.45 to £4.60 an hour, and 16-to-17-year olds, whose hourly wage will rise by 10p to £3.40. It is also important to note that 16-to-17-year old apprentices are exempt from the minimum wage and can be paid whatever is agreed with the employer.

Mr Gordon Brown and his Government have stated that they are committed to ending child poverty. We cannot address child poverty if, at the other end of the scale, we attack the parents of those who work in the lower-wage end of the economy, thereby reducing their wages. All we will do, as was said on the opposite Benches, is drive people into the relative poverty trap or the benefits trap, and we all know how difficult it is to get economically inactive people out of that state of mind.

Official figures show that in the United Kingdom, the wages gap between those who are earning a reasonable wage and those who are at the lower end of the wage economy is continuing to widen. We have a strong economic base in the UK, but poverty exists amongst that plenty.

3.00 pm

Reference has already been made to Professor David Smith's initiative to reduce and regionalise the minimum wage. Northern Ireland, where Professor Smith wishes to see the minimum wage reduced, has higher levels of housing costs than other parts of the UK. Even in the privaterented sector, housing costs in Northern Ireland are equal to those in the south-east of England, for which he has proposed an increase to the minimum wage. However, Northern Ireland also has high costs for bread, fuel and travel.

Some unscrupulous employers pay below the minimum wage and get away with it, perhaps by operating in the black economy. Rather than reducing the minimum wage, I call for the Government to strengthen the enforcement of minimum-wage policy and to introduce tougher penalties for employers who break the rules. There should be a tougher enforcement plan on the payment of the minimum wage.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion. I welcome the debate, and I thank the proposer of the motion for bringing it to the Chamber.

The SDLP is opposed to tampering with the national minimum wage. The introduction of the national minimum wage was one of Labour's most successful and progressive economic policies. As has been said, from 1 October 2007 the minimum wage will be increased. For adults, it will rise to £5.52 an hour; for 18-to-21-year olds, it will rise to £4.45 an hour; and for 16-to-17-year olds to £3.40 an hour. Those increases will by no means make anyone rich, but they will go a little way towards meeting the ever-increasing costs of living in Northern Ireland. If a variable rate of the minimum wage were introduced, it would damage what we are trying and need to build on. Predictably, it would discourage people from taking up employment, especially those who are caught in the poverty trap of low-paid jobs. Many people who are caught in that trap have no incentive to work, given that they are financially better off on benefits. It is important to be able to encourage people to take up the challenge of employment. Paid work can be a vital route out of poverty, but only when workers have access to secure jobs with decent pay and working conditions. That is particularly the case for women, who fill approximately three quarters of low-paid jobs. Women who work full time are still paid only 80% of their male colleagues' earnings, and part-time female workers earn even less.

I am disturbed by reports that Gordon Brown's Labour Government may be considering a dual, rather than a national, minimum wage. It has been reported that the London rate may be adjusted to be approximately 10% more than the applicable rate for regions such as Northern Ireland. It has already been pointed out that the housing costs in Northern Ireland are among the highest in the UK. Costs of light, heating and food in areas such as Northern Ireland already exceed London costs for the same products. Those costs exist in spite of the fact that pay rates in Northern Ireland are only about 80% of the average pay rates in GB.

The national minimum wage is a floor that recognises the value of doing an honest day's work for a basic rate of pay. It is not wildly generous, but it gives a measure of statutory recognition to the value and dignity of work. Although the minimum wage is a reserved matter, the Assembly must send a strong message of opposition to any proposal to vary it. A BBC economist, who supported a dual wage, said that two thirds of income in Northern Ireland was public-sector generated — either from public sector employment or from benefits. However, that is a red herring.

Some 35,000 immigrants have come from Poland to work in Northern Ireland, often for the national minimum wage. That highlights the fact that a decent rate of pay that can be supplemented, if necessary, by family benefits for the low-paid, can reduce the culture of dependency and provide the best way out of poverty for families. The SDLP believes in creating a fair, equal society in which the most vulnerable and marginalised are protected. Those in low-paid jobs, who work hard just to survive, need support and protection. A fully inclusive society will come about only if people feel that they are contributing to it.

The gap between the rich and the poor — the haves and the have-nots — is increasing. According to the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, wages in Northern Ireland are 25% lower than the EU average. That is unacceptable, and the Assembly has both a political and moral duty to ensure that low-paid workers receive a fair deal. Put simply, they deserve a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. If the Assembly is serious about tackling poverty, a reduction in the minimum wage would be totally counterproductive.

Dr Farry: I support the motion. It is important for the Assembly to send out a strong and well-argued case, based on a sound economic rationale, for its opposition to the lowering of the minimum wage in Northern Ireland. This subject has sparked much discussion among economists. Current scaremongering may be based on the arguments of some economists that a minimum wage that is artificially higher than the market rate leads to unemployment.

On the other hand, just as many economists point out the strong basis for having a minimum wage. Not only does it benefit individual workers by guaranteeing them a solid, secure and standard level of living, but it also creates demand in society, ensures that people have money to reinvest in the economy and boosts the overall size of the public sector.

In Northern Ireland, it is clear that the minimum wage is not artificially higher than the market rate and does not, therefore, contribute to unemployment, which is at its lowest level for almost 40 years. Although that is encouraging and a major achievement, it masks some problems beneath the surface that must be taken into account. A variable minimum wage in Northern Ireland would do nothing to address fundamental problems, such as the number of people who are economically inactive. Several Members mentioned that point earlier: Northern Ireland has the highest level of economically inactive people in the UK, at over 26% of the working population. That is an extremely high and unsustainable figure. The next-highest rate in the UK is about 20%. There must be an awareness of the major subregional variations in Northern Ireland; for instance, the number of economically inactive in Derry approaches almost 50%.

Carmel Hanna mentioned the increasing demand for workers throughout the economy. People come from overseas to take up posts to satisfy the demand of local companies. Those workers do not take jobs from local people, but satisfy a demand that could not otherwise be met. The large number of people who are economically inactive highlights the fact that structural problems in society keep people out of the workplace — it is not because the wage structures act as a deterrent. If anything, lowering the minimum wage will make it much harder to attract people who are out of the labour market back to work in the near future.

There must be a focus on creating high-value-added jobs in Northern Ireland. In recent years, there has been too much economic investment in low-value-added and low-paid jobs. In particular, a comparison of the level and nature of investment in Northern Ireland to that in the Republic of Ireland shows that Northern Ireland is not attracting the same calibre of jobs.

There is a major challenge ahead to ensure that we have a balanced economy that focuses on those well-paid jobs.

There is a gap of almost 20% between the average public-sector wage and the average private-sector wage. That situation is unsustainable and, therefore, we must focus on trying to improve the pay of local people. Although Members may support the motion, it is important to be sensible about it and think through the implications of doing so. Notwithstanding yesterday's debate on tax-varying powers, most parties are contin-

uing to support the call for a separate rate of corporation tax for Northern Ireland. However, we must have a clear argument as to why we believe there is a case for varying corporation tax while insisting that the parity principle with respect to the minimum wage should remain very much in place.

Equally, we should bear in mind that there is a federal minimum wage in the United States, but that individual states and cities can have higher rates. What would happen if London wanted to go for a higher minimum wage? What would be the response of the Northern Ireland Assembly to that, especially if the same minimum wage existed across the country? We would want to ensure that wealth would not be concentrated in south-east England and would argue that concentrating wealth in one area would be a backward step for the country. It is something we should bear in mind.

Mr McCausland: Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, and workers in Northern Ireland are, therefore, entitled to the same standards, benefits and rights as workers in every other part of the Kingdom. It is noticeable, and it has been highlighted this afternoon, that politicians in every other region and nation of the United Kingdom are opposed to any plan for a variation in the minimum wage across the United Kingdom. All parties in the Assembly also agree on the matter.

Some people have argued that the cost-of-living in Northern Ireland is lower than that in other regions of the United Kingdom, but the evidence is clear that that is no longer the case. If one considers the cost of living increases in Northern Ireland and, particularly, the cost of housing, it is clear that any gap that did exist is either disappearing rapidly or has disappeared already. We want to get people out of total dependency on benefits and into work. We believe that it is good for the person concerned and for their family, for society and for the economy. We should oppose resolutely any disincentive to getting a job, or any incentive to remaining dependent on benefits. Therefore I hope that Members will give their total support to a standard national minimum wage across the United Kingdom.

Those on the economic side may argue that lower minimum wage levels would be attractive to investors, but there is a serious question over the validity of that argument; there is no strong evidence for it. While it is important to build up the economy, there are more effective things that could and should be done rather than tampering with the national minimum wage. The Alliance Party believes that the retention of the national minimum wage across the United Kingdom will be of benefit in the way that I have outlined. We welcome the fact that the national minimum wage is due to increase in October — albeit only by 17p — to £5.52, and that everyone in the country will be entitled to that.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is an impressive consistency in the remarks. I, too, support the motion and thank Mr McClarty and Mr McCrea for presenting us with the opportunity to debate the issue. I hope that the Assembly will take the opportunity to express its outright rejection of the case that was produced on behalf of the Economic Research Council.

It seems that Gordon Brown was impressed by that report, which recommended that workers in northern regions should be paid a less generous wage than those in the south-east and that the unemployed in northern regions should receive less generous benefits. It seems that the one-size-fits-all policy, with which the Executive have already been confronted when seeking the necessary tools and flexibility to deliver on the Programme for Government, is not immutable. What does that say about convergence and parity?

3.15 pm

There has been a great deal of discussion about the regional variation of the minimum wage. We could all endorse many of the points that have been made that discussion, but there is little benefit in repeating them. That said, I support the comments that several Members have made. It is important to note that regional variation is a blatant attempt to drive down salary and wage levels across the board. This region already has some experience of that strategy, and it has already been marketed for many years — for too many, in fact — as a low-wage economy. Although the use of that strategy has declined, it has not been completely abandoned. Such a marketing strategy not only depresses the wages and salaries of workers, it sustains a lower-skills base and makes it extremely difficult to attract the wealth-creating, knowledge-based investments that are needed to regenerate our economy.

The regeneration of the economy is an important common ground for the political parties, given that they are divided on and need to resolve many other issues. That is work in progress. However, a common front is needed to formulate the regeneration of the economy and to provide a sound basis for sustaining the political process.

I do not want to assume the responsibility of speaking for other parties, but a consensus has been stated repeatedly. That position has been publicly recorded many times, not least in the reports of the subgroup of the Committee on the Preparation for Government. All of the parties argued that we should be attracting the higher-value-added wealth-creating enterprises that are currently investing in the South of Ireland and elsewhere.

I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. I had intended to exhort him to make a clear statement that took cognisance of the correspondence that my colleague Sue Ramsey mentioned. However, that is all that I will

say on that matter. No party in the Assembly could endorse a reduction of the minimum wage. We already have an underdeveloped economy, and on many occasions we have rehearsed why we need to invest in higher performance; why we seek to promote enterprise; why we need to encourage entrepreneurs; why we need to motivate our workforce; and why we need to invest in education and skills programmes. Let us move on with that more progressive agenda. We must eradicate the long-standing patterns of regional inequality. That is a challenge in itself. It will not be done by colluding with or countenancing any argument that advocates reducing the minimum wage. Growing the economy and the private sector — and creating wealth — are the means by which we will create prosperity. The introduction of measures such as a regional variation on minimum wages or unemployment benefits will sabotage that objective.

Mr Ross: First, I congratulate the Members who secured the debate. I am sure that many of us were surprised when we heard that the Prime Minister was giving serious consideration to reducing the minimum wage in Northern Ireland and to implementing a variable regional minimum wage. As is always the case for Members speaking at this late stage of a debate, many of the points that I wish to raise have already been made.

We were well used to Mr Brown, during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer, giving with one hand and taking with the other, and now it seems that, as Prime Minister, he is intent on taking from those in low-paid jobs in Northern Ireland.

People who live in London have a higher cost of living than those in some other regions of the United Kingdom, and that is recognised in some part, for example, by the supplement to loans for students studying in London. However, I do not welcome a regionalisation of the minimum wage, because the result will be a lowering of the minimum wage not only in Northern Ireland, but in Scotland, Wales and the north-east of England.

New Labour boasted of the 1.5 million people who would benefit from their increased minimum wage, and, over the past decade, many of those who work in the lowest-paid jobs have at least been given some protection with regard to how much they earn. Adults working in low-paid jobs are also protected against losing their jobs to those who are willing to work for lower wages. If the current Labour Administration were to reduce the minimum wage in Northern Ireland to £4.80 — as reports have suggested — many families who survive on low wages and live from day to day on the breadline would be plunged into financial crisis. The proposed reduction can be viewed as nothing but a backward step, and it will, undoubtedly, create fear among those who already find it tough to make ends meet.

There are already too many families and children in Northern Ireland living in poverty. Low pay is widely recognised as a major factor contributing to household poverty. Furthermore, a lower minimum wage in Northern Ireland will be tantamount to labelling Northern Ireland as a low-wage economy that provides low-skilled and low-paid jobs. That will do nothing to encourage more people into work, and labelling Northern Ireland as something different will not help us in attracting foreign investment for high-skilled and well-paid jobs in the knowledge economy towards which we aspire.

Several Members have spoken of the importance of getting people into employment. The high levels of economic inactivity among adults in Northern Ireland, and the contentment of many to live off welfare, have been mentioned. Work should be viewed as a means to earn more money and to better oneself. An individual should benefit from coming off welfare and into work. Do Members think that people will be encouraged to come off benefits and into employment if the minimum wage in Ulster is slashed?

As I said previously, the fact is that a regional minimum wage for workers in Northern Ireland the minimum wage here would drop to £4.80. Are the Government saying that someone in Northern Ireland who is doing exactly the same job as someone in London has a job of less value? We should not compensate for higher costs of living in London by reducing the minimum wage elsewhere, and, based on reports that have surfaced, Northern Ireland is towards the bottom of that scale — despite the recent rise in the cost of living, as other Members have mentioned. Considering the steep rise in property prices in Northern Ireland over the last months, it could well be argued that the statistics used to formulate the variable rates of minimum wage are obsolete. The cost of living in Northern Ireland has never been higher, and there could not be a worse time to consider reducing the minimum wage. Those who would suffer already live on low wages and have a poorer standard of living than everywhere else. I hope that the Prime Minister is not seriously considering the proposal. I support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: There is no point in describing regional variance as anything other than a pay cut for those on the minimum wage. I have recently criticised the threat to reduce the minimum wage in Northern Ireland, and I will continue to do so. According to the Government's figures, the household income in Northern Ireland is well below the regional average. That is a disgrace, and even to suggest reducing the minimum wage — not to mention it being the subject of a prime ministerial proposal — is an insult.

We are British citizens and should be treated equally to other British citizens. Northern Ireland should not be seen as an area in which the minimum wage can be

reduced to pay for the raising of the minimum wage in London. The Westminster Government talk about reducing child poverty, making it worthwhile to work, and all citizens being equal. However, reading such a proposal makes one wonder if the Government are serious about any of those intentions.

The DUP and, I believe, the Assembly, find the proposed attack on the lowest paid in society reprehensible. Anyone working for the minimum wage does not have spare income to spend. Most of their money — if not all — is spent on keeping a roof over their heads, paying the bills and, perhaps, trying to get children through university.

All this must be looked at while remembering that the cost of living in Northern Ireland is, in some respects, greater than that in the rest of the United Kingdom: much of our clothing, food and many other products have to be imported. That, of course, adds to the price of every single item we buy and reduces the amount of cash available, for example for any recreational activity by a family.

With all that in mind, I argue that the rates for the minimum wage in Northern Ireland should be raised, not lowered. Further, it must be remembered that the Government have insisted that they will not reduce corporation tax to aid business. Is Mr Brown trying to offset that refusal by reducing the wages of workers instead?

The Varney Report hits the nail on the head when it mentions the bias towards London and the south-east of England. It looks as if Northern Ireland's pleas for assistance to rebuild an economy deprived by years of underinvestment will fall on the same deaf ears as they have always done in Downing Street. Now we have an added insult with Northern Ireland seen as an area where wages can be cut with the Westminster Government's approval.

My constituents are worth a lot more than the minimum wage at its present level, and in no circumstances will I support any move that will take money directly out of workers' wage packets.

I am happy to support the motion.

Mr Savage: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate today.

I read Mr Hennessy's article in 'The Daily Telegraph' on 23 July that said that the Prime Minister was drawing up plans to vary the minimum wage, region by region, across the UK.

The background to the story is that senior Labour sources believe that a regional minimum wage is a logical step, given the Prime Minister's announcement four years ago when, as Chancellor, he stated that regional price indices would be published to show variations in inflation rates across the country. A report for the Economic Research Council by Professor

David Smith from the University of Derby said that the minimum wage for Londoners should be boosted to £6.90 an hour. It also said that the level in the north-east should be cut by 57p to £4.78, while the workers in Yorkshire should get a minimum of £4.95. Employees in Northern Ireland should be paid at least £4.80 an hour, and those in Wales no more than £4.84. The report called for Britain to adopt a similar system to those operating in Switzerland and America, where local authorities are allowed to set benefits, the minimum wage and the salaries of public-sector workers.

That smacks of gross hypocrisy on the part of New Labour. The minimum wage was introduced as one of its flagship policies. In 2005 when Tony Blair raised the minimum wage he declared:

“This will benefit 1.4 million people... and it is a powerful symbol of how this country is changing for the good.”

Now his successor, Gordon Brown, is seeking to undo that by penalising those on low wages outside London.

The minimum wage is a powerful way of making sure that work pays and it sends out the message that society supports those who take the decision to work. The Prime Minister's plans to reduce the minimum wage will hit hard-working individuals and families throughout the regions of the United Kingdom. We cannot allow him to do that.

We all know that Northern Ireland, like some other UK regions, has unacceptably high levels of economic inactivity. In other words, we need to get people into work. Just how are we meant to do that when the Prime Minister is planning to ensure that work does not pay? Getting people off welfare benefits and into employment is good for them, good for their communities and good for the economy. It beggars belief that Gordon Brown should be penalising work, which will have the opposite effect.

On 26 July this year I wrote to the Prime Minister to relay my concern over that ill-thought out idea. My office received the following reply from the Prime Minister dated 8 August 2007, and it shows how the Prime Minister is attempting to evade this issue.

3.30 pm

The letter reads:

“I am writing on behalf of the Prime Minister to thank you for your letter dated 26th July 2007.

The Prime Minister has asked me to arrange for a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office to reply to you direct.”

To date, I have yet to receive a reply, let alone an acknowledgement, from the NIO, and that is an absolute disgrace.

I am left to conclude that the Government are working to compose a cover story, no doubt with a smokescreen. It is a coincidence that yesterday my office received a response from Pat McFadden MP, the Minister of State

for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs, in the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform stating:

“There are no variations to the minimum wage rate between areas and no plans to set different rates.”

What is going on? The Prime Minister may have been trying to pull a fast one but was caught on.

I am in contact with my party leader, who is also the Minister for Employment and Learning, and he has been more than helpful in ensuring that the minimum wage is not interfered with.

I want to leave Members with this sobering thought: if we take the average working week to be 40 hours, the plans proposed by the Prime Minister would mean that families that rely on the minimum wage the most would have £22 less a week in their pockets, which is £88 a month — almost £90 — and we cannot simply sit back and let that happen.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am grateful to my two colleges for introducing the motion. Several Members said that the announcement from academic researchers that appeared in the press took them by surprise. Everyone has been quick to say that the research was merely carried out by an academic and that it does not have any standing. However, we are all long enough in the tooth to know that the oldest trick in the book is to fly the kite; in policy terms, that is not done directly, it is kept one stage removed, you let someone else do it, and you see what happens.

I will attempt to respond to some of the individual comments, which have been welcome. It has already been stated that the national minimum wage is a reserved matter, and that the Executive does not have direct influence or authority over it. Nevertheless, pursuing such a policy would have major consequences for the Executive. In common with most Members, I am opposed to any move to replace the national minimum wage with variations. I made that clear to Ms Ramsey, the Member for West Belfast, who is the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, when she wrote to me during the summer. As average wages in Northern Ireland are among the lowest in the UK, regional variations would undoubtedly lead to the lower minimum wage that some Members quoted as being part of the research.

Professor Smith's article claimed that Northern Ireland's cost of living was 7% below the UK average. However, that estimate was for 2004, and anybody who knows anything about the cost of living in Northern Ireland today will know that that information is wholly out of date.

In the mid 1820s, the cotton weavers of Ballymacarrett, in the heart of what is now my constituency, worked from 4 o'clock in the morning until late at night, seven

days a week, and received the princely sum of four shillings and six pence.

To put the current minimum wage into context: if we, as Assembly Members, were paid the minimum wage — and I see a look of terror on the faces of Members — instead of receiving nearly £900 a week, we would get about £200 a week. That would make little difference to those Members who are of independent means, but we all know that many households are just surviving by a narrow margin. That is the difference between what Members are paid and the national minimum wage. Therefore, any cut to the modest level of the minimum wage would create a real injustice for people. Members must also carefully consider the implications of water rates and so on, which will clearly have an impact on household budgets, as we move into what will be a difficult period in the autumn.

The most dangerous and pernicious part of the proposal to lower the minimum wage — and many contributors have made this point — is that it might signify the thin end of the wedge on the issue of benefits. Currently, the benefits budget is met nationally through annually managed expenditure. I fear that if the principle were established that people on the minimum wage should be paid less, benefits could fall.

Members are trying to encourage people into work, and my Department is running several initiatives with that aim. If the basic minimum wage were lowered, particularly in the context of the large numbers of migrant workers, which we did not have in Northern Ireland five years ago, then the Department for Employment and Learning would find it exceptionally difficult to get people back to work. That is self-evident.

Sadly, there has been no significant progress in closing the earnings gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. I understand the argument, which Mr Ross and others have made, that there are specific issues in London. There has always been a London weighting for teachers and other professionals. However, I have great difficulty with the moves across the water to have variations between different regions — even different counties. Dr Farry made the point that there are major variations within Northern Ireland. Areas such as Strabane have had a history of high unemployment, and I cannot understand how a reduction in the minimum wage would advance things at all.

When I asked officials to make enquiries, it was made clear, as George Savage said, that the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform has indicated that there are no plans to reduce the minimum wage. I have no doubt that, if the Prime Minister is contemplating an election, this issue is certainly not one that he will want to wave a flag about in advance. However, Members must be vigilant on this issue, and

I welcome the fact that the Committee for Employment and Learning will discuss the matter tomorrow.

I take note of the remarks of my colleague, David McClarty, who said that lower wage costs would actually bring more people into the benefits trap than would be taken out, and Sue Ramsey quoted people from Scotland and Wales. While I do believe that the idea is probably off the table at this time, that does not mean to say that, perhaps after an election or at some future stage, it could not come back onto the table. In Northern Ireland, we are particularly vulnerable to that.

Next week the Assembly will be discussing fuel poverty. All Members know that the cost of utilities such as gas and electricity, both for businesses and households, is significantly higher than elsewhere in the UK.

Added to that mix is the cost of housing, because housing benefit only goes so far towards the amount that landlords charge, and people have to dig into their own resources to pay for accommodation.

The housing argument is over. Housing costs are higher in Northern Ireland than in most regions of the UK, with the exception of London and the south-east. Fuel and food costs are also higher. The argument that we have a lower cost of living is well off the mark and out of date.

With regard to Robin Newton's point about apprenticeships, yes, there are some exemptions. It may be that apprentices who are just starting out may not have the experience and training to add as much value. I will look into that and write to the Member to clarify the position, because I am not 100% clear about it myself.

Carmel Hanna — a former Minister in this Department — raised the point that women are far more likely to be in receipt of the national minimum wage than are men. As many women work part time, that is inevitable. We are still trying to improve the level of female involvement in the economy, and reducing the minimum wage would be a huge disincentive to women. It just goes to show that the range of issues that affect people grows once a policy such as this is rolled out.

Dr Farry mentioned the issue of public- versus private-sector wages. There is undoubtedly a difference. I am not sure of the precise amount, but I will look into it.

Nelson McCausland made a point about which we must be careful. He said that workers in Northern Ireland are entitled to the same standards as in other parts of the UK. I understand that argument. However, all our parties are seeking variations in the tax regime within the UK. We must be careful that that argument does not get turned on its head. We must make the point that, on its own merits, lowering the minimum wage is a bad decision in principle. That argument can stand alone.

George Robinson made a valid point about child poverty — one other Member also raised it. The UK Government's targets for the eradication of child poverty are currently not being met. I cannot think of anything that would prolong child poverty more than not giving people the opportunity to climb out of very-low-paid jobs or get off benefits.

If we are trying to give people an incentive to get off benefits and into work, lowering the minimum wage makes no sense whatsoever. I could understand it, from an economic point of view, if there were a large variation between the national minimum wage and the market value of labour.

Immigration is another cause for concern, as Carmel Hanna mentioned. Last week I spoke to my counterpart in Dublin, and people are worried there. There has been an enormous surge of immigration. Many immigrants are skilled workers, such as welders or surveyors, but many others are receiving the minimum wage. If that was to be lowered, it would be likely that part of the indigenous population would be pushed back onto benefits. However, because migrant workers are not immediately eligible for benefits, they would take minimum wage-jobs because the wages would still be relatively high compared to those in their home countries. The net effect would be that in areas where low wages are paid the indigenous population would be driven back onto benefits, which could create tensions in the community.

That is something that we should try to avoid. I am discussing that, not only with colleagues in Dublin but also with my counterparts in Scotland, because if we do not manage that properly, it could return to haunt us. Nothing would exacerbate that situation so much as reducing the national minimum wage.

3.45 pm

I thank all the Members who contributed to this useful debate. We may be reassured by the letters received by George Savage and by the information that my Department has received. However, I urge the Committee for Employment and Learning and all Members to be vigilant, because the issue may return in the future. The Committee should consider making its views known to its counterparts in Scotland and Wales. I will do the same, so that the idea is not allowed to gather momentum, either at present or in the future.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to those Members remaining in the Chamber. When Members are in such agreement, it can be difficult to get a debate going. To raise Members' spirits, I shall take the opportunity to pose a few challenges. I have listened with interest to points made by several Members.

I begin, therefore, with a few questions. If Northern Ireland has the highest level of economically inactive people and a below-average working wage, why has it

only average levels of poverty? I heard several Members speak yesterday about the need to tackle poverty, yet Northern Ireland sits in the middle of the poverty league table. One of the reasons why we have a minimum wage is precisely to tackle poverty, but we do not necessarily have that problem. Why do we have a minimum wage? I have heard a lot of talk about the implications one way or the other, but what was the reason for introducing a minimum wage in the first place? If we understand that, then we have to take on board certain implications of decisions.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am about to quote Ms Ramsey. Let me do that, and then I will give way. The question that Ms Ramsey and Mr George Robinson posed is this: if the minimum wage is such a good thing, why not raise it?

I will give way now. Ms Ramsey can make her point.

Ms S Ramsey: I have two points. First, I have a problem with the issue of the minimum wage. We have to be looking at a living wage, since some people are working merely to survive. My second point is that I am confused by Mr McCrea's assertion that he wants to add life to the debate. When he was asking those questions, I was concerned as to whether he was actually supporting the motion.

Mr B McCrea: Obviously, if I put my name to a motion and propose it, my Minister comes forward and we are all in agreement, of course I am going to support it. However, there are some issues that we have not tackled because we have gone round and said things, and they are likely to be raised in other forums. The real reason why the minimum wage was introduced was to promote fairness in society. Some people perform very valuable jobs that do not require great skills or any formal qualifications: cleaners, security men — a whole range of other workers who have no economic strength. The minimum wage was introduced to protect those vulnerable workers. That is the key point, and that fairness is why the minimum wage should not be reduced.

The second reason for the introduction of the national minimum wage was to get people out of the benefits trap and back to work. At the moment, Northern Ireland has the lowest unemployment rate that it has had for decades: 3.6%. When one talks about taking people out of the benefits trap, one should look at the figures involved.

We do not have more students at work or more elderly people. The reason for the increase in economically inactive people is that they are either sick or disabled. It is a matter of whether the genuinely sick and disabled are to be forced back into work.

Society must examine that issue and concede that, given 30 to 40 years of the Troubles, it is reasonable to expect that the population of Northern Ireland is suffering greater mental distress. Those circumstances underlie the high figures for disability living allowance. Therefore, the labour pool that some Members say will be encouraged back to work is simply not there.

Some Members have suggested that benefits could be tinkered with and pushed back up. However, a delicate balance must be reached between incapacity benefit, disability living allowance and other issues. Skills standards should be raised, but many valuable jobs do not require five GCSEs.

Carmel Hanna spoke about the general effects, and I agree that that is one benefit: a rising tide lifts all boats. I have written a half-page on Stephen Farry's comments, but I will not go through them all. However, in relation to the type of job that we want to create, the highest gross value added, averaging £49,000 an employee, is in the manufacturing sector; that figure falls to £12,000 in the tourism industry. Well-paid jobs that give people a working life are being replaced with part-time jobs in an insecure environment.

In light of Northern Ireland's special circumstances, I am sympathetic to achieving the best financial deal possible, but there is a danger in cherry-picking economic issues — for example, supporting a lower rate of corporation tax, rejecting the lowering of the minimum wage and expecting benefits to remain the same, and so forth. Everything forms part of a complicated system of networks, and Members must be careful that their arguments stand in their own right.

There are two key points in the argument on the minimum wage. It is fair: society should protect those who do a hard day's work in environments that are not always enticing. Those people do a good job, and Members should strive to look after them. However, the correct incentives must be in place for those people to progress. In particular, that issue will affect the emerging group of young people who should be encouraged into work in spite of the legacy of the past 30 to 40 years.

I have sympathy with Alastair Ross, who mentioned the difficulties of a winding-up speech, because it is not easy to cover every issue. However, Members should be careful when they characterise some people as being content to live off the welfare state. Are people really content to live off the welfare state? People do that when they have neither the opportunities nor the skills to exploit those opportunities.

The question was asked: what do Members want to deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland? The answer is: an economy that recognises and fully recompenses skills.

Finally, with regard to fuel poverty and housing benefit, the answer to the question that I posed earlier is if housing costs were to be taken out of the calculation, only then would Northern Ireland have an approximately average level of poverty. I accept what the Minister has said about recent changes in housing costs. If housing costs were not taken out altogether, Northern Ireland would zoom to the top of the league of poverty and related problems. That must be taken on board.

Lest there be any doubt; the reason that David McClarty and I have moved the motion is that despite the national minimum wage's being a reserved matter, it permeates every other aspect of a fair and equitable society — one that tries to eradicate not only child poverty, but all poverty. We want to encourage people. I commend the Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for the approach that they have taken on the matter. I hope that the Assembly will not only tackle the issue, but will examine its root causes. I, therefore, support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly opposes any attempt to replace the national minimum wage with regional variants.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker*]

ADJOURNMENT

New Visitors' Centre at the Giant's Causeway

Mr O'Loan: A new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway is perhaps an unusual subject for an Adjournment debate. However, all will agree that it is a significant one because of the necessity of such a centre at the Giant's Causeway, which is of crucial importance to the tourism industry here and on the island of Ireland. No other natural feature on the island of Ireland enjoys such a level of international recognition. Everyone believes that it is essential to have a world-class facility at the site.

The delay in producing that simply defined result has come to be seen as a metaphor for the sclerotic bureaucracy and the inadequate and non-delivering governmental process that we have enjoyed. Recently, I have seen considerable references to that.

As a result of two departmental press releases yesterday, the scenario for the debate is different to that which I had expected when I requested it. One came from the Minister of the Environment, which said that she was "of a mind to approve" a planning application in support of a private-sector proposal for a visitors' centre. Although she is minded, however, she is not in a position to make a decision until she and her officials have had further discussions. A linked statement came from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who said that he would withdraw funding for the public-sector proposal that his Department has led for several years on account of the statement that had come from the Environment Minister. Not many Members would regard the timing of those statements to be coincidental in the light of the fact that the Adjournment debate on the subject was to take place today. Movement seems to have been rapid. I have no doubt that the Minister of the Environment would have preferred to make a final announcement on planning approval and would not have been keen to merely be in a position whereby she is only minded to take a particular course of action.

I want to make an important point about the manner in which the information was released; it was in the form of press statements and not in ministerial statements to the Assembly.

4.00 pm

The Deputy Speaker might like to bring that to the attention of the Speaker; he may wish to consider whether

House privilege was breached by making statements of import in such a way.

I will make two points. I have no objections, in principle, to private sector solutions to public need; that is a general comment rather than one relating to the issue under discussion. Nor do I have any objection, in principle, to a Government or Department saying that it has changed its mind on an issue. There are bound to be times when that is a perfectly good and sensible thing to do.

However, there are major issues around the decision on the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre, two of which are crucial. The first is the integrity of our government process; the second remains the achievement of a visitors' centre. I have spent a significant amount of time talking about the integrity of the government process, which is an issue that Members should take seriously. How the government process applies to the decision on the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre is something to which we should devote a great deal of attention.

Four questions arise from the issue of integrity. The first is for the Minister of the Environment. She needs to reassure me, the Assembly and the public that the decision that she will, undoubtedly, make — conferring planning approval on the private sector application — was taken strictly on planning grounds. If necessary, I will submit a question under freedom of information legislation and ask that the advice that the Minister received from the Planning Service, and the discussions that her Department had on the issue, be revealed. I do not know whether that information is obtainable under freedom of information legislation, but I can find out. The Minister can prevent me from having to force the issue by making her decision-making process transparent, and that would give the necessary reassurance to the public. I am asking that she do that.

The other three questions are for DETI. Why did it change its mind? Contrary to its press statement, DETI was leading the project. Even after the release of the ministerial statement, DETI's website still asserted that the Department was leading the project. Its website probably still makes that claim. For years, DETI has been in no doubt that it, along with several other public-sector players, was leading a public-sector project.

A Department is entitled to change its mind. However, if there has been considerable expenditure of public money — and if the change has important consequences — a Department has a duty to explain itself. DETI led the project because there was a belief that a visitors' centre would be better delivered as a public-sector project. DETI must explain why it now thinks that it is not better delivered as a public-sector project.

I do not agree with the reference in the statement to disagreement among the parties in the Assembly. I have talked to key parties involved in the project, and

there seems to have been, for a considerable period, a lack of communication between DETI and those parties.

My next question for DETI is this: why announce the dropping of public funding for the public-sector proposal simply on account of planning approval for the private-sector project? Let us just assume that planning approval for the project has been granted, although that has not been finalised. We all know that getting planning approval for a project is no guarantee that the project will go ahead. Therefore, for DETI to say that it is now washing its hands of the public-sector project simply because planning approval has been given for the private-sector project raises a great question mark about the matter — unless, of course, the Minister knows more about the certainty of the private-sector project than anyone has yet said. If, indeed, he does know more, he is under a duty to tell the public about it.

My final question is this: can the Minister confirm that no public money will be provided to support the private-sector project? If, in a month or a year's time, public money were to be given in support of the project, other potential contractors could rightly say: "Excuse me, was I not entitled to express an interest in delivering that project too?"

Those four questions must be clearly answered so that the Assembly can have confidence in the integrity of the governmental process. That is important at any time, but it is particularly important in this fledgling Assembly. I hope that my questions will be given consideration and that they will be answered with an openness that can give us some reassurance.

I turn to the question of whether we have a mechanism to deliver a visitors' centre. Everyone should be very clear that no such mechanism is guaranteed. All we have is planning approval — nearly — for a private-sector project. On the basis of that alone, DETI has essentially said that it is putting no more public money into this and that it is washing its hands of the public-sector project. The Assembly should not accept that as satisfactory. DETI has accepted the lead over the years to ensure that there is a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. That responsibility remains with DETI.

I am not privy to the business case for the visitors' centre, but the application of even a little common sense suggests that there could be snags. We are told that one of the concerns for the Minister and DETI was that the public-sector project would cost over £21 million. It is a very sophisticated project and so too is the private-sector developer's project. I have not seen a costing for it, but it will be a considerable sum. The private-sector developer will develop only if he believes that he can make a return on his money. Where will the income come from? The obvious sources are car parking and the sale of cups of tea and the like. Many cars would have to be parked and many cups of tea sold to get a

return on a project of that nature, particularly when there is no monopoly on those services — a car park already exists there, and more than one party sells cups of tea. There is, therefore, no guarantee that this private-sector project will go ahead at all.

It will not be in anyone's interest if we again reach the situation whereby this business runs with uncertainty for years. People will simply laugh at the Assembly, the Executive and the governmental process and say: "Come off it, you cannot even deliver a visitors' centre at the biggest tourist attraction in the North of Ireland —" *[Interruption.]*

I think that I heard a Member from the opposite Benches say that that is exactly what could happen. That is what has happened and what still could happen.

4.15 pm

The responsibility remains with DETI, and I will be pleased to hear the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment say that he still accepts that responsibility.

Those are the essential points. Questions remain on the integrity of the process, and we need reassurances that there will still be a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway.

Mr Campbell: This matter is fraught with difficulty. The proposed visitors' centre is in north Antrim, but, as several people have said today on the airwaves, it is more than just a local centre. The centre would be based in north Antrim, but would cater for more than 500,000 visitors a year, and, as such, would be Northern Ireland's premier visitors' resource. Therefore, it is a Northern Ireland-wide facility. Unfortunately, because of the controversy that has emerged — whether or not that is contrived — some people appear to have missed what has been happening for the past seven years, or, to be more accurate, what has not been happening. That is precisely the problem faced by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Assembly.

Previously, as the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan said, DETI was pioneering the project. For a variety of reasons to which I am not privy, but have observed from a short distance as a representative of an area close by, there was no end product. There is still no end product. If there had not been an announcement yesterday, there would have been no delivery on an end product today, next month, or even next year. In response to that seven-year vacuum, in which, for whatever reason, there was no end product — the world-class facility that we all wanted to see — an announcement had to be made and a decision had to be taken.

It is an unfortunate fact that there is only one private-sector proposal for the site. That is the reality. My view, and that of those members of the wider community to whom I have spoken, is that we want to see a facility that meets the very high levels of expectation that are

the mark of a world heritage site. People are not as concerned about the delivery mechanism, or who does the delivering, as they are about the delivery itself.

Having said that, planning applications submitted by the developer in question have caused difficulties for many people in the past. Many of them have been in my constituency, and I have represented constituents in opposition to some of those applications. However, this planning application is completely separate and different to any of those. I have never come across any planning application, either from this applicant or anyone else, of this nature. There are no similarities in that respect. Given that background and that context, however, this entire process, from today, must be subjected to the closest possible scrutiny. If it were not, I would totally and unequivocally oppose it without reservation.

The planning application must face the most rigorous examination possible in order to arrive at the conclusion that we all want. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of the Environment were placed in an invidious position. What if the seven years of inability to deliver became eight, nine or 10 years? If that happened, the Ministers would receive criticism from inside and outside the Chamber for inactivity. People would ask why the Ministers did not do something.

Mr O'Loan: Does Mr Campbell accept that DETI's position on the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre is remote from saying that there was no progress? In October 2005, it was announced that an international design competition was to take place. Since then, a planning application has been worked on. DETI said, and probably still says on its website, that a planning application would be made later in 2007 and that a proposal would be complete by 2010. I am surprised that as a member of the Minister's party, Mr Campbell says that nothing is happening, given that DETI has made a commitment to deliver the project and has said publicly how it is proceeding to do that.

Mr Campbell: I was reluctant to give way given that the Member had previously spoken; however, I will deal with the matter. I did not say that no progress has been made; I said that there has not been delivery. It is patently obvious that for seven years, for a variety of reasons, there has not been delivery on the world-class facility that everyone wants. Does the hon Member wish those seven years to become eight, nine, ten or 12 years? I presume that the Ministers are acting in the best interests of delivering that facility and that they hope to do so. The Member referred to the website, but the previous, direct rule Minister was responsible for the facility and was pursuing a particular line until 8 May 2007, when there was a change of Minister. I am sure that he will respond to the debate in due course.

Hopefully, we are all agreed on the need to deliver the facility. Provided that the local community and the wider population are content that the delivery of that facility has been done in the most appropriate manner, going through all the rigorous examinations that are necessary, I do not see a problem. That ought to be the conclusion, and I hope that nothing is said in the debate that would deviate or divert attention from the delivery of a world-class facility. Moreover, nothing should happen that might jeopardise the world heritage status of the site, including any surrounding paraphernalia that may accompany any development application. That is why rigour must be applied to ensure that every single thing that needs to be done is done to deliver that facility. The mechanism by which that conclusion is arrived at is of secondary importance.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the SDLP Member for North Antrim for bringing this issue forward for debate. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of the Environment for their attendance.

The Giant's Causeway was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1986, and it is, in my opinion, Ireland's greatest tourist asset. The existing visitors' centre caters for the 500,000 tourists who visit the Giant's Causeway each year, and it is important that any visitors' centre that is placed there is of world-class value.

Much time, money and effort have gone into the plans for a new visitors' centre. The project was overseen by DETI and the Giant's Causeway Visitor Facilities Ltd, and DETI was close to submitting plans to the Planning Service.

Earlier this week, the Minister seemed to imply that other bodies had dragged their heels. However, DETI itself had taken on the mantle of project co-ordination. Other bodies, such as Moyle District Council and the National Trust, were waiting for the Department to move the project forward, to get its act together and to submit an application to the Planning Service.

Given the number of tourists who visit the Giant's Causeway each year, the new company would have made a significant profit. Of that profit, 25% of the surplus would have gone to Moyle District Council, 25% to the National Trust and 50% would have been left to the company's discretion.

It is important to elaborate on the benefits of those revenue streams. For example, the money that Moyle District Council generates from the existing visitor facilities is used to maintain other amenities and tourist facilities in the area. The money from the existing visitors' centre benefits people from places such as Bushmills, Cushendall, Ballycastle, Armoy, Ballintoy and even Rathlin Island. If a private visitors' centre is given the green light, and Moyle District Council loses

that revenue stream, which is currently more than £250,000 a year, the rates in those areas will shoot through the roof. Moreover, I am sure that the potential loss of jobs in Moyle District Council and the National Trust has not been taken into consideration.

Both DUP Ministers pulled the plug on the publicly funded visitors' centre before the Assembly had an opportunity to debate the issue today. That was clearly an effort to make the debate redundant in the wake of Sinn Féin's having raised concerns about the matter last Friday. It is suspicious that no DUP MLA has clarified the nature of the relationship between the party and the private developer involved.

It has been revealed that the owner of Seaport Investments Ltd, Mr Sweeney, signed the nomination papers for a Moyle DUP councillor in 2005. Mr Sweeney has today admitted that he is a member of the party. When questioned about that relationship earlier today, why did the DUP representatives not declare that Mr Sweeney is a member of their party? If everything was above board, why did the DUP consider it necessary to hide that detail?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: No, I will not give way on this occasion. I have started, so I will finish. *[Interruption.]*

I want to place on record my concern about the conflict of interest: two DUP Ministers are involved in potentially awarding the contract to build a multimillion pound visitor centre to Seymour Sweeney, a senior DUP member and benefactor.

Does the Assembly want to hand over the multimillion-pound benefits of Ireland's world heritage site to a private developer and deprive the people of Moyle of a vital strand of revenue? Sinn Féin will back what is good for the local tourist industry, the local environment and the people of Moyle. My party remains supportive of the publicly funded proposal for a new visitors' centre and asks the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to reinstate his support for that project, given recent developments.

Given the approach of the two Ministers, and the DUP in general, to the subject, it will take much more than statements to address Sinn Féin's concerns. The facts about how and why those decisions were taken must be made known. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I am pleased that there is an opportunity to discuss the new visitors' centre. I am well acquainted with the scheme. In 2001, Moyle District Council invited the then Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to discuss the delays in creating the centre. As it turned out, I drew the short straw and, during the summer of 2001, chaired a series of meetings between Seymour Sweeney and the National Trust, the two

organisations that had submitted proposals for the redevelopment of the visitors' centre.

Unfortunately, nothing came of those discussions. Bearing in mind, as other Members have said, that the Giant's Causeway is Northern Ireland's most important attraction, I admit that I am disappointed that the Assembly is still dealing with the issue some six years later.

The Giant's Causeway is a world heritage site, and that must be borne in mind when proposals are put forward. I, too, am concerned about the process of the past few days. The Minister of the Environment issued a statement that she was "of a mind" to approve the proposals from Seaport Investments Ltd. However, she insists today that she has not made a final decision. If that is the case, why did Nigel Dodds decide, on a whim, to pull out of the project at the Giant's Causeway and withdraw the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's interest in it, based on a statement that Mrs Foster was "of a mind"?

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been dealing with the issue and has raised it with the Minister and his officials. In a briefing today from Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment officials, we learned that, so far, £1.5 million has been spent on the project. That is a considerable amount of money that will not be recovered. The fact that there was a competition to submit plans to develop the site was also raised.

I, too, have serious concerns about the relationship between the DUP and Mr Sweeney. On the radio today, Mr Sweeney said that he was a member of the DUP. He was honest about it, but he said that he had never given money to the party. The DUP is some party if its members do not have to pay membership; everyone would be queuing to join. The visitors' centre must be replaced, as the issue has been ongoing for too long. I have no objections to the private sector's becoming involved in the development of the project, but the sensitivities of the area must be borne in mind in any proposals — it is a world heritage site.

How was the decision reached? There are other stakeholders in the project — Moyle District Council and the National Trust, for example. What negotiations took place with the National Trust over the sensitivities of the development? The process of the past few days has set a dangerous precedent: even the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was not consulted on the decision. Bearing in mind the importance of the site to Northern Ireland's tourism industry, it is important that the visitors' centre be replaced as soon as possible.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am a member of the National Trust; I have given it money every month for more than 20 years, as has my family. It is important to put

that on record, given that such relationships appear to be important to the Assembly.

The debate was tabled more than a week ago on the pretence that foot-dragging Ministers Mr Dodds and Mrs Foster had done nothing. The debate was supposed to have a different colour today: it was going to criticise two Ministers who have been in office for more than 100 days and who have failed to solve the crisis at the Giant's Causeway. However, when Ministers remedy that crisis by setting a course of action that will resolve a decade of dilly-dallying and delay, they are condemned and criticised for all manner of things, and all types of innuendos are thrown at them.

They are condemned in a manner that is completely unjustifiable — the criticism is scurrilous. It says something about the small-minded nature of many people that, when there is an opportunity to do something good for all the people of Northern Ireland, they look for a way to kick it instead of letting it be resolved.

4.30 pm

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member will get a chance in a wee minute, but there are some points that I intend to make in the debate.

This is one of the most important issues that affects my constituency, because tourism is going to be the future in Northern Ireland. Tourism projects — many of which have been announced, such as the Titanic Quarter, and various golf courses across the Province — provide an opportunity to turn Northern Ireland into a tourist destination, which will make us the envy of this part of Europe. We have an opportunity to get that right, and it is unfortunate that there are people who want to change the debate in order to prevent that progress.

There has been some unfortunate focus on the applicant, rather than the application, on the part of some of the Members who have spoken. Are Members opposite suggesting that every time an application for planning permission, or a business plan, comes before any Minister in Northern Ireland, we examine the applicant to find out whether he is a member of this or that organisation, or, worse still, whether he is a Protestant or a Roman Catholic, and then decide whether the applicant should be granted permission or given encouragement by Government? Are they seriously arguing that someone who is entitled to be a member of a lawful organisation, which has no bearing on his application, which has been at the consideration stage for some time, should have that held against them and be penalised? I hope not, because what we are hearing from the Benches opposite is an argument for discriminating against an applicant, rather than looking at the salient points of the application.

As some Members have said, let us focus on the fact and detail of the application and ask whether it is the right way forward for Northern Ireland to deliver a world-class centre of tourism excellence. I hope that it is.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will give way very briefly, because the Member has been persistent if nothing else.

Mr A Maginness: The Member said that the Ministers have made a decision in relation to the matter, and that the purpose of this Adjournment debate — and he is correct — was to highlight the delay in making a decision. However, is it right for Ministers to make an announcement in the press, but not come to the House prior to the Adjournment debate to make a statement on this very important matter and, therefore, not allow Members to question them?

Mr Paisley Jnr: Obviously that is a very pertinent point. I understand that today is 11 September and that the Assembly was recalled yesterday after two months' holiday. At the first available opportunity, the Ministers are in the House to take part in a debate tabled by the Member's party.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No, I will not give way. The Member's first attempt was poor, so his second will only be worse.

I will pose some questions that Members should really ask.

Mr Donaldson: It is a bit rich for Members opposite to talk about conflicts of interest in public positions when some of them have spouses who are in very senior offices in the country, taking decisions about sensitive matters such as policing. Then they point the finger at anybody else —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let us not get into personal attacks on Members.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am quite happy to have a cup of coffee with Mr Donaldson over that point later.
[Laughter.]

Several questions must be asked today. Are the Government the developers of last resort? Are Members saying, at a time when resources are finite, that the Government have a public responsibility to build, pay for and take the risk for everything and let the private sector get away risk free? I hope that they are not. I hope that we drive forward an economy in Northern Ireland that tells people that opportunities exist here. I want to drive forward a dynamic business economy in which opportunities can be provided and, importantly, facilitated for everyone. I do not believe that the Government should be seen as a developer of last resort.

I remind Members that when the Government last thought of themselves as developers of last resort and decided that it was their duty to build tourism facilities, they did so at Navan Fort, which today is a public disaster. Had that been a private initiative, the risk would have been with the private sector and the outcome would have been different. With this project, as with many others, the Government have cleverly transferred the risk to the private sector but ensured that taxpayers — the people who really matter — continue to benefit from having a centre that has been paid for by private money. The public will be able to avail of it, and it will be instrumental in attracting tourists to Northern Ireland and encouraging them to spend their money here.

Some Members have mentioned a DETI application — the elusive alternative planning application — and work has been done in that regard. However, I remind Members that any lobbying that has been done to me by the National Trust and others has been carried out with the sole purpose of stymying and delaying the possibility of anything happening at the Giant's Causeway. That is sad. The most damning indictment that I can put on that organisation is that it should have a different vision for my constituency. Instead of bickering about an application in the area, it should see this as a brilliant opportunity to clear the ridge of a lot of horrible buildings and Portakabins. It should have the vision to see a brand new tourist facility from which it, the public, the private sector and the public sector can benefit. We have that opportunity, and it should be taken.

I appeal to people not to be blackmailed by the threats that have been put about, the most obvious being that world heritage status will be removed from the Giant's Causeway if the proposed development goes ahead. Over the past 10 years, I have taken the opportunity to speak to representatives of other world heritage sites when they have visited Northern Ireland from the continent. I have asked them about the accuracy of that threat. They rubbish that claim. On visiting other world heritage sites such as Niagara Falls, one will see that buildings have been developed around them, and that those sites have been developed to encourage visitors. Other world heritage sites, such as that of the terracotta soldiers in China, have been developed so that people can go right up to the artefacts and look at them closely. Visitors are able to see those spectacular tourist attractions. However, it is right that any development should be carried out practically, sensitively and in a sustainable manner.

It is wrong to say that the standing and status of the Giant's Causeway stones would be jeopardised if a developer — no matter who — were to clear the site of the horrible buildings and build a new, state-of-the-art tourism centre. That is rubbish: it is blackmail. We should not have that threat directed at us, and it should

not be held over us like a sword of Damocles that implies that the status of world heritage site will be withdrawn. I hope that the organisations and individuals who are making that threat will withdraw it and recognise that this is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to get a world-class visitors' centre urgently, expeditiously, practically and legally. It must happen as soon as possible, and I encourage Ministers to continue taking positive, proactive decisions that will help business in Northern Ireland to flourish.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have to leave the last ten minutes for the Minister.

Mr S Wilson: First of all, many people may be disheartened and depressed by the debate, because having listened to some of those who have spoken previously criticising the Minister, it seems that we are engaging in the petty politics of prejudice. The main thrust of the argument, certainly from Sinn Féin, seemed to be not so much about the development but rather the background of the developer. That certainly came through in the speeches from the Alliance Party and the SDLP, perhaps to a lesser extent.

On the other hand, perhaps we should be heartened that at least now we are getting down to the kind of issues that the Executive and the Assembly are going to have to deal with. When the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster did a study on tourism, it said that it could not understand why such a site did not have facilities for visitors. We have to establish how they can best be provided and what the best methods are of providing them.

Members of the Assembly, from almost every party, criticised the Department of the Environment for being slow over the planning process, and then when the Minister tries to speed up the planning process, she is thought to be engaged in some kind of skulduggery.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will be very happy to.

Mrs Foster: There is some suggestion in the Chamber today that I took a rushed decision when I was told that there was to be an Adjournment debate in the House. Anyone who knows anything about the planning process in Northern Ireland knows that that is the greatest load of ludicrous nonsense that could be put to the House.

When I came into office in May 2007, I was made aware of a number of article 31 applications that would ultimately come before me for a decision. I was amazed to find that one for the Giant's Causeway had been sitting since 2002. That is why I immediately set about looking at it to try to come to a decision.

My colleague is absolutely right — when I made up my mind, I was criticised for doing so, and that is the point that I wanted to make.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Minister for saying that.

Let us just look at three contradictions and the arguments that have been made. Mr O'Loan said that we have a planning application that is on the point of being granted, but wondered whether it would be delivered. That is what he said. He wanted to know how profits can be made from parking cars and serving tea. Therefore, his argument is that DETI should stay involved, because the project may never be delivered.

Then we had the Sinn Féin Member saying that it was an absolute scandal to give the contract to a private developer, because Moyle District Council will be deprived of £250,000 in profits from the centre.

Which is it to be? It is not going to be profitable, so it should not go to the private sector, or it is going to be too profitable, so it should be kept in the public sector. The arguments are totally contradictory. That is one of the reasons I believe that there is something more to the objections than simply the economics.

The second contradiction is that the planning process should be transparent and totally accountable, and yet it appears Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan and the Sinn Féin Member whose Irish name I cannot pronounce are basing their criticism on the fact that the contract has been granted to someone whose background they are suspicious of. What kind of a planning process would we have if decisions were made on the basis of who the applicant was, rather than what the application is?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Point of order.

Mr O'Loan: It is important to put on the record that I made no reference to the developer.

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

Mr S Wilson: Let me make it clear that when the Minister was considering the planning application she would have had to consider the views of the Environment and Heritage Service, for example, and if there was an element of doubt at all about the impact on the environment, I know what the decision of the Environment and Heritage Service would be. It would tell the Minister to have nothing to do with the application; and I speak as someone who has criticised the Environment and Heritage Service and the Planning Service on many occasions.

4.45 pm

My third point is in total contrast to what Members heard from Mr O'Loan yesterday. During yesterday's debate on the economy, he told the House eloquently that we must find new ways of delivering for the economy of Northern Ireland and new ways of bringing in resources. However, at the very first hint of a Minister finding new ways of bringing in resources he is jumping up and down in anger. If private money is available for the proposed visitor centre, and if that private money

can deliver something that has not been delivered for seven years, then let us take it. Using private money is one of the new ways of doing things. What the Ministers have decided, and the routes that they are taking —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: No, I have to finish soon as the Minister wants to speak.

Ministers are looking for new ways of bringing in resources, speeding up the planning process, getting decisions made and delivering, and that is what people want from the Assembly. When Ministers do that, it should be welcomed, rather than trying to find some Machiavellian motive behind such decisions.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I congratulate the Member who secured the Adjournment debate. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue, and it is right that it should be discussed. The timing is appropriate. It has been recognised on all sides that the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, who is in the House, announced yesterday that she is of a mind to approve an outline planning application by Seaport Investments Ltd for a new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. I welcome the fact that Minister Foster has made her views known on the merits of that planning application.

The Giant's Causeway is our premier tourist attraction, with over 550,000 visitors in 2006, 80% of whom were estimated to have come from outside Northern Ireland, and it needs world-class facilities. I endorse everything that Mr O'Loan said about the importance of the causeway and the need for world-class facilities. That is an absolute priority. I am sure that Members will agree that the current facilities are far from ideal and are, quite frankly, appalling. There is a need to improve all aspects of the facilities needed for visitors, from education and interpretation to basic amenities such as toilets. My priority, as the Minister responsible for tourism, is that those world-class facilities are delivered — not how, or by whom they are delivered; it is that they are delivered.

Much has been said about what the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is doing. In 2003, under a different Administration and different Ministers, the Department worked with key stakeholders at the Giant's Causeway, including Moyle District Council, which owns the land on which the current facilities are built, and the National Trust, which owns the actual causeway site as well as the shop and café. At that time, the Department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) assumed the lead in developing a proposal for a new centre, and they did so at the request of Moyle District Council and others who simply could not, unfortunately, find a way forward.

I believe that the Government's position at that time was to be the developer of last resort: in other words, they did not want to be in that position at all, and they felt that they should not have to be in that position. The Government did not own any land at the causeway and felt that it was up to the council and other stakeholders to do the job. Central Government were not in the business of designing and running visitors' centres. That job was best left to local stakeholders, councils, or the private sector.

Following the burning of the previous council-owned centre in April 2000, there were a series of initiatives by the council to rebuild the visitors' centre. Moyle District Council went down the road of a process and a competition, and it was open to the idea of offers to build a centre that could have included non-public enterprises. That will be of interest to Mr McKay, who said in a weekend press report that he was against anything that involved the private element and that it was in the interests of local people that the visitors' centre remained under public ownership. The key issue for Mr McKay is that the visitors' centre remains in public ownership — and he takes a dogmatic view on that.

As Sean Neeson said, the previous Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment tried to find a way forward that would have allowed for the building of a new visitors' centre. It was only in the absence of agreement that the then Moyle District Council asked the then Government to take the lead in developing new facilities. We could go into the ins and outs of whether or not direct rule Ministers made decisions and for whatever reasons, but, no doubt, they acted in good faith. They were obviously influenced by the fact that if we are to capitalise on the potential for tourism in Northern Ireland, we must develop our tourism infrastructure. I believe that they reluctantly assumed the role of developer of last resort.

Some might ask why, in 2003, the then Government did not await the determination on the Seaport Investments Ltd outline planning application before embarking on an international design competition for a new centre. That is a good question, which direct rule Ministers will have to answer. Devolved Ministers may well have taken that decision, but it was more important to get a speedy answer and outcome to the planning application than to incur substantial public expenditure on something that has now probably turned out to be nugatory. That is a matter for those former Ministers to address.

When the devolved Administration took office and the current Ministers came into their posts, they inherited a process that had been long delayed, and they recognised a need for action. I commend Minister Foster for making the Causeway centre a priority issue — and she has taken the opportunity today to set out why she did that — and for making her views on that complex application known so quickly after coming into office. As Gregory

Campbell rightly said, the application will be subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny — as it should be.

Mr McKay raised the issue of why the decision was taken when the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) project, along with other stakeholders, was so close to reaching the stage of a planning application being made. If only that were the case. The DETI/NITB project would have had to overcome significant obstacles. The identification of suitable car-parking provision has proved to be particularly difficult, and remains unsolved to this day. No planning application could have been lodged without that problem being solved. The consequent delays, along with construction price inflation, increased the estimated cost to £21.5 million — a considerable amount of taxpayers' money.

It is clear from Minister Foster's statement that she sees merit in the Seaport Investments Ltd application, and that she is of a mind to approve it. As a consequence, and in those circumstances, my Department would be reckless to take any decision other than to say that it will not be progressing with further expenditure and work on the current proposal. It would simply be wrong to commit further taxpayers' money to a project that, it would appear, will likely not be required. The rationale for the Government's involvement as a developer of last resort is no longer compelling. It would not be in the public interest to proceed to spend more money on working up proposals and, possibly, spend £21 million of taxpayers' money on a centre when an alternative private-sector proposal could be developed.

Even though the Government will no longer be the developer of a new visitors' centre, my Department will continue to take a close interest in the efforts to have a world-class visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. The objective remains to ensure that the many thousands of tourists who visit what has often been described as the eighth wonder of the world receive an experience that does justice to that description. Similar to Minister Foster, I am keen that the key stakeholders at the Giant's Causeway — The National Trust and Moyle District Council — should work together and in partnership with the private sector investor to ensure that future visitors receive the best possible experience.

I will deal briefly with a number of points that have been raised. Mr McKay talked of the need to protect the revenue stream of Moyle District Council. That is not the primary purpose of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Our primary purpose is to promote world-class facilities for tourism in Northern Ireland. Mr McKay may see that as his primary objective, but, in those comments, he reveals more about where he is coming from than anything else could.

Mr O'Loan talked of the need for a ministerial statement to the Assembly, and Mr Maginness, from a sedentary position, made the point that he was not so much criticising what Minister Foster had done, but the way in which she had done it. My statement, on behalf of my Department, simply explained the logical implications for the prospect of the proposal from DETI and NITB and the implications of Minister Foster's decision on that project. I made my statement in the knowledge that the Assembly would have the opportunity to debate the matter today.

Mr O'Loan talked about the lack of communication with stakeholders.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dodds: No, I will not give way, because I have very little time.

DETI could not communicate with anyone in respect of a statement by the planning Minister, which was issued only yesterday. As far as lack of consultation with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is concerned, it was not for me to deal with that matter, because the decision was taken by the planning Minister. However, when the Committee asked my officials to come here today, they made themselves available at very short notice to explain to the Committee, in great detail, the issues as my Department sees them. I made sure that that happened as soon as was possible and appropriate.

My Department's priorities are to ensure that the site has a world-class facility; that the criteria for preserving world heritage status are maintained — that is a matter that the planners, as Mr Sammy Wilson said, will examine closely; that it is done with the best possible value for money to the public purse; and that it is done as quickly as possible. That is all I am interested in. That is all the House should be interested in.

If Members really had taxpayers' interests at heart, they should not decry our efforts or take a dogmatic Marxist approach, which says that only the public sector can deliver. We have seen what has happened — delay, delay and delay. Action is finally being taken to deliver the project at the best possible value for money.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Adjourned at 4.56 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 17 September 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask that you review the Hansard report of last Tuesday's debate on attacks on Orange Halls. There has been an omission from page 276, column 2. I understand that it can be difficult for Hansard staff to pick up all interventions, especially if a debate becomes heated; however, although my intervention was clearly audible on this side and was definitely heard on the other side of the Chamber, it was omitted.

Speaking at 2.30 pm, junior Minister Mr Kelly said:

“that is why attacks on homes, businesses, Orange Halls, other buildings belonging to the Loyal Orders, GAA premises, and all other cultural and religious premises must be condemned.” —
[Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p276, col 2].

At that point, I asked, “And the Old Bailey?”

Perhaps you would review that exchange, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for your point of order. I shall speak to the Editor of Debates. I will then either write to you directly, or bring the matter back to the House.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Additional Dentistry Funding

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on additional dentistry funding.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Access to Health Service dentistry has been one of the first — and most pressing — issues that, as Minister, I have had to address. I believe strongly that people who want Health Service dentistry should be able to get it.

As Members are aware, that is far from the case in too many parts of Northern Ireland. Members will recall that during the debate on dentistry on 2 July 2007, a question was asked about what could be done to address the drift of dentists from the Health Service into private practice.

At that time, I explained that after representations from the British Dental Association, an additional recurrent investment of £2 million had been agreed, effective from April 2007. That additional £2 million was to assist dentists who continue to provide care for Health Service patients with the costs of running their practices. It was hoped that that additional funding would encourage dentists to remain in the Health Service and slow the drift into private practice.

However, I have listened carefully to representations made by Members and their constituents across Northern Ireland; I am also aware of the issues that have been raised by the British Dental Association. It is now clear to me that previous Administrations have not done enough to address the issue effectively.

Although that additional £2 million is undoubtedly a significant investment in our 361 dental practices, it has become clear to me that it has not proved sufficient to stop the movement of dentists out of the Health Service. We need to take further measures not only to retain dentists in the Health Service but to address the problems of access to Health Service treatment in areas where dentists have opted for private practice. We also need to keep an adequate supply of dentists in Northern Ireland practices in the first place.

I am pleased to be able to announce to the House a substantial package of additional measures. First, I am making an additional injection of £2 million recurrent funding, over and above that already announced in this financial year, into practice allowances. That is specifically to address the profession's main concern with the current dental contract — increasing overhead costs.

Secondly, in recognition of the increasing costs of meeting cross-infection control standards, I am making

a further £1.5 million available to help dentists with the costs of necessary new equipment and procedures for sterilisation and disinfection, thus improving patient safety in the surgeries.

Thirdly, to help to ensure an adequate supply of new dentists into Health Service dentistry in Northern Ireland, I am making available £500,000 to increase significantly the vocational training allowances for trainers who are willing to take on new graduates.

Finally, I am determined to address the problem of equity of access to Health Service dentistry by allocating up to £400,000 to health boards to enable them to start to grow the salaried dental sector in order to plug the gaps in Health Service provision.

I have already said that the additional £2 million recurrent funding, which was announced earlier this year, is insufficient to address the profession's concerns about the increasing costs of running a dental practice. There is evidence that those costs are rising at a much higher rate than inflation. Therefore, I have decided to approve a further £2 million funding of the practice allowance. That increase will be targeted at those dental practices that are defined as "Health Service-committed" — in other words, they must provide a minimum level of Health Service treatment, which must include those adults who pay for their Health Service treatment. It is my intention that that increase to the practice allowance will incentivise dentists not only to remain in the Health Service but to continue to provide care and treatment to paying adults.

For those practices, that will mean that the practice allowance is, in effect, being raised from 8% of practice Health Service income to 11%. On average, Health Service-committed practices will now receive an annual practice allowance of £29,600 compared with £21,500 under previous arrangements. If the additional funding that I am announcing today is included, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, over the past two years, will have invested some £7.7 million into this scheme and the 361 practices involved. Most importantly, it means that I am responding to the main concern expressed by the British Dental Association, which is its assertion that, in the past, Health Service funding has not adequately covered the costs of running a dental practice.

I am also aware that the regulations around infection control procedures, and the continuing raising of standards in that area, have had significant resource implications for the profession.

For example, higher specification sterilisers and other equipment are now required. Patient safety is paramount to me, and it is imperative that our dental practices offer the best possible standard of cross-infection control to their patients. Therefore I am pleased to be able to release a further £1.5 million to assist

Health Service dentists to improve their sterilisation and infection-control procedures.

The additional funding will permit dentists to equip their practices to meet the highest infection-control standards and assure patient safety. As with the practice allowance, the additional funding will be allocated to those dental practices with the most Health Service patients, although a proportion will be available to all Health Service practices.

As regards vocational training allowances, Members will be aware that all aspiring dentists, on graduation, must undergo a vocational training year in a dental practice before they are qualified to practice on their own. In recent years, there have been difficulties in attracting sufficient numbers of high-street dentists who are willing to train our new graduates in the Health Service. That has meant that many new graduates must leave the country to undertake their mandatory vocational training year. In fact, 10 graduates had to leave Northern Ireland this year, which is an expensive loss as it cost the taxpayer £1.75 million to train that particular group.

Dental students are expensive to train: the figure is £178,000 per student over the five-year undergraduate course. My Department directly funds more than 50% of that amount, and the balance is funded by the Department for Employment and Learning. Therefore, it is important that we are in a position to offer training places to all our graduates, not only to provide a sustainable base for the Health Service dental sector, but to ensure a return on the substantial investment that is being made in the students.

I recognise that taking on a graduate for the vocational training year is an expensive undertaking for a dental practice. In addition to requiring supervision from the dental practitioner, each graduate needs to have hands-on experience with patients, which requires the full facilities of a dedicated dental surgery. In response to the shortage of trainers, I have sanctioned an increase to the vocational training allowances paid to dental practitioners to encourage them to become trainers. That will provide additional funding of approximately £0.5 million. I am confident that that additional funding will help incentivise sufficient trainers to provide enough training places for all our graduates and stem the flow of graduates to Scotland and elsewhere to complete their vocational training.

I hope that the significant investments that I have outlined will encourage dentists not only to come into, and stay in, the Health Service but to come back to it where they have currently opted for private practice. Where dentists do not return to the Health Service, I cannot accept the situation in which there are geographical pockets in Northern Ireland where dentists have stopped providing Health Service dentistry, or are

providing treatment only to patients who are exempt from charges. I want to move quickly to address that problem.

I mentioned during the course of the Assembly debate on NHS dental treatment on 2 July 2007 that I am encouraging the dental directors of the four boards to seek to commission salaried dentists in areas where there are problems with access to dental services. The Northern Health and Social Services Board has already commissioned a salaried dentist working out of the Dalriada Urgent Care centre in Ballymena. That is a very welcome development, and the board is looking at other possibilities for employing salaried dentists.

The Western Health and Social Services Board has identified the need to recruit six salaried dentists to address access problems in its area. Both boards are actively considering where, and how best, to recruit salaried dentists, bearing in mind the comparative lack of new dentists in the local labour market.

I confirm today that I have made funding of up to £400,000 available to resource those new posts, and I want to see similar proposals from the other two boards as soon as possible to address the identified shortfalls in Health Service dentistry in their areas.

In summary, the measures that I am announcing today represent an investment of £4.4 million into Health Service dentistry to address the immediate issues around access pending the introduction of the new dental contract in the next few years, which I intend will address those issues on a more permanent basis.

12.15 pm

Together with the increase in practice allowances that was announced earlier this year, we are investing a total of £6.4 million in Health Service dentistry this year alone, £4.5 million of which will be recurrent. That represents a substantial package of additional funding for dentists who are committed to the Health Service. I hope that Members will see that package as being my commitment to tackling inequities of access to Health Service dentistry and to making such services available to everyone who wants them.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McGimpsey: I am confident that those measures will help to persuade dental practices across the country, and the general public, that I am determined to provide fair and equitable recompense for Health Service treatment of patients in Northern Ireland. I trust that the profession will respond positively to this generous dental investment package.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome the Minister's statement, and I thank him for allowing me sight of it before the sitting. During the Assembly debate on NHS dental treatment on 2 July 2007, to which the Minister referred, I acknowledged

that, despite improvement in oral health in children and adults in Northern Ireland in recent years, we still have much higher levels of dental disease than our counterparts in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. Tackling that problem, therefore, must be a priority, and any measures that address the particular issue of access to Health Service dentistry must be welcomed.

Just last week, a lady wrote a letter to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to point out that there are no longer any dentists operating in County Fermanagh who provide Health Service dentistry, and that all of them are now in private practice. That is a problem, however, not only for the people of County Fermanagh but for people across Northern Ireland, as the Minister will be aware.

My question to the Minister concerns the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which the Committee is currently considering. One of the Bill's provisions seeks to provide a legislative base to allow health and social services boards to enter into a contract with dental practices and individual dentists. The Minister said in his statement that he is allocating up to £400,000 in an effort:

"to start to grow the salaried dental sector".

How far can that approach progress before the legislative provision is in place?

Mr McGimpsey: Members will know that dentists run independent businesses: they can set up where they want, and it is a matter for them whether they take Health Service patients. That is the situation with which we must deal, and therein lies the *raison d'être* for the measures in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill that primarily seek a new contract between the Health Service and dentists in order to fulfil our stated aim of providing Health Service dentistry for all patients in Northern Ireland.

The Member mentioned salaried dentists. There are general practice dentists, who are those whom I talked about when I mentioned independent businesses. There are also community dentists, who work directly for health and social services boards, and who primarily provide a service to those who have learning disabilities or to those who require general anaesthetic for their dental work. There is also a third category, which we must see grow; namely, salaried dentists who are employed directly by boards to fill the gaps in provision that are identified. As I said, I cannot simply direct dentists to an area where there are gaps and tell them to set up a practice there, any more than I can tell them that they must take on more Health Service patients because they are not taking on enough.

My intention is to create an incentive and a new contract for Health Service dentists, and, in the interim, to employ salaried dentists. There are clear needs for salaried dentists in various areas.

Mrs Robinson asked what the limit to growth is in the salaried dentist sector. Resources set that limit, but, as far as I am concerned, where need exists, we must address that need, and that is what I have asked the health and social services boards to do.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, which comes on the back of the resolution passed in this House on 2 July 2007. Iris Robinson raised the issue of access, and I want to raise the same matter with reference to Fermanagh. Pain clinics are supposed to be available in all areas. However, if people in Fermanagh are in pain at the weekend, or, indeed, at any other time, they have to use the out-of-hours service, which, I am told, is totally unsatisfactory. People have to pay immediately, and sometimes there is great difficulty in claiming that money back. People, who are often very much in need, cannot afford the large amounts of money required.

A lot of money is put into training dentists — they train for five years — and none of that is put back into the public sector after that training is finished. It costs more than £200,000 to train each dentist. Then they go into the private sector, so the NHS gets no return on the money invested.

Can something more, other than what we have been told, be done to give people, and the people of Fermanagh in particular, proper access to pain-relief clinics when they need it? Can that be done as soon as possible?

Mr McGimpsey: The areas that have been referred to are the responsibility of the Western Health and Social Care Trust, which is responsible for provision. It has identified a need for six salaried dentists, and it is actively recruiting those in order to deal with the demand for services that the Member has highlighted.

Where a need exists, my Department attempts to meet that need. We are currently plugging the gaps with salaried dentists. Ideally, we are moving towards a new contract with dentists, and I hope to be able to negotiate that over the next two years. That will enable dentists, and traditional dental practices, to deal primarily with the needs of the people, and to do so through the Health Service, so that free cradle-to-grave healthcare is available for all of the people of Northern Ireland. That is the guiding principle; it is very much my guiding principle. That is what those contracts are about.

As I said, measures must be taken in the meantime. The measures that I have outlined today are targeted primarily at dedicated Health Service practices that treat 500 or more patients. That is where the money is being directed.

I accept the point about investment and return. It is a poor return to invest large sums of money in training young people to be dentists — we badly need them — only for them to be forced to go and work in Scotland,

for example. Once they do, there is a possibility that they will not come back. That is why I am also considering increasing allowances for vocational training so that we hold onto our graduates.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I welcome the Minister's announcement, which follows the personal commitment that he gave in the debate in the House earlier this year to address the issues of dental services.

The Minister is aware of the chronic shortage of NHS salaried dentists in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. Although this statement will help in some way to address the issue, will the Minister take a personal interest in ensuring that resources in the Northern board area are increased as soon as possible in order to meet the demand?

Mr McGimpsey: I have probably largely answered that question in so far as it relates to plugging the gaps through the employment of salaried dentists. For example, I know that in the Northern board area, the need for a salaried dentist has been identified, and it has already employed one. If it needs to employ more, I have no doubt that it will take the necessary step to do so.

The appointments of salaried dentists in the Dalriada Urgent Care centre and in Cushendall have been approved. One of those dentists has already been employed. Further business cases from the Northern board will be given full and prompt consideration when my Department receives them.

Mrs Hanna: As one of the Members who proposed tomorrow's motion on the National Health Service, I welcome the Minister's promise of additional funding and the assurances he has given on increased funding for running practices and increased training opportunities for new dentists, so that we get a better return on the £178,000 which it costs to train each dentist.

As the Minister knows, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is now at Consideration Stage. Will there be a facility in that Bill for pilot schemes, to ensure the broadest access to the full range of dental services for the whole community?

Mr McGimpsey: Mrs Hanna makes an important point about access. There must be access to all types of dental treatment in all areas of Northern Ireland. However, 92% of Health Service dentists accepted new Health Service patients last year. We have to look at the context. We have by no means slipped into the situation that pertains in England. My Department is determined to ensure that we do not get that far down the line. We are concerned to ensure access to appropriate treatment, and to have sufficient numbers of dentists in place to provide whatever category of treatment is required.

Mr McCarthy: I also welcome this morning's announcement. I am delighted to hear that the Minister

has listened to the voices of the community and of the Assembly.

I recall that on 2 July, questions were asked about the benefit of debating dental practices in Northern Ireland. I am pleased that the Minister is here as a result of that debate. Clearly, he listened to what everyone said.

I remind Members that, on that day, I questioned the wisdom of the Executive's spending huge amounts of money on the multi-sports stadium, the Irish language and other policies which, noble causes as they may be, are not priorities. I said then that we should get our priorities right. This morning, the Minister has listened to what Members have said and has got his priorities right. As Assembly Members, we do not want to have to answer telephone calls daily from people who cannot get access to dentists.

How soon will this be rolled out for the community, so that our constituents may have access to a dentist when they need one?

Mr McGimpsey: As I have just said, 92% of Health Service dentists accepted new Health Service patients last year, so overwhelmingly the profession is responding. The measures that I have announced this morning are to plug gaps and fill deficits. They are active immediately. The money is immediately available. Health and social services boards are actively recruiting for salaried dentists, and the vocational training money is now available. Other moneys — £1.5 million for infection control and £2 million for practice allowances, on top of the £2 million already announced — are all in place.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister clarify a few points? Will any of the new money be available for children's dental health? As he knows, children in Northern Ireland have the worst dental health in the United Kingdom, and it must be addressed urgently.

Indeed, is this new money, or has money been withdrawn from other areas of the Health Service?

12.30 pm

Mr McGimpsey: The funds that I have announced today are designated for the area of dental health and will not affect any other service. The money in question has become available because a number of dentists, whose services the Department had anticipated having to pay for, withdrew their services. I am, therefore, redeploying the resources that have been made available in the budget rather than waiting and returning the money at the end of the year. It is important that that happens, as the money in question was voted by the House to be used for dental provision.

In relation to children's oral health — Northern Ireland has the worst record of oral health in the United Kingdom. It is extremely poor, and it is one of the worst oral health situations in Europe. The rate of decay, teeth extractions and fillings for the under-12s is much

higher, sometimes double or treble, than that of other European countries. It is therefore an important area. In the Health Service, children are provided for by exemption from charges. Everybody under 18 is exempt from Health Service dental treatment charges.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement. Like Alex Easton, my concern was that the money for dental provision was going to be removed from another budget, and the cynical part of me was asking whether it would result in another strain on the budget for mental health or for other areas. I, therefore, welcome the fact that additional money is being made available from within the dentistry budget.

Does the Minister agree that the other concerns that have been raised in relation to his announcement today can be addressed in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill; for example, the issue raised by my colleague, Gerry McHugh, regarding the cost of training, investing in and retaining dental practitioners? During the Assembly debate on training for junior doctors, similar points were raised about training costs, and ensuring that investment was not being displaced to another country or another region of this country. Those concerns also apply to dental practitioners.

Is there room in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to ask for a clawback on investment? It is only fair that our taxes, rates and other investments should be tracked. Thank you. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: Dentists are the most expensive students to train; for example, costs run at almost double that of training a doctor. The investment is substantial and, therefore, we would expect to retain the services of the dentists we train in Northern Ireland. One of the problems in doing that lies in vocational training, where it has not been cost effective for dental practices to take on dental graduates for a year's vocational training. I have announced an investment to try to persuade practices to take on young graduates.

Last year, I believe Northern Ireland had 40 graduates, and 10 had to leave. It is a substantial investment to lose if they do not return, and, sadly, that is one of the things that is liable to happen. Northern Ireland is more or less in balance as regards the number of dentists trained, and the need is approximately met each year. Each year, the Department aims to put 45 students into the workforce. This year, 40 students are being trained, but the target is 45, so we are approximately on target.

In relation to the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, I am not clear about getting a return on investment, as that could be construed as students repaying fees.

That is a difficult area. The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill focuses on giving trusts and boards the power to commission the dental services that their areas require. They will be able to commission those

services through a contract, which will be the normal procedure, or, if necessary, through salaried dentists if further commission is required. That approach, and not the English method, should be followed. I understand that the English approach is unpopular with dentists, is more concerned about setting targets, and is more of a “drill-and-fill” method.

Ms Ni Chuilín: My point was not about retaining money. I want to be clear that the last thing that I want to do is put pressure on those who are studying for any profession, given that there is enough pressure on them already.

My point, which has been discussed with regard to other professionals, such as junior doctors, and to which Gerry McHugh referred, is that if the NHS has invested a lot of money so that individuals can train to become dentists, it may be possible to retrieve some of those NHS hours. It is reasonable to ask whether a way could be found to work that out while ensuring that the process were transparent and that equality and equity were enshrined throughout. The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill offers an opportunity to provide that. I want to clarify my point; I was not saying that any further pressure be put on students of any profession.

Mr McGimpsey: The Member has explained her point to an extent. However, what she suggests is a form of clawback. One must be careful when getting into such an area. Therefore, I must consider it carefully. As I have said, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill focuses on another area. The work in the types of professions about which we are talking is done, in effect, by volunteers rather than by conscripts. Volunteers give a much better return than conscripts. Rather than be forced, volunteers are able to enter into contracts in which they receive a proper wage and are rewarded for their work.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the Minister’s announcement about the provision of additional funding for dentistry. The west of the Province has been mentioned. At present, it is difficult to access a National Health Service dentist in that area because they are all going into private practice. What measures will the Minister put in place to ensure that that additional funding is distributed equally in all the boards?

Mr McGimpsey: Decisions about Health Service provision, including whether to allocate money to an area such as the west or to provide services in another area, are driven by need. Funding will be concentrated in areas where there is most need. The Western Health and Social Services Board has identified a need for six salaried dentists to plug the gaps in provision in its area, and it is currently recruiting. The Northern Health and Social Services Board has identified a need for two salaried dentists. At present, it is also recruiting. However, money will flow into areas where the need is strongest.

The bulk of the money will cover the practice allowance and will be targeted at dedicated Health Service practices — those practices that treat over 500 patients per annum. The Department aims to reinforce provision of its own Health Service dentists and to plug the gaps in provision. By definition, gaps indicate need. Therefore, plugging those gaps will tackle need.

Mr Kennedy: I warmly congratulate the Minister on his statement. I welcome the fact that he has addressed the urgent and great concerns of many people throughout Northern Ireland on the increasing problem of availability of NHS dentists. Will he tell the House how he will ensure that people in rural areas — including parts of my constituency of Newry and Armagh — will continue to receive adequate NHS dental treatment at the point of need?

Will the Minister encourage all the health and social services boards — not only the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Western Health and Social Services Board — to commission salaried Health Service dentists in areas where people have difficulty in accessing dental services?

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Kennedy’s points go to the crux of the matter. Under current Health Service dental services arrangements, we cannot tell dentists where to set up their practices. Dentists can set up their practices wherever they wish, and they can treat whomever they choose. In the future, the new contracts that we envisage will address those problems.

New legislation will make it a duty on the health and social services boards to commission Health Service dental services for their respective areas. That is the future. In the meantime, we are beginning to employ salaried dentists to plug the gap — that is the point that I made about the Western Health and Social Services Board and the Northern Health and Social Services Board. I accept the point that Mr Kennedy has made about the Southern Health and Social Services Board and the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. I shall raise the issue of plugging the gaps in dental services provision with those boards to see how far they have gone in addressing that matter.

Mr Gallagher: I remember a similar debate — probably more than most, because I proposed the motion. The Minister was present for that debate and made a constructive contribution. Despite that, some Members from his party — the Ulster Unionist Party — argued that day that there was no need for the motion. Those comments were also forthcoming from the DUP Benches.

The Minister’s statement shows how badly that motion was needed, and I commend him for returning to the House in a short space of time having made some concrete steps to alleviate the problems of dental services provision. Besides increases in salaries, other

matters such as infection control and vocational training have been mentioned. My question concerns the issue of salaried dentists. The Western Health and Social Services Board and the Northern Health and Social Services Board have been identified as having a problem in dental services provision. The previous Member who spoke mentioned the Southern Health and Social Services Board, which covers an area that includes my constituency. That is important too.

However, the delay in addressing the shortage of Health Service dental services is, in part, a result of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's assessing the business cases provided by the health boards. In welcoming what he has said, I ask the Minister whether he will investigate that matter as the programme for salaried dentists progresses. We must ensure that progress does not get bogged down in the Department for an undue length of time.

Mr McGimpsey: I understand Mr Gallagher's point. I have been in the situation, as we all have, of working with various groups and running into business case and approval scenarios. It should give the Member some comfort to know that the required money is in the current budget and is available now. I assure the Member that there will be no delay in spending that money — it needs to be spent now and there are no excuses for not doing so.

Ms Anderson: I too welcome the Minister's statement. The Minister has addressed some of my concerns during the debate. The scandalous lack of dental services provision in the north-west needs immediate resolution. Although I welcome the announcement on salaried dentists, I am keen to know how soon Health Service dentists will be available to people who live in the north-west, particularly those who live in the Derry area.

Mr McGimpsey: As I have said, the package is for immediate action this year. Putting that in context, 92% of Health Service dentists accepted new patients last year. However, there is a problem, and I am concerned that that problem does not grow and overwhelm us. In that context, the gap in dental services provision is around 10%. The new measures are designed to address that gap quickly. I have already said that six salaried dentists have been identified in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. Further recruitment is under way.

12.45 pm

If the Western board needs more, representatives can come and tell me, and that will also be considered. I am as anxious as the Member is to ensure that all parts of the country receive an equitable service — the service that is required under the principle of cradle-to-the-grave care for everybody.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Taxis Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(2) be extended to 7 December 2007, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Taxis Bill (NIA Bill 4/07).

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Taxis Bill was given its Second Stage on 26 June 2007, and it was referred to the Committee for the Environment on 27 June 2007. As Members will appreciate, that was just before the summer recess, and the Committee was unable to begin to scrutinise the Bill until its first meeting after recess, which was held on 6 September 2007.

The Taxis Bill is a comprehensive piece of legislation that consists of 56 clauses and three schedules. It will make provision to regulate taxi operators; introduce new requirements and duties relating to the operation of a taxi service at separate fares; provide for the regulation of vehicles used to provide taxi services; make further provisions to regulate the drivers of taxis; and deal with other issues such as enforcement.

The Committee wishes to give adequate time to scrutinise this important Bill. It has received 21 submissions from 16 interested parties, and it has just begun to take oral evidence from those individuals and organisations. Members will appreciate that that takes time.

The Committee will, therefore, need a time extension in order to consider their views, and the Department of the Environment's responses, before completing a clause-by-clause scrutiny and compiling its report on the Bill. The Committee faces a heavy workload in the coming weeks, which includes consideration of the Budget, Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14), environmental governance, the review of public administration and statutory rules

I, therefore, seek an extension of the deadline to 7 December 2007 to allow sufficient time for the Committee to consider the Bill and report on its findings, and I ask Members for their support. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(2) be extended to 7 December 2007, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Taxis Bill (NIA Bill 4/07).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Ad Hoc Committee on Suicide

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

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 for the winding-up speech.

Mr Adams: I beg to move

That this Assembly shares the growing concern about the level of suicide, particularly among our young people, and, pursuant to Standing Order 48(7), appoints an Ad Hoc Committee, to —

Examine the delivery of services and support to people who may be at risk from suicide; make recommendations to the Executive; and present its report to the Assembly by 10 December 2007.

Composition: DUP 4

SF 3

UUP 2

SDLP 1

Other Parties 1

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch díot, nó is ábhar an-tábhachtach é seo. This motion was first introduced by Sinn Féin in July to raise awareness of suicide. The motion came on the back of more reported suicides in west and north Belfast, as well as in County Tyrone and Craigavon. A report published in June into the death of Danny McCartan found that there had been serious failures of care by the Health Service. Another report identified people over 60 years of age as a group at serious risk of suicide.

For legitimate reasons, the motion could not be debated until now, but in the course of the summer, more people committed suicide. The statistics are frightening. In 2006, 291 people died by suicide in the North and close to 500 died in the South. That means that nearly 800 people took their lives last year on this island. Yet, suicide is preventable; all of us can play a part in reducing it. That is especially true of those of us elected to this Assembly. Ba chóir do na húdaráis ceannasaíocht láidir a thaispeáint san ábhar seo.

The bereaved families have demonstrated remarkable courage. Many of them have been to the fore in helping to prevent the same tragedy engulfing others. They deserve our respect and praise, but they also deserve practical assistance and public investment. A lot of burnout has occurred at the grass roots; support groups and family networks are still not properly resourced. It

is a source of concern that much of the money ring-fenced for suicide prevention is recycled through the Health Promotion Agency. It is also a concern that there are still insufficient community-based services, too few psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists and psychologists, and most GPs still do not receive dedicated training in suicide awareness and prevention.

Sinn Féin believes that civic society must be mobilised to respond. A conference will take place here on Monday 24 September to discuss this. I have spoken to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of Education and the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety as well as to representatives of other parties in the Assembly. Ba chóir dúinn a bheith ag obair le chéile.

The Health Minister, Iris Robinson, proposed that the Health Committee would take up —

Mr Kennedy: We did not hear about that.

Mrs I Robinson: I am the Health Committee Chairperson.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Adams: I am sorry, Michael. Gabh mo leithscéal.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Iris Robinson, proposed that the Health Committee would take up suicide prevention as a priority and would hold a statutory Committee investigation into the matter. I commend that approach; we believe that it is a positive and constructive proposal, which has the potential to deliver significant improvements to suicide prevention strategies.

Dá thairbhe sin, ba mhaith liom rún s'againne a tharraingt siar. For that reason, Carál Ní Chuilín and I would be pleased to withdraw our motion in the light of such a positive development.

Mr Speaker: As the Member made a significant speech when moving the motion, I intend to carry on with the debate. I call Mrs Iris Robinson to move the amendment.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order. Is Mr Adams not entitled to the rest of his time? If you are moving into a full debate, does he not have the rest of his 10 minutes?

Mr Speaker: Yes. It is the normal procedure to allow the Member moving the motion and the Member moving the amendment each to speak for 10 minutes.

Mr Adams: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the fact that, even though it is a bit unorthodox, you have decided to proceed with the debate, because the important thing is to focus in on the scourge of suicide. We got to the point of considering withdrawing the motion simply by dint of a lot of good tick-tacking between ourselves to try to find the best way forward. Everybody was sincerely engaged in trying to find the best way to get preventative measures brought forward.

All of us have felt the impact of suicide. Every time someone loses his or her life through suicide, shock waves are felt far beyond the immediate family. That is because three out of four people on this island have said that they knew someone who took his life. It is also important to note that a huge number of people have attempted to take their lives, or have survived suicide attempts, or are self-harming. That amounts to a huge degree of trauma.

Over the past 10 years, reported suicides in Ireland have risen by more than 20%. North and west Belfast have been particularly affected, as have other areas.

No community, whether rural or urban, no class, and no religious grouping are free from this great tragedy. Suicide has convulsed many local communities. I have experienced the sense of powerlessness that people feel when a loved one has taken his or her life. Particularly in families in which a young person has taken his or her own life, parents and grandparents are living in great fear, watching and waiting to see who will be next.

The biggest killer of the next generation will be suicide. We, as the legislators, together with the Governments, must show leadership on suicide prevention. We must have the power to prioritise, to develop strategies and to allocate resources. The number of recorded deaths by suicide on this island outstrips the number of deaths in road-traffic accidents. Everyone will agree that there is a necessary urgency about road safety, because so many deaths are preventable. We all agree that there should be safety training for drivers, safety devices in cars, technology on the roads, road-safety advice for schoolchildren, road-safety research, and penalties for those who create road hazards. Millions are spent on public-awareness advertising. There is an increased integrated approach by statutory agencies and Government bodies on an all-Ireland basis.

Why should death by suicide not be afforded the same degree of intense effort and resources? In the past, I have written to the commissions on human rights and on children's rights in the North and South to ask them to forge a common way forward. I am now also writing to cultural and sporting organisations to explore how suicide awareness can become mainstream. Suicide prevention must be integrated into all walks of life. Consequently, Sinn Féin wants suicide prevention to be prioritised across the island, under the institutions of the North/South Ministerial Council. If road safety, drug trafficking and foot-and-mouth disease are all rightly designated as issues for that type of action, the same can, and must, be done for suicide prevention.

Specific action must be developed and implemented that is targeted at individuals who have been identified as being at risk of suicide. Actions must be developed to assist people who have been bereaved through suicide and to promote greater targeting of mental-health

resources for schools, youth services, workplaces and the media. Action must be taken to address the serious shortage of counselling services for adolescents and young adults. Urgent action is required to ensure that the health system can deal appropriately with people who present themselves at accident and emergency units, having taken either drugs or alcohol.

The role of the Internet, and its influence, must be addressed. Although I do not know how true they are, stories have mentioned suicide pacts and discussions about methods of suicide on the Internet. All of that means that we must work together, around agreed common goals and objectives.

To repeat what I said earlier, I have spoken with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of Education, and the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as well as with representatives of the other parties. When we were drafting the original motion, we agreed that every party would have two representatives on an Ad Hoc Committee, and, because of the time lost over the summer recess, we wanted the Committee's report date put back until January or February 2008. However, the proposal from the Chairperson of the Health Committee to adopt suicide prevention as a priority issue and to hold a Statutory Committee investigation into it is a welcome step. Once again, I commend that approach. It is a positive and constructive proposal, which has the potential to deliver significant improvement to suicide-prevention strategies. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "people" and insert

"and refers this issue to the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee to examine, as a matter of urgency, the delivery of services and support to people who may be at risk from suicide; make recommendations to the Executive; and present its report to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity, but not later than 12 February 2008."

I am pleased that the Sinn Féin Member for West Belfast is now appreciative of the fact that the proper course of action is for the Health Committee, which has the remit to hold a public inquiry, to take responsibility for the issue of suicide prevention. The Committee should set up a subcommittee to deal with that. That the Health Committee is to do so offers nothing but good for the wider community.

We stand at a moment in the history of Northern Ireland at which people will look back and judge us on what we do now for the sake of our young people. Society is demanding that something be done about the current plague of suicide, and, if we are to make a difference, all of us must play our part.

In recent times, Hillary Clinton has made popular the African proverb:

"It takes a whole village to raise a child."

That principle holds the key to our society's helping to decrease the numbers of people of all ages dying by their own hands.

1.00 pm

Society will never effectively deal with suicide by expecting mental-health professionals alone to solve the challenge. However, by accepting that suicide is a social, biological, spiritual and mental-health problem, all those areas can be examined to find a solution. Understanding suicide requires investment in gathering appropriate useful information and avoiding the mistake of collecting what is easy.

There must be wide consultation with all stakeholders and experts in the field. As policy-makers and politicians, we must first listen. When dealing with such a painful subject, there is a temptation to act hastily and risk investment that may not be very effective. The motto of the Royal College of Psychiatrists is "Let Wisdom Guide" and, in considering such a complex subject, wisdom is required. Any group that is constituted to examine suicide must, therefore, involve the necessary experts — by which I do not mean only professionals: expertise resides in many parts of the community.

The family unit is the main element that holds together a healthy society. Effective policies that support the family are important in the healthy development and maturation of a child. However, more important still is that the healthy strong family acknowledges the role of the older individual. In aboriginal culture, the older person does not retire and become perceived as valueless. The best translation of how they are regarded is "the manual". The older individual is someone from whom others seek advice and guidance.

The young and the old may be at risk from suicide because they feel useless and worthless. They have no purpose in their lives and, worst of all, they have no hope that that will change. Research has consistently shown that hopelessness puts a person who is contemplating suicide at high risk.

Suicide has been described as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. As communities, we must show people that help and support is available when required and that there are always options. Investment in community infrastructures is important, and pragmatism, not platitudes, is required. The young mother who is geographically isolated from her family and who cannot access affordable childcare needs a practical solution.

Although those aspects of social care seem distant from the topic of suicide, they are not, and we neglect them at our peril. Although suicide is considered to be a problem of the mind, the mind cannot be divorced from the body. Issues that impact the body and have a significant role in suicide include alcohol misuse and addiction to other substances. Many people impulsively

take their own lives when under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

It is important that, in a society that has been historically divided on spirituality, that aspect of a person's life is not ignored. People may not be religious, but they are, generally, spiritual. Christian mental-health professionals have been holding seminars at educational conferences for clergy that focus on the interface between faith and mental health, and that should be encouraged and supported. The 2006 response from the Royal College of Psychiatrists to the five-year report of the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness concluded that:

"it is up to commentators outside clinical practice to give up the culture of blame."

If the Assembly is to make a difference in dealing with suicide, all areas of society — the state, the voluntary sector, clinicians and families who have lost loved ones to suicide — must put aside their differences and work together. Suicides are a tragedy for victims, their families, their society and the professional staff involved. It is important to take steps at all stages to improve mental health and to minimise risks.

There is a need for robust systems, such as a better physical environment for inpatient services, with fully trained staff in all disciplines, and there must be joined-up working.

Professionals agree that every attendance at hospital following an incident of self-harm:

"should lead to a specialist psychosocial assessment."

This should aim to:

"identify motives for the act and associated problems which are potentially amenable to intervention, such as psychological or social problems, mental disorder, alcohol and substance misuse."

That information has come from the University of York NHS Centre for Reviews and Disseminations, 1998.

There are teams being developed to work in the area of self-harm, such as that at the Mater Hospital, Belfast, and lessons must be learned from the experiences of such teams.

I will list some practical goals that emerged from American research into suicide prevention. These were published on the US Government's National Library of Medicine web pages as a report of the Surgeon General, 'National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action'.

"Goal 1: promote awareness that suicide is a public health problem that is preventable."

For example, one could work with local media to develop and disseminate public service announcements describing a safe and effective message about suicide and its prevention.

"Goal 2: develop broad-based support for suicide prevention."

For example, one could encourage organisations to consider ways that they could integrate suicide prevention into their ongoing work.

"Goal 3: develop and implement strategies to reduce the stigma associated with being a consumer of mental health, substance abuse, and suicide prevention services."

For example, one could review — and modify, where indicated — school health curricula to ensure that mental health and substance abuse is appropriately addressed.

"Goal 4: develop and implement community-based suicide prevention programmes."

For example, one could develop and test natural- or peer-helper programmes for use with young people, and implement and evaluate a programme that trains educationalists with a pastoral role in the principles of suicide risk identification, crisis intervention and referral. One could also develop and implement a training programme for employees of local programs, working with older persons to assist these workers and volunteers in identifying persons at risk of suicide.

"Goal 5: promote efforts to reduce access to lethal means and methods of self-harm."

For example, one could develop an emergency department screening tool to assess the presence of lethal means in the home, and develop standardised practices for law enforcement response to domestic emergencies that assess for the presence of lethal means and advocate their removal or safe storage.

"Goal 6: implement training for recognition of at-risk behaviour and delivery of effective treatment."

There should be training for the key gatekeepers: teachers and school staff; school health personnel; clergy; police officers; correctional personnel; supervisors in occupational settings; natural community helpers; hospice and nursing home volunteers; primary health care providers; mental-health care and substance abuse treatment providers, and emergency healthcare personnel.

"Goal 7: develop and promote effective clinical and professional practices."

For example, one could develop guidelines for hospitals and health delivery systems that ensure adequate resources to implement confirmation of mental-health follow-up appointments. One could also collaborate locally to establish processes that increase the proportion of patients who keep follow-up mental-health appointments after discharge from the emergency department, and develop standardised suicide assessment guidelines for primary care physicians when assessing elderly patients.

"Goal 8: improve access to and community linkages with mental health and substance abuse services."

For example, one could develop and offer peer leadership training for facilitators of suicide survivors support groups.

“Goal 9: improve reporting and portrayals of suicidal behaviour, mental illness, and substance abuse in the entertainment and news media.”

One could develop and provide press information kits that provide a resource for reporting on suicide and contact information for local spokespersons who may provide additional information.

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

Mrs I Robinson: Also there is:

“Goal 10: promote and support research on suicide and suicide prevention.”

For example, one could tie priorities for training grants to the inclusion of “suicidology” in curriculums.

“Goal 11: improve and expand surveillance systems.”

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I was intrigued by the previous speech and think that it is great that we can have an analysis of a problem that goes to the very heart of our society. In my work, I have had to pastor and counsel those who have suffered trauma in the aftermath of suicide in the family.

Only those who sit with them and share their tears will realise the extent of the problem.

In our country, too many families have been beset by such grief and by the sense of guilt that follows. Some people may feel a sense of failure as they were unable to recognise what was going on in the young person's mind, and older people may feel that they have let the young person down. Perhaps we should take those issues on board and use the media, and incorporate training into the media so that people who are faced with this problem and with its aftermath will have somewhere to turn and know exactly what to do in that situation.

I was amazed to learn recently of a chat room that actually promotes suicide. I was horrified when I read that someone who was suicidal said in the chat room that they were going to commit suicide, and they were actively encouraged to take their own life, which they did. That suicide was photographed as it happened, so that others could take delight in seeing a life being taken.

It is incumbent on all of us regardless of religion, as Mrs Robinson said, and regardless of our political beliefs, backgrounds and aspirations, to take this problem to heart. I am glad that this motion has been tabled today. It is a great loss to society when young people who have spent years in primary school, high school or grammar school and then, perhaps, further education, suddenly take their lives. Their future is lost not only to them and to their families, but to society.

The cost of education and training has been mentioned. What is the cost when someone's life is suddenly cut off after they have been trained to commit their talents to society? The Health Committee should take this issue forward, so that it can return to the House and inform Members of the progress that has been made. Not only politicians and health professionals, but churches, mental-health charities, teachers and anyone who is involved with young people in any way should be involved and contribute.

In my constituency of North Antrim, a young boy who lived near my home was bullied at school and took his own life. The impact of that on the family and on the community was disastrous. The family have never gotten over it, and they never will. If only the teachers had been aware of the bullying, perhaps that great young talent could have been saved.

The training of doctors and health workers must be addressed, and the Health Minister is also concerned about that. If we work together to tackle this issue, we can move forward. I hope that the Health Committee will provide a platform from which benefits can be brought to many young people and to the community.

1.15 pm

Mrs Hanna: Suicide is at the heart of mental-health issues. Parents, siblings, and loved ones trying to understand and come to terms with their awful loss need every possible support. They also need to know that we, as politicians, are doing all we can to address those issues. Why do people commit suicide? Sometimes there are no obvious answers. In the first instance we must promote good mental health and try to ensure that everyone has a stake in our society. As a matter of urgency, the recommendations of the Bamford Review must be implemented.

A bottom-up approach is absolutely essential; there must be support at community level. There should be awareness training, counselling, and training for teachers, parents and others — particularly GPs. I am aware that there is an opportunity for training for GPs, which should be taken up and made available to all health professionals. Although sometimes there are no signs before a suicide, there should be training for teachers to look out for them. We need to train more personnel to work in the mental-health sector, which is a major point of the Bamford Review. It is up to the Health Committee to ensure that the recommendations of the Bamford Review are fully implemented and that there is a bottom-up — and top-down — approach to ensure that there is sufficient detail. Every possible ounce of support must be given to the parents, relatives and loved ones of anyone who is suicidal or has, sadly, already taken their life.

Mrs Long: I welcome the motion, because it has brought an issue to the House that is important to the

wider community, as well as the Assembly. The suicide of a young person has to be one of the greatest tragedies that can confront any family. All Members will feel a great sensitivity in dealing with the issue.

Suicide has devastating consequences, not just for the young person involved, but also for their family, friends and local community, who are left behind to come to terms with their loss. It is testament to the level of despair, isolation and hopelessness in modern society that suicide is so prevalent. All Members in the Chamber will recognise the importance and sensitivity of the issue, and the role that we can play — however limited — in trying to address it.

Although the overall rate of suicide in the UK and Ireland is among the lowest in Europe, that masks a disturbing and rapid increase in the rate of suicide among young people, particularly young men from deprived communities. That increase has been largely masked by a fall in the rate of suicide among older people. Suicide is now estimated to be one of the three main killers of people in the 15-44 age group, and is therefore an issue that Members must give serious consideration to.

When the Order Paper was published, the Alliance Party gave long and detailed consideration to whether the proposal for an Ad Hoc Committee was the right approach for the Assembly to take in response to the issue. The Alliance Party is not opposed to Ad Hoc Committees in principle, if they work to a fixed timescale with clear objectives. Ad Hoc Committees also have the benefit of being able to deal with cross-cutting issues, for example by addressing health and education issues together. However, after weighing up the motion and the amendment, the Alliance Party was convinced that the Health Committee was the best place to effectively deal with the issue.

Regarding the effectiveness of a response, departmental Committees have the weight of statutory powers behind them, as well as a formal scrutiny role. Therefore, as well as developing a report and a strategy, they have the ability to scrutinise the progress and implementation of promises that have been made. The Alliance Party also feels that where there are cross-cutting issues, for example where the Department of Education and youth services both have a role to play, Ministers can liaise with other departmental Committees.

I am glad that the Members who moved the motion and the amendment have reached agreement, and I hope that the House can move forward on this without division.

As other Members have said, suicide must be examined in the context of other mental-health issues. The Bamford Review acknowledged the deficits in mental-health facilities, particularly for adolescents, and it realised that that deficit would take a long time to redress owing to the length of time required to train

a psychiatrist to deal with adolescents specifically. That is a huge problem that must be addressed sensitively.

The Assembly must recognise that suicide is at the end of a spectrum of mental-health disorders which often go undiagnosed and untreated in the community, and the Health Committee is well placed to examine that shortcoming. Whatever strategy is set up to deal with suicides should also deal with other related issues such as mental-health problems and, in particular, the promotion of good mental health. One of the main aspects of any future strategy should be to remove the stigma of mental-health disorders so that people feel free not only to discuss treatment with their doctors but also to discuss their problems with their friends and family without feeling that they are being judged on their illness.

We need improved counselling facilities for young people and greater awareness in the community. Several Members have mentioned the roles played by teachers, parents and GPs, but the people who volunteer to work with young people through youth organisations and youth clubs should also be acknowledged. They may feel ill-equipped to deal with a young person who is contemplating suicide, and they should be given support and guidance on how to address the needs of those young people.

The Assembly must also consider the need for support for families who have been affected by suicide — not only those who have been bereaved by suicide, but those who have felt the devastation that a family member's attempted suicide can also cause. There must be proper support and counselling for the family circles and friends of young people who have made failed suicide attempts to help them come to terms with what has happened. As a community, we need to deal with isolation and hopelessness, and although the Assembly has a role to play, this will best be driven forward through the Health Committee.

Mr Easton: We are confronted, daily, with newspaper and television reports giving dreadful accounts of the pain and suffering caused to families and communities by the loss of loved ones through suicide. All Members can recall the recent nightmare scenario in Armagh when, following closely on the death of a young adult, three pupils from the same high school took their lives in what appeared to have been a series of related suicides. In the past five weeks, nine young people in west Belfast have taken their lives. At times like this, we do not think of politics, race, colour, creed or religion: we only see and feel the pain of the families and wonder how we would respond if we were in that position. We want to reach out and help, but we feel a sense of helplessness in the face of the intense grief and devastation that parents suffer when they have lost a child.

Northern Ireland is in the grip of what has all the hallmarks of a suicide epidemic. Suicide is almost becoming part of daily life here, and few people have not been directly affected by it, such is the scale and prevalence of the problem across the Province. The suicide rate has doubled in the past decade from 143 to 291 last year. We are indebted to local newspapers for the magnificent 'Newspapers Against Suicide' campaign that they conducted last week to bring to our attention the need for concerted action and for us to do all in our power to deal with this scourge. That campaign followed on from the various events organised on last Sunday's World Suicide Prevention Day, which helped us to realise that suicide is a serious international problem.

However, we are also informed by the various editorials and articles that the suicide rate in Northern Ireland is one of the highest in Europe, and that warns us against being less than resolute in our response. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has promised to give a suicide prevention strategy the attention and commitment it deserves, and its publication last year of 'Protect Life: A Shared Vision' was welcomed by all. Suicide is no longer the taboo subject that it was in the past. Everyone recognises that suicide is a multi-dimensional community health problem, and any strategy — to be effective — will have to involve the co-ordinated approach of the widest possible range of statutory, voluntary and community agencies.

At the forefront of our minds must be the importance of conducting appropriate research. We must also ensure that critical people, particularly medical practitioners, have the appropriate training and that the entire community has the information that it needs to assist in tackling all aspects of suicide prevention and dealing with the consequences.

Many of the risk factors are known, including: unemployment; forced retirement; changes in social or financial status; alcohol; drugs; bullying; peer pressure; dangerous influences in society, on the Internet and on television. We must take a determined stand against any individuals, gangs or social groups who direct social policies that actively undermine personal and community well-being.

We all need to understand and know how to deal with friends, co-workers and family members who show signs of depression. We need early information about and sensitive medical treatment for those at risk. People must be prepared to reach out to others when they see problems of any kind.

Some parts of the solution include: the teaching of life skills; health, educational, personal and social development; education; the identifying of high-risk groups or individuals; school-based screening; community crisis centres; the provision of telephone

and Internet helplines; and charitable groups that involve parents who have experienced such tragedy.

There must be a determined strategy of preventative activity at different levels directed towards complementary goals and a comprehensive, multi-level approach involving a wide range of Government Departments, peoples and agencies. The health, education and social-development sectors and voluntary agencies require the help of teachers, police, youth and community workers. Public knowledge and awareness must be improved, and there must be acceptance of crisis services. All possible support must be given to families that are dealing with children or family members who are in danger.

I welcome the recognition today that Members share a growing concern about suicide rates, particularly among young people, and believe that it is in the best interests of those people if that matter is dealt with by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety rather than an Ad Hoc Committee. I am pleased that the Member is withdrawing his motion.

Ms Anderson: Last Monday, 10 September, was World Suicide Prevention Day, one day institutionalised in the calendar to mark the death and unimaginable suffering of friends and relatives whose children felt that life was not worth living. In my city, Derry, families and the wider community have recently experienced unbearable pain and anguish because so many people have taken their own lives. In the past year, almost 300, mostly young, people in the North ended their lives. That is nearly one a day.

Members must examine what they are doing for the generations of young people to come. What world will we leave them with? After the publication of excellent junior certificate results, what world faced that Dublin child who took her own life last week? What world faced Louise Meenan, the beautiful young Derry woman who had the potential to gain a university degree? We know for sure that it is a world of cut-throat, competitive pursuit, a world based on inequality and marginalisation, in which communities are plagued by drug pushers who peddle poisonous substances to young people.

When faced with suicide, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of reducing those circumstances to the individual trauma. We must be sure that we do not dislocate the relationship between individual suffering and the societal context that gives rise to it.

In his report on suicide prevention, Mike Tomlinson of Queen's University suggested that more must be done to encourage empowerment, which:

"is not limited to developing more positive feelings about oneself and gaining insight into one's situation. It also means doing something about it."

All Members must do something about it, and I wish to commend my colleague Cairtriona Ruane, the

Minister of Education, who took action by placing counsellors in every post-primary school. Hopefully, that will address some of the concerns about bullying that were expressed earlier.

1.30 pm

There is a serious problem of under-provision of psychiatric and community services for children, adolescents and young people in the North. There is a clear need for help and support for children and for those who live with someone who is struggling and may be contemplating taking his or her life or self-harming, or who is suffering from a mental illness.

As many Members know, it is heartbreaking to see so many families devastated in the aftermath of a relative's suicide. We must ensure that we find the advice, help and support that those families need and that more backup services are made available for bereaved families.

I do not believe that all those who ended their lives wanted to die; some simply did not know how to live at that moment. I appeal to anyone who is struggling today to talk to someone. I want them to know that all Members are here to support them and that their friends and relatives care. People want action from the Assembly, dedicated ring-fenced resources and care that goes some way towards redressing the unbearable individual circumstances that give rise to these deaths. The onus is on Members.

When we are moved by each tragedy, it can be difficult to remain rational. However, the Assembly has a responsibility to take action, and power sharing has given us the responsibility to share and shape a new society that has confidence in itself and where it is possible for everyone to realise hopeful dreams and have plenty to live for. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the motion has not been withdrawn. The motion has been proposed, and the amendment was proposed by Mrs Robinson. Members who wish to speak must remember that the motion has not been withdrawn.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for clarifying that. The motion is still up for debate, as is the amendment, which I support.

I am glad that most Members, with hindsight, seem to support the amendment. I am getting a pleasing vibe that perhaps the House will not divide on the issue, but that remains to be seen. It is important that the House does not divide on the amendment. Some of us tried to impress that point on the Business Committee, but no one was prepared to listen.

With hindsight, only good can come out of this useful debate. The subject matter does not touch only one section of the community; it goes across the spectrum of society in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is most important

that the House unites and sends out a clear message that the Assembly is concerned about what is happening, albeit being so powerless to do anything about the matter. However, I trust that, as a result of today's debate, minds will be focused, attention will be drawn to the issue and resources will be directed to tackling an acute problem that exists across Northern Ireland.

I listened to all the contributions, and I was struck by some of the things that were said. However, I was also struck by something that was not said. Some Members have tried to guess — rightly so — the reasons behind the situation. I suspect that one reason is that our society has emerged from 35 traumatic years. Society has felt the charge and dynamism that peace has brought as well as the pressures that extend to all households in the Province, no matter the background from whence they come. I have little doubt that, as a result, and in some significant way, that played into the situation in which we find ourselves.

It is difficult to explain or to ascertain why young people are under such pressure. They have not yet lived their lives, which are still in front of them, and their future should be bright. It has been mentioned that many young people who have taken their own lives were doing well at school or at university. In my constituency, one young man, who was at the peak of his educational career and was ready to step out into society with a well-earned degree of a high class, could not face society and took his own life. That is a great tragedy. That message must come across, and I know that all of us struggle to find out why someone would do that.

This issue presents a challenge, not only for the Minister and his Department, but for society as a whole, because we all play into it, and all of us impact on it in some way. There is a challenge for us, as an Assembly, to show whether we are really concerned at what happens around us. Why do so many people, from age groups across the spectrum, take their own lives? No matter what political group any of us comes from, all of us struggle to provide the answer to that question. We can all point to people in our communities or in society who put up a facade of not having a care in the world and that everything is going for them. Yet, often, we find that those are the very people that, tragically, we learn have taken their own lives.

The Assembly must tackle this issue in the days ahead. Teachers and leaders of the community become concerned, blame themselves, and ask whether they missed the signs or the vibes. However, such tragedies are not attributable to them.

I hope that the Assembly will send a united message that it sees this matter as important, and that it directs the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public

Safety to take its concerns on board and produce a report that will get to the heart of the problem.

Mr McCallister: I am pleased to be involved in, and to contribute to, this debate. The Rev Dr Coulter spoke eloquently about his role in providing pastoral care. There is no one in the Chamber without knowledge of someone — perhaps someone very close — who has attempted suicide. As the proposer of the motion mentioned, the issue, therefore, cuts across all divides of class and religion. This issue knows no boundary, and, as Lord Morrow pointed out, it affects those at the very height of educational attainment, as much as those from a deprived social background.

The Assembly must tackle this sad issue. Lord Morrow further pointed out that there must be some link between this problem and our situation in the last 35 to 40 years. In my brief time as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety since devolution was restored, we have been given excellent and useful briefings. From the diversity of witnesses to the Committee, it is clear just how cross-cutting the issue is, and how cross-cutting some of the answers must be from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Committee, the Department of Education, and, particularly, the Department for Social Development. There must be a big involvement and input from the community and voluntary sectors.

I have been at meetings with various groups, and have taken various briefings from them, which have been very useful in enabling me to share information with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

It is important to consider how to get the first-aid plan for mental health rolled out as early as possible into schools, universities, workplaces, sports clubs, youth clubs, and so on.

I am aware of the great work on this issue that is done by many voluntary groups, and I pay tribute to that. In the brief time that the Minister has been in office, I am aware of the huge amount of work, time and interest that he has invested in this matter. Of course, owing to the timing of his assuming office, the issues raised in Bamford Review have been prevalent both in his work as Minister, and for members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I would like the Minister to attend the meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety when we discuss this issue.

Most people want action, not a duplication of work. It would be very useful if the Minister were available to give Members a briefing on what work that the Department has done to date, so that there is no duplication of that work.

Answers to this huge problem must be found, and they must be found quickly so that no other families

have to go through the awful pain and loss that far too many have suffered so far. I support the amendment.

Mr Savage: I commend the Members who brought this most important matter before the House. It is certain that Members are united in the view that this is an issue on which urgent action must be taken. Young people — and those who are not so young — cannot be allowed to be left isolated, vulnerable and bereft of help.

Suicide in Northern Ireland is at an all-time high. In 1996, as was said earlier, there were 143 suicides, yet last year that figure had more than doubled to 291. Since I wrote this speech on Friday, that number has increased again.

In my constituency of Upper Bann in June this year, five teenagers in and around the Craigavon area tragically took their own lives, and left empty seats in the classroom, empty places at the dinner table, and an ever deepening void in the hearts and lives of those who knew and loved them.

Statistics, sadly, are only that. They do not show the character that people possessed, or their skills, talents and abilities — they become only a number. Sadly, the true extent of this tragic problem in our society remains unknown. Currently, it is believed that one person a day in Northern Ireland takes his or her own life, and that is one person too many.

How do we end this? How do we protect our young people, and those who are in a different age bracket? How do we protect those who are most vulnerable? I welcome the initiatives that my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has taken recently. I commend him for doing so, and I believe that they will make a difference.

However, the following points were raised in the Bamford Review, which, I believe, if implemented, would reap the benefits in the future: suicide prevention must be made a public health priority; a suicide-prevention strategy must be developed with an identified action plan that will target dates and responsibilities; suicide prevention must be properly resourced; and a regional mental-health promotion directorate should be created to ensure the implementation of the proposed suicide-prevention strategy.

1.45 pm

If we are to achieve anything from this debate, it must be that all of us begin to help bring about a major culture change in society; where seeking help is seen as a sign of strength, not as one of weakness. Together, we must bring an end to the silent hopelessness that haunts thousands of people in our cities, towns, villages and remote rural areas. In doing so, we will help them to feel that there is hope, that help is available and that things can change and improve.

We have heard much talk of a phone-in helpline. That should be in place, and when someone rings for help there should be someone on the end of the line. A problem shared can be a problem solved; and sharing problems can go a long way to saving lives.

I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Like everyone else, I am deeply concerned about the increasing numbers of people who are dying through suicide, and I reaffirm my commitment to do all in my power to improve mental health services for those who are in crisis and at risk.

Suicide is recognised worldwide as the third biggest cause of years of life lost, after cardiovascular disease and cancer. An estimated one million lives are lost annually to suicide. That is not only a tragic loss of life, but also leaves a difficult legacy for families and local communities. The problem is complex and many-faceted, and there are no clear short-term solutions.

Some individuals show signs of risk and can be targeted for additional support and services. In others, warning signs may be absent or less obvious, and therefore they are much more difficult to reach and support. There is no easy answer; there is no quick fix. If we are to turn the tide and have a reduction in the rate of suicide in Northern Ireland, we will all have to work together — statutory bodies, communities, voluntary organisations, the media and local churches — and take a long-term view.

Reducing the rate of suicide is a big challenge. We have only to look at the recent significant increases in the suicide rate to realise that.

The media has an important role to play in helping to prevent suicide and in promoting positive mental health and well-being. I therefore welcome the commitment made recently by local editors on World Suicide Day. The issue requires very careful handling by the media because it is possible to worsen the situation through excessive or inappropriate reporting. Sometimes, when we are attempting to play things down or calm a situation, we inadvertently talk it up. We are all obliged to act responsibly and maturely on the issue. Lives are at stake through contagion, especially among our young people. We must monitor the situation most carefully right now; the issue is seldom out of the news.

It is estimated that Northern Ireland's mental-health needs are at least 25% greater than those of England. Suicide is one manifestation of poor mental health in our population. Many factors affect mental health and well-being, and a range of policies relating to alcohol and drugs, sexual health and abuse or violence can contribute to a reduction in suicide. It is difficult to tackle suicide in isolation and outside the context of a wider strategy to improve mental health and well-

being. I therefore urge the Assembly to continue to address the issue in an integrated way.

I accept that mental-health services are not good enough. We all know that those services have been underfunded for years and that we are now trying to redress the balance. The Bamford Review, which has recently been finalised, has shown that there is a clear need to reform and modernise mental-health services to bring about improvements. Prevention is a key element in improving services; and I am fully committed to that.

I have recently established the Mental Health and Learning Disability Board, which has already had its first meeting. I expect that board to champion the cause of those with mental-health and learning disabilities and to be a driving force delivering the Bamford reforms.

I intend to meet the Chairperson and the board regularly. My Department has already taken on board recommendations from the Bamford Review; however, I emphasise that all relevant Departments and statutory bodies must be involved in developing a joined-up response, and in reshaping services.

The Northern Ireland suicide prevention strategy, 'Protect Life: A Shared Vision', published in October 2006, provides a comprehensive route map for tackling this tragic issue. I take the opportunity to acknowledge the key roles played by many bereaved families, their local communities and support networks in the development and ongoing implementation of the strategy. Their commitment has been matched by the dedication of many health professionals. This year, over £3 million has been allocated to support the implementation of the Northern Ireland suicide prevention strategy. A substantial amount has been allocated to support local communities in the development of initiatives to tackle the rising suicide rate.

Several pilot schemes operate locally that were established to assist with the implementation of the strategy, including a telephone helpline and mentoring services for those in crisis.

In addition, having listened to feedback from local communities, and in response to the rising levels of local suicides, I recently announced the establishment of a Northern Ireland telephone helpline for suicide prevention, with associated counselling and mentoring support services. I anticipate that the service will come on stream by the end of this year. The pilot scheme in north and west Belfast has proved to be seriously overused, which demonstrates its value.

Research suggests that GP training in depression recognition and treatment can have a positive impact on the level of suicide. Therefore, a new depression-awareness training programme has been developed and is being rolled out across Northern Ireland. To date, 161 GPs, and 71 practice managers and nurses have

participated in the programme, and I anticipate that a further 200 GPs will have done so before December 2007. I am looking at ways to encourage greater uptake of the training among GPs, and will continue to work proactively with the British Medical Association's (BMA) Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee (NIGPC) on the issue.

Much other work is under way, including research into the underlying causes of suicide and the development of a public information campaign. A crisis intervention service is now available in all areas. Furthermore, a service specifically for under-18s is now operational in the Eastern and Southern Board areas, and is being put in place in the northern and western areas, where recruitment is under way. That has been achieved despite delays caused by difficulties in recruiting appropriate staff.

I am increasingly concerned about the impact that the internet can have on vulnerable people, especially in times of crisis. In London, in July, I met internet industry stakeholders, including Bebo, Google and Vodafone, to highlight my concerns in some detail. Those involved in the meeting have responded positively. In particular, they have highlighted their intention to continue to promote positive mental health, and to encourage people to seek help and support in times of crisis. I intend to meet the stakeholders again in the near future.

I am also concerned about the correlation between drug and alcohol misuse and suicide among young people. Alcohol and drugs decrease inhibitions, and increase the likelihood of suicide attempt by a depressed young person. American research suggests that one in three adolescents were intoxicated at the time of their suicide attempt. Therefore, I intend to focus on prevention and intervention in drug and alcohol misuse, as I believe that that will impact on adolescent suicide rates.

Suicide respects no borders, and many of the issues we face will also be challenges for colleagues in England, Scotland, Wales and the Irish Republic. It is vital that we share learning and best practice among our close neighbours.

A group on suicide prevention has been established, which includes key representatives from England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic and Northern Ireland. The group is due to hold its next meeting in Northern Ireland in November 2007. The parallel implementation of the Reach Out strategy in the Republic is of particular relevance to Northern Ireland, as is the strategy in Scotland. The Department has developed an all-Ireland action plan in conjunction with the health service in the Republic. Soon, I will meet with Dr Jimmy Devins, a Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, who has special responsibility for mental-

health and learning disability, in order to discuss ongoing co-operation on that issue.

The Health Service alone cannot successfully reduce suicide levels in Northern Ireland. Other sectors and Departments must play their part. The Executive established the ministerial co-ordination group on suicide prevention in order that they could do their part by co-ordinating action and by ensuring that suicide prevention remains a priority for all relevant Departments. The group, which includes the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, and the two junior Ministers, Gerry Kelly and Ian Paisley Jnr, works together and has brought added focus to the issue. Several issues have been identified. Officials are examining how those can be taken forward. The Ministers will consider the issues further at its next meeting in October 2007.

The co-ordination group has the potential to provide Ministers with the wider context and support that will allow us to work in an integrated and joined-up manner in order to deal with the devastating effect that suicide and self-harm has on all our communities. I have already stated my willingness and eagerness to work and engage with fellow MLAs in order to find out what input can be brought to bear by the Assembly. I also welcome the support that I have received from the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has already met with representatives from families bereaved by suicide from across Northern Ireland in order to listen to their concerns about the services that are provided and the available support.

I accept that more must be done to develop mental-health services and to provide a better service for people, particularly those who are at risk of suicide in Northern Ireland. I welcome any input that can be brought to bear.

Mr Buchanan: I support the amendment. Suicide is a complex issue that affects constituents throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, I am sure that every Member in the House knows of a family that has suffered the loss of a loved one through suicide. When a suicide occurs, it not only brings grief and sorrow to the family concerned but leaves behind a stigma and raises questions among the family members about whether they could have done more to recognise the signs that led to the suicide. Although those families cry out for help, there appears to be little assistance available to them.

In recent years, Northern Ireland has witnessed an increase in the number of people who die from suicide and acts of self-harm. Statistics show that Northern Ireland has more suicides per 100,000 people than England and Wales, although that figure is less than levels in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

When they are taken in isolation, suicide statistics indicate a substantial public-health issue that generates tremendous public concern. However, media reporting

of individual cases highlights the human tragedy that is associated with suicidal behaviour. The statistics also suggest failings in existing prevention strategies and resources that have been put in place to tackle suicide, as well as inherent limitations in mental-health services for children and adolescents throughout Northern Ireland.

In addition to the costs that are associated with suicide — the lives that have been lost and the trauma that bereaved families in local communities experience — it has been widely acknowledged that suicide and self-harm can generate significant economic costs. According to 'Protect Life: A Shared Vision — The Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan 2006-2011', there were 146 suicides in Northern Ireland in 2004. That figure equates to 4,350 potential years of life lost for that year. Associated with each suicide are the direct costs of a post-mortem and a funeral, as well as the indirect costs, such as the value of potential earnings lost.

Subsequently, the total estimated cost of suicide in Northern Ireland in 2004 was in the region of £202 million. That figure represents £1.4 million for each suicide. Those figures, combined with the significant human tragedy of suicide, imply that the development of successful prevention strategies may generate significant economic returns. Moreover, there are the obvious benefits of saved lives and the avoidance of emotional trauma.

2.00 pm

A phrase that is often used about suicide is that it is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. While that comment can be applied to anyone who has been affected by suicide, it has frequently been associated with the education of adolescents and young adults in addressing their concerns about suicide and self-harm. The point is often made to young people who are considering taking their own lives that, whatever the nature and source of the emotional stress and pressure that is influencing them, advice and support can be given that can lessen that burden. The difficulty in getting that message across to young people — particularly to young adult men — is reflected in recent findings that 41% of young males under the age of 35 who took own lives were in contact with their GPs during the year before their deaths.

Members have heard how suicide has affected so many families. I commend the Chairperson of the Health Committee, who proposed the amendment to the motion. I was intrigued by the list of goals and guidelines that she outlined.

Families across the Province are being torn apart because of suicides. Suicide is an issue that must be tackled by the Health Committee — that is the proper vehicle and the proper way in which to deal with the matter. During the course of the debate, Robert Coulter

mentioned awareness training for teachers, ministers of religion and others working with young people. That must be given consideration.

Carmel Hanna spoke about training for GPs and the full implementation of the Bamford Review. Again, that must be considered by the Health Committee so that all the measures that are recommended in that report are put in place.

Naomi Long spoke about the removal of the stigma associated with mental-health issues. That too is a big issue; there are many people who do not want it to be known that they have mental-health problems. If the stigma of mental-health issues can be overcome, that may help to solve some of our current problems. Undoubtedly, the issue will be raised in a future meeting of the Health Committee. We believe that that is the proper vehicle in which to deal with the issue.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Much has been said during the debate, and everyone who has spoken has made a valuable contribution to the debate. I ask that the Official Report of the debate be made available to the Health Committee, because we will consider it as a source of reference. Members' valuable contributions must not be overlooked. Equally, while the contributions are valuable, they must be translated into actions. The Statutory Committee's inquiry will be one way of achieving that outcome. I was delighted to hear Mr McGimpsey, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, outline all of the actions that have been undertaken since May 2007. There has been much ongoing work. He also conceded that, while we are all doing good work, we need to do more. The Health Committee will add to that body of work.

At the start of the debate, my colleague Gerry Adams said — and every other Member has also mentioned — that the number of people who are ending their lives or harming themselves is increasing. To take the issue of road safety, for example: when we see youngsters playing football in a street full of parked cars, our instinct is to look out for them. We need to develop a similar instinct for looking out for each other, because very often we do not know that people are vulnerable until it is too late.

I pay tribute to the bereaved families and those who are caring for people with mental-health problems, because they have a mighty fight. We need to support them up that hill. Many people ask why, and that question was woven throughout the debate today. We ask what we can do, and what we can do together. It is very clear from the debate that by listening to one another, talking together and working together, we can make a difference and help those who are often trying to help themselves in very difficult circumstances.

We heard from some groups that we met this morning that some of the difficulties are around burnout. The funding for community groups is very sporadic, and the Minister has recognised that. Even the funding for the Protect Life strategy and other strategies that fall within the remit of this House is piecemeal. The strategies are often cross-cutting, but they are also often piecemeal. So, in a sense, the ability to plan and sustain and retain what services there are is often threatened. We must consider that issue as well.

The Committee Chairperson, Iris Robinson, and Thomas Buchanan both said that suicide is a:

“permanent solution to a temporary problem”.

That really had an impact on me. We have all had difficulties, and it is really a matter of how we deal with those difficulties and of whether we have the support to deal with them. What do we do within Government, schools, churches and the community? We must listen to those who are working in the field and those who have had experience of suicide. We need to promote awareness of suicide and self-harm, and we need broad-based support for suicide prevention. That is the minimum that is required.

We must also be realistic and honest. From time to time, the money that has been allocated for suicide prevention or mental-health issues has gone elsewhere. Action must be taken to address that.

The Minister outlined the role of the media, and Alex Easton talked about the campaign in some of the papers. From young kids I hear about Bebo, YouTube and other technologies that mean nothing to me, but I recognise that the Internet is a very powerful tool. We must commend the fact that steps have been taken to outline the responsibility that Internet and other telecommunication providers have.

Lord Morrow mentioned the effects of the conflict, and Martina Anderson spoke about the need to remain connected to each other. In terms of our empowerment, what happened in the past cannot be divorced from this process. The indelible marks of the conflict are on us all, and they have been proven to have been passed down to our kids, so they go from one generation to another. The last thing that any of us wants is to be in the situation that the Rev Robert Coulter has been in. Perhaps not as ministers, but as politicians, neighbours, brothers, sisters or partners, we have all sat in too many wake houses where people have ended their lives. It is very frustrating.

The Bamford Review is about mental-health and learning difficulties. There is the Protect Life strategy, and there will be this Committee investigation. We need to mop up all the evidence and look at the issue again. Even when the investigation ends, we will still need to review the situation. Things change, and, unfortunately, they change at a pace. More people are

ending their lives and harming themselves, and more carers are being put under pressure. We cannot resolve this matter ourselves, but we can start by having a good look at the issue.

Daniel McCartan was a constituent of mine. A report in June found that there were serious flaws and failures at the core of the mental-health services.

We must learn lessons from what happened to the McCartan family, and we must do everything that we can to ensure that it does not happen again. However, I imagine that that will be considered in the inquiry.

I commend all the Members who have spoken today — and previously — on the matter. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that he and the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, and the junior Ministers, Gerry Kelly and Ian Paisley Jnr, are also part of a team. Given that we need to hear what our young people are saying, I am delighted to hear — as are other Members — that counselling services will be available in primary schools.

We cannot wait until it is too late. We cannot wait until those people are young adults, or even until they get to our ages — a variety of ages is represented in the Chamber. It is hard to ask for help; therefore, we must make getting it easier. We must also ensure that every step that can be taken is taken so and that the people who are so often let down can get the help that they so frequently ask for.

I accept Lord Morrow's view that the House should not divide. Therefore, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Speaker: The next item of business will be questions to the Minister of Education. The Assembly is suspended until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 2.11 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Youth Outreach Expenditure

1. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to give a breakdown of departmental expenditure on youth outreach work. (AQO 92/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department allocates an overall budget of approximately £32 million for youth services. Of that, £1.82 million has been allocated in 2007-08 for outreach and detached youth workers. The youth outreach initiative, specifically funded through the children and young people funding package, was allocated as follows: £205,000 to each of the four education and library boards outside Belfast, focused on rural areas and small conurbations near rural areas; £205,000 for YouthNet, focusing on dealing with young people who are isolated because of their gender, disability, because they are from an ethnic minority community, or from a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender group. The Department also allocated £437,000 for detached outreach youth workers in Belfast; £250,000 for detached youth workers, under the renewing community initiative in Belfast; and £108,000 for peer educators carrying out similar work, focused in south and east Belfast.

It is essential that those limited resources are prioritised according to need. Therefore, I have asked departmental officials to re-examine, with colleagues in the education and library boards, especially in the Belfast and South Eastern Board areas, the deployment of outreach workers in areas of objective need.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her detailed response to my question and I also welcome her commitment to re-examining because it is my understanding that Belfast was left out of the funding bid under the children and young people funding package. Can the Minister give an assurance to people in my constituency of West Belfast that outreach workers will be provided in what is clearly an area of need?

Ms Ruane: The roles of outreach and detached youth workers are important because those workers try to reach young people to encourage them off the streets. They are skilled at engaging with young people

and, having made some contact and established a degree of understanding and trust, they work to determine what young people's needs are, how they can be met, whether they can be helped by existing services. They then work with other agencies to develop strategies. It is difficult work and it should not be underestimated. The statutory providers, who deploy and support those workers, are experienced in that approach to meet urgent and critical needs. The youth sector is only one of a number of agencies and services involved in helping to address issues affecting young people.

In the West Belfast constituency, there are wards covered by Belfast Board workers and wards covered by South Eastern Board workers. In the Belfast Board, there are four qualified, detached, outreach workers and there are four trainee, detached, outreach workers in west Belfast. There are four outreach workers funded through renewing communities. In the South Eastern Board, there are five outreach workers, funded under the children and young people funding package. That outreach work is focused on rural areas and their communities groups of interest, under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I am aware that the focus on rural areas restricts the ability of the board to deploy outreach workers in urban areas, but there are questions for the Department on that. The Department has made a bid to secure the funding currently available for outreach workers through the comprehensive spending review and, if successful, the deployment of those workers can be reviewed. It is essential that the limited resources are prioritised according to greatest need and, as I said earlier, I have asked my officials to examine, with colleagues in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, the need for outreach workers in Poleglass and Twinbrook. Twinbrook is the 20th most deprived ward in the North under multiple deprivation and the 17th most deprived ward under education statistics.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for some of those answers. Does the Minister have any thought or plans to change any of the responsibilities or roles of Sure Start when it comes under the remit of the Department of Education this year?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his question. Previously, the Assembly had a good debate on the importance of early-years education, and that is an area that must be further developed. If the Assembly is serious about tackling disadvantage and giving young people a start in life, particularly those from the most disadvantaged areas, the early-years strategy must be right. I will engage with the Committee for Education to develop the Department's existing strategy, and we will work together to devise the best possible programme.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her earlier answer in which she highlighted the current budget for youth services. In the context of the review of public

administration (RPA) and the establishment of the new education and skills authority, will the Minister assure the House that the resources, role and reach of youth services will be developed in the future?

Ms Ruane: I am a passionate supporter of youth services. It is important to reach out to all young people, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas across the North. Members have seen what can happen when youth is marginalised. Many young people play a tremendous role in society, but there are others whom we are failing to reach.

Recently, I visited young people in the young offenders' centre at Hydebank Wood. While I was talking to them, I felt a real sense of sadness. They came from all communities, though mainly from working-class disadvantaged areas, and there were both Catholics and Protestants. Politicians have failed those young people by failing to provide resources to support them. Even when young people are in Hydebank, they do not receive the support that they should.

It is essential to provide resources to young people across the board, but it must be done strategically. Members know that finding the money will be difficult given the comprehensive spending review (CSR). The Department must consider many issues, such as early-years education, youth provision, and finding more money for primary schools, and Members have been lobbying me on all of them. I am doing my utmost to ensure that the maximum amount of money possible is invested in youth services. As the process is not complete, I am not at liberty to say how much will be available. Indeed, I do not know the amount, but the Department has made some strong bids.

Academic Selection

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education what the final date is for assuring the public that academic selection will end in 2008. (AQO 23/08)

Ms Ruane: I assure the public that the transfer test will operate for the final time in 2008. My position on academic selection is well known. However, in the search for agreement on workable new arrangements for the transfer of children from primary to post-primary education, I am conscious of the continuing need to engage with those who hold different views. In attempting to find the best way forward, I have deliberately spent a considerable amount of time speaking to people on all sides of the argument.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Is she aware of the ongoing uncertainty being felt by teachers, parents and young children and the effect that that is having on morale and motivation in schools? Will she tell Members when she expects to bring forward

a new transfer procedure and will she confirm that academic selection will not be part of it?

Ms Ruane: It is an uncertain time for everyone: parents, teachers, and everyone who works in schools. It is essential that the Department comes up with the right transfer procedure. Members know my position on academic selection: I have been clear on that. The Department wants to find the best way forward, and I do not believe that that is through academic selection. It is important to make the transfer from primary school as seamless as possible for young people.

I assure parents that the Department is working hard on how to move forward. The most important consideration is to assure the children and everyone else involved that everything will be sorted out. I will engage with the Committee for Education, the Executive and all relevant stakeholders and I will inform the Assembly as soon as the new arrangements are in place.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister told the Education Committee on 27 May 2007 that in the absence of any agreed regulations, schools could continue with academic selection, probably through entrance examinations. Does the Minister accept that if no proposal for transfer arrangements from primary to post-primary schools is agreed by all of the Assembly, then that is what will happen? In light of the attempt to spread information by those associated with the Minister's point of view, will the Minister confirm whether the information given to the Committee on 27 May 2007 was correct, or was the Committee being misled?

Ms Ruane: If schools choose to operate independent arrangements that lie outside any agreed system of transfer, there will be no obligation on the Department to assist with funding. It is important that the transfer from primary to post-primary education is as seamless as possible. I am confident that we can find the best way forward to meet the needs of all our children.

Mr B McCrea: I wish I could welcome the Minister's comments, but I cannot. When will she stop using our schools as some kind of ideological football and get down to the real business of trying to create a fair and robust transfer test? It is simply not good enough for the Minister to say that she will take her time and not be rushed. When is the navel-gazing and introspection going to end, and when are we going to give some form of assurance to the teachers, pupils, and parents with children in year five, who do not know what is going to happen next? It is an abdication of responsibility. Our grammar schools were supposed to have been saved at St Andrews.

Ms Ruane: People can be confident that I will bring forward arrangements that will be in the best interests of all our children, and I will take the time necessary to do so. That is my job, and I assure everyone here that I will do that.

School Uniforms

3. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Education what support is available to help low-income families purchase school uniforms. (AQO 91/08)

Ms Ruane: Grants for uniforms are available to families where a parent is in receipt of income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance or receives the child tax credit and is ineligible for the working tax credit because they work for less than 16 hours per week and have an annual taxable income of £14,494, or less. The grant available is not intended to cover the full cost of the uniform but is designed to assist those in need with the cost of purchase. The wearing of school uniforms is not a statutory requirement, but a matter for the discretion of individual schools.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, aLeasCheann Comhairle. What legislation covers school uniform policy, and what are the Department of Education's guidelines?

Ms Ruane: The wearing of the school uniform is not governed by legislation, but falls to schools to determine. The day-to-day management of schools, including any rules regarding the dress of pupils, is a matter for school principals, subject to any directions that might be given by boards of governors. Following the issue of the General Consumer Council's report on school uniform in 1992, the Department wrote to all boards of governors in 1993 suggesting that they might wish to consider: the importance of ensuring through school prospectuses, etc, that parents are aware of the requirements of a school's policy on uniform; the cost implications for parents, particularly those on low incomes, of a school's policy on uniform, and the implications, in terms of value for money and consumer choice of supplier, of uniforms often being available from a limited number of official suppliers.

The Department is reviewing guidance on school uniforms here and will take developments in England into account, where the Department for Children, Schools and Families has recently consulted on guidance for school uniform policy.

A similar scheme is in operation in the South of Ireland. The Back to School Clothing and Footwear scheme assists families who are on social welfare and Health Service Executive payments towards the cost of uniforms and footwear for schoolchildren, and it is administered on behalf of the Department of Social and Family Affairs by the Health Service Executive.

2.45 pm

Mr Burns: Given that a recent Norwich Union study estimated that school uniforms cost an average of £178, does the Minister agree that the help that is available is

inadequate to offset the financial burden that buying school uniforms puts on low-income families?

Ms Ruane: Buying school uniforms is a big cost for many families. Our grants contribute only partially towards the cost of uniforms. The Department must consider all the competing priorities and decide where best to direct its resources. Offsetting that financial burden would be a big resource cost, but I must consider the competing priorities.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister agree with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers that academic consensus shows that 85% of the variation in pupil performance is due to factors outside the school, such as culture, parental support, family income, and, particularly, social class? Does she accept, therefore, that the major challenge is to remove the artificial pressure on parents, pupils, and schools that the current lack of clarity imposes?

Ms Ruane: We provide grants towards the cost of school uniforms to those in receipt of income-based jobseekers allowance, those who are in receipt of child tax credit, and those who are ineligible for working tax credit. Buying uniforms is difficult for parents, and economic cost disadvantages people who are in working-class communities and in disadvantaged areas. The Department of Education is working on many programmes in order to target need. Members will continually hear me talking about objective need — we must target resources on the basis of objective need if we are to deal with people in such need and give them a fair chance.

Curran Committee of Inquiry

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in providing teaching principals with the two days' administration time recommended by the Curran Committee of Inquiry. (AQO 24/08)

Ms Ruane: I acknowledge the workload demands that are placed on the teaching profession, and I recognise the dedication of teachers locally. Workload concerns should be addressed, especially for teaching principals who need time to lead and manage change in their schools — and we all know that a lot of change is ahead. The local management of schools (LMS) gives principals of small primary schools the flexibility to be released from class contact for one day a week. Part II of the Curran committee of inquiry recommended that the teachers' negotiating committee in the North of Ireland should reach a contextualised agreement that is similar to the English arrangements on raising standards and tackling workload.

In accepting that measures that are similar to those in England and Wales should be introduced here to limit teachers' workloads, including the provision of

teaching principals' time, the Curran committee took the view that the English proposals would require adaptation for the North of Ireland and that the timetable for their introduction may vary. The implementation of the agreement in England and Wales was achieved through various strategies, including reforming and remodelling the school workforce, using teaching assistants to undertake teaching-type duties, and relieving teachers of routine administrative tasks.

The teachers' union here considered that such strategies were inappropriate. Consequently, it was estimated that, based on the assumption that a significant number of additional teachers would be needed, it could cost over £80 million a year to implement the Curran recommendations. Therefore, the cost implications of delivering measures to reduce teacher workload here, including administration time for teaching principals, would be proportionately much higher than in England and Wales. It also means that more teachers would be covering for absent colleagues. That would be at odds with another of Curran's recommendations, which stated that a contractual limit should be placed on the amount of cover that is required from an individual teacher, with the longer-term objective that teachers should cover for absent colleagues only rarely. In the absence of additional resources in the 2004 and 2005 Budgets, successive direct rule Ministers asked the teachers' negotiating committee to consider whether any of the main Curran recommendations could be introduced through alternative ways of working.

That is currently the subject of ongoing negotiations between both sides, with particular reference to teaching principles, and planning, preparation and assessment time.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that if that particular part of the Curran Report were implemented, it would go some way to providing posts for the roughly 4,000 teachers on the substitute-teachers register who have never had a full-time teaching post?

The Minister mentioned some of her proposals, can she give some indication as to the time frame within which she is working, and, therefore, when deliberations on the matter will be completed?

Ms Ruane: I was at Queen's University this morning to meet approximately 200 people who were starting a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) course. It was interesting to meet all the people, young and old, who will be in our classrooms. I was honest and told them that I could not guarantee all of them a permanent job, and that, if I did, I would be lying.

The number of teachers must be matched to the skills and posts that need to be filled. Politicians cannot be ostriches, pretending that there are not 50,000 empty

desks in our classrooms. We ignore the current demographics in our society at our peril.

The Assembly must examine the best way to meet the needs of our education sector. The right number of teachers, and the right guidance for schools when they are employing substitute teachers are needed. The Department has written to all school principals to state that it would like to see more young teachers employed so that they can gain experience. We also need to diversify and create opportunities for our teachers so that they can go into the youth or pre-school sectors.

I have launched a new initiative involving the Irish Football Association (IFA) and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) whereby 20 coaches are employed, who will then go out to primary schools. Members know the budgets within which we must work, and of the difficulties that demographic decline is creating in our schools. Members should join together to show leadership when dealing with this matter.

Mr K Robinson: Is the Minister really convinced that adequate and sufficient time has been provided to enable teachers and principals to thoroughly prepare for the curriculum entitlement framework? Does she have any plans to use the surplus of teachers who, after graduating up to five years ago, have yet to secure a permanent teaching post? That would be an attempt to reduce the strain on an already overburdened school system, and on the individuals in it.

Ms Ruane: I agree that principals play a key role in our schools. As for the curriculum entitlement framework, the Department has granted schools five additional exceptional-closure days to prepare for its implementation from September 2007. A detailed programme of training for both principals and teachers, phased in line with the implementation timetable, is also under way, and schools can avail of support on an individual basis from dedicated schooling officers in their education board's curriculum advisory and support service (CASS) team.

Do the principals have enough preparation time? Of course not. The Department has to find a way of getting the resources to provide enough time. As part of the comprehensive spending review, the Department is looking at how to meet the needs of principals. That will involve an adequate budget being provided to the whole area of education. I am meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, next week about the various bids in the comprehensive spending review. I cannot overstate — as the Member's question indicates — the importance of the leadership role of principals in our schools.

Pupil Numbers

5. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Education what proposals exist to remove pupil numbers as the sole factor in assessing the future viability of schools.

(AQO 60/08)

Ms Ruane: Pupil numbers are clearly an important factor in assessing the future viability of schools, but they should not be the sole factor. The direct rule Administration issued a consultation document on a policy for sustainable schools, which set out six proposed criteria for helping to assess the viability of schools. In addition to enrolment trends, the document also identified the educational experience of the children, the financial position of the school, leadership and management at the school, accessibility, and links with the community. My Department is currently analysing the responses to that consultation.

The overriding consideration must be the quality of education that a school provides for the children. Any review of a school's future viability needs to be handled carefully and sensitively, and the local circumstances must be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Mr Neeson: The Bain Report indicates that some rationalisation of schools will be unavoidable. In communities where the closure of schools will be unavoidable, has the Minister examined the possibility of promoting the amalgamation of controlled and maintained schools, especially in areas where the alternative for some children would be a bus journey to a single-identity school that is located some distance from their homes?

Ms Ruane: If the demographics to which I referred earlier are taken into consideration, it is important that the Department of Education takes a strategic approach to amalgamations. Over the past few months, I have met representatives from many schools who are considering amalgamation, and through those meetings with the teachers, parents and children, I have seen a strong sense of schools coming together and working together. Some schools expressed difficulties with what was happening, but the majority of schools recognised that it is not in the best interests of pupils to have 20 or 30 children in a school.

The Department is trying to ensure that schools amalgamate with schools that are located nearest to them, and we would love schools in the controlled and maintained sectors — where they feel that it is appropriate — to amalgamate and provide education for the children. In the post-primary sector, there are some interesting programmes in which schools are working together. I have visited post-primary schools and further education colleges in which the grammar, controlled and grant-aided sectors are working together to provide different courses at different sites. That is

the way forward for our education system, but it must be progressed and implemented by schools coming together. It should not be the responsibility of the Department to impose the new system on communities, but the demographic decline gives us an opportunity to examine the options.

Dr W McCrea: Has the Minister not already removed pupil numbers as a factor in assessing the viability of schools and done so in a most sectarian and unfair manner? If she has not, can the Minister explain why she has approved the opening of an Irish-language school with an intake of 12 pupils while closing Minterburn Primary School in County Tyrone, which has a register of twice that number?

Ms Ruane: Proposals for the opening of schools or the closing of existing schools are introduced by the relevant bodies and are the subject of consultation. I need to consider the issues surrounding each individual proposal on its merits and with regard to the education needs of the children concerned. The Department of Education has a statutory duty under the Education and Libraries Order 1998 to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. There is a growing demand for Irish-medium education, and this —

Dr W McCrea: The school has only 12 pupils.

Ms Ruane: I am answering the Member's question, and I would appreciate it if he would listen. There is a growing demand for Irish-medium education, and that is reflected in the proposals introduced by parents. New schools — regardless of what sector they are in — are approved on condition that they will meet the Department's minimum intake levels. The Member is being economical with the truth. The real question to be asked is how many pupils are in primary 1. There is a growing demand, and if there are 12 pupils in primary 1, a long-term enrolment for a seven-class school can be calculated by multiplying 12 by seven. The three Irish-medium schools approved recently —

[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to answer the question.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. The three Irish-medium schools approved recently are: Gaelscoil Éanna in Glengormley, Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach in Crumlin and Gaelscoil na Daróige in Derry, each with an estimated long-term enrolment of between 105 and 140 pupils.

Mr Savage: Does the Minister recognise that, in the absence of any clear direction from her, the perceived viability of a school becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as pupils, parents and schools —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. The Minister will have to respond to the Member in writing.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Loans: Repayment Threshold

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to reassess the current £15,000 threshold at which students commence repayment of their student loans upon graduation.
(AQO 90/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): There are no plans to change the repayment threshold, which was considerably increased by 50% — from £10,000 to £15,000 — in April 2005. Effectively, that increase reduced repayments by £450 a year for graduates who earn £15,000 or more.

Mr Neeson: In this day and age, when one considers the rocketing cost of housing that young people face, £15,000 is not a substantial salary. In reassessing the threshold — which I hope that the Minister will do — will consideration be given to other costs such as energy, housing and transport, which result in much lower disposable incomes for young people than might be apparent from their salaries?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware that, in this day and age, there are huge increases in costs, and I am sure that all Members wish to do what they can to ensure that people can participate without crippling economic consequences. However, there would be significant operational difficulties were Northern Ireland to act unilaterally because, as the Member knows, repayments in the student loan scheme are collected by HM Revenue and Customs. Therefore, it would be extremely difficult for that organisation to administer a separate scheme for Northern Ireland.

However, the system is designed to ensure that people who earn less will pay back less, and that any money still outstanding at the end of 25 years will be written off. I will be watching and liaising closely with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to ensure that its proposals will be considered when I am reviewing student finances, which I hope to do next year.

Mrs Hanna: I understand that Queen's University has instigated a scholarship programme for science, maths, engineering and technology. Does the Minister have any plans to offer student loans to post-graduate students who must further their skills, especially in those areas?

Sir Reg Empey: That is an important point. Queen's University is encouraging students to focus on subjects

that are significant for the development of the economy. I have been thinking about the people who we want to encourage into research — which is critical for our future economic prosperity — particularly those at the higher levels such as master's degree and PhD students. However, until the comprehensive spending review has been completed and we know where we stand, I am unlikely to be in a position to respond to the House this year. Any proposals that I, or others, might have will cost money. Nevertheless, the Member touches on an important point that is close to my heart.

Mr S Wilson: Is the Minister not concerned that almost every decision being made in further and higher education is having the effect of deterring people from low income families from entering education at that level? The £15,000 repayment threshold and university fees have been mentioned. Even concessionary fees at the first step — for those who wish to embark on their university careers via further education — have been cancelled for many courses. Has the Minister assessed the impact of low-income families opting out of further and higher education due to monetary considerations?

Sir Reg Empey: Other similar questions have been asked, and I have had considerable correspondence on that matter. Northern Ireland's record on involving people from disadvantaged backgrounds in further and higher education is second to none in these islands. We have a much higher than average participation rate.

Although I accept that the imposition of fees was a traumatic development, a wide range of measures is, nevertheless, in place to ensure that people can access assistance, such as maintenance grants. The grant in Northern Ireland is £500 higher than that in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Early indications are that there continues to be a higher level of participation from low-income families, which is entirely consistent with the Department's long-term objectives, which were set some time ago. If the hon Member cares to compare our participation rates with those of any other region of the UK, he will find that they are far greater.

Further Education Lecturers: Pay Policy Constraints

2. **Mr Attwood** To ask the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has taken legal advice to determine whether Further Education Lecturers should be subject to pay policy constraints.
(AQO 20/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The continued application of public sector pay policy in Northern Ireland has been endorsed by the Executive. When approving further education lecturers' pay, my Department is required to ensure that pay settlements are compliant with that pay policy.

There are no grounds for my Department to seek legal advice on the matter.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his answer, but he knows that no stone should be left unturned when addressing the further education pay dispute. I strongly suggest that it is appropriate for the Minister to seek legal advice on the matter for several reasons, although I will name only one. On 21 June 2004, slap bang in the middle of the current pay policy constraints, Welsh further education lecturers got pay parity. Why did Welsh lecturers get pay parity in 2004, despite the pay policy constraint, when Northern Ireland's further education lecturers did not, despite having agreed in principle on pay parity in 2001?

I suggest that that precedent may be relevant to the dispute, and that that alone justifies the Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel acquiring legal advice on the situation as a matter of urgency.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question; he has also corresponded with me on the matter. This inherited dispute has caused us to find ourselves in the most bizarre circumstances. During negotiations, a willing employer side and a willing employee side reached an agreement, which was put to the Sub-Committee on Public Sector Pay in London and was rejected. On 24 May, and on 13 September, the Executive endorsed the policy of ensuring that we are compliant with that national macroeconomic policy.

With regard to discussions — and I am aware of the Welsh example and several others — there are serious anomalies in the dispute. However, the problem that is dogging us is not legal, but political. It is a political decision of the Government in London to have a national pay policy, and it is a political decision of the Executive to adhere to it. Therefore, the political issue, not the legal one, is the problem.

However, I can tell the Member that few issues occupy as much of my time as trying to resolve the dispute. The week before last, I met representatives of the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges, the college employers, and I had a long meeting last Friday with the union side, including national officials. At that meeting, I undertook to reflect over the weekend on certain proposals for dealing with the matter.

However, I must stress that it has to be dealt with within the overall confines of policy. The anomalies that have been referred to, and there are many of them, are, unfortunately, caught by the almost arbitrary imposition of this pay policy, because there were agreements either in place or about to be put in place, but they had not been implemented. That is why the Sub-Committee on Public Sector Pay took such a difficult line.

It is true that no other group of education workers in the United Kingdom is caught up in this policy, and I am

very conscious of that. Discussions took place on Friday, and I hope to have further discussions tomorrow. I do not wish to be pressed further on the details today, but I am hopeful that we are beginning to see some way of managing this dispute, but it does have to be within the confines of public-sector pay policy.

Of course, within the application of that, there is an issue as to how the Sub-Committee on Public Sector Pay might interpret certain things, and we are considering everything very carefully in an attempt to find a way to resolve the issue. I assure the hon Member that I do not believe, at this point, that a legal route is the solution.

Mr Spratt: I know that the Minister has said that he does not want to elaborate on discussions that he has had in recent days. I also know that this is a difficult dispute, and there has been support around the Chamber and, indeed, from his own Department and himself. If the Northern Ireland situation were resolved through the Executive, could that have a knock-on effect on other disputes throughout the United Kingdom? Could it also have a knock-on effect for the Northern Ireland Budget in the future?

Sir Reg Empey: The Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Mr Spratt, has hit the nail on the head. That is exactly one of the concerns that the Department has. I am writing to the Committee today. I had the opportunity to brief the Chairperson of the Committee on Friday, and I appreciate that the Committee is trying to play as constructive a role as possible, given the obvious frustrations that all Members feel with this situation. Everyone wants this dispute settled; we all want to see the lecturers' pay claim adhered to. Parity with teachers is ultimately the solution to this. Indeed, that is effectively the mechanism that the Welsh managed to agree. I accept the point that the Member made; we do have to be careful of the wider issues. Let us hope that progress can be made.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and fulsome answer, which to a certain extent means that my question is superfluous. However, I will give the Minister the opportunity to clarify, in simple terms, that this is not a legal issue, that this was a decision taken by the Executive —

The Deputy Speaker: Order. As you do not have a question, Mr McCrea, we have to move on.

Tuition Fees

3. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if there has been an assessment of the impact of tuition fees on applications to, and enrolment in, third level education institutions, particularly in

relation to the number of applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. (AQO 97/08)

Sir Reg Empey: It is too early to gauge the impact of variable tuition fees, as we have completed only one academic year of the new arrangements.

3.15 pm

A review of variable fees and student finance arrangements, which will include consideration of participation rates and any additional effect on particular groups and students from low-income backgrounds, is planned to commence in the academic year 2008-09.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that if tuition fees were not in place, many more people from disadvantaged backgrounds would take up the opportunity to go to university? Does he also agree that many of those who drop out of university are from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Sir Reg Empey: There is no doubt that those students who are targeted from disadvantaged backgrounds do have a higher drop-out rate than other students. However, I am pleased to say that both our local universities have strategies in place, commencing this month at the very latest, to ensure that there is a follow-up to that.

It is a waste for students and taxpayers alike if a place on a course is taken by a student who later drops out; it is also most unfortunate for the individual concerned. There are many difficulties.

The drop-out rate for students from less fortunate backgrounds tends to be higher; that is the pattern across the country. There is no doubt that if no costs were involved in going to university, many more would go.

I remind the Member, however, that participation rates in Northern Ireland are far higher than anywhere else in the UK. They are more than 40% higher in the relevant groups; elsewhere, the percentage is in the twenties. We have a comprehensive range of measures in place to ensure that people have access to resources and maintenance grants so that they are not unduly penalised as a result of deciding to go to university. We are encouraging people to go, and the evidence is that we are succeeding. Measures are in place to ensure that such students receive assistance. The work of both universities to reduce drop-out rates will be successful, although it will be a while yet before we can measure that.

Mr Kennedy: The Minister is aware of the proposed exorbitant increase in tuition fees that affects many senior citizens attempting to take non-vocational courses in my constituency. Will he undertake to review that problem urgently and to address the issues involved: ageism, equality and consistency of approach by the new regional colleges?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question. I have received a significant volume of correspondence from many Members on that issue. The Department does

not, however, set charges; colleges are autonomous bodies that set their own charges. I believe that there is an understanding among the college employers to agree a tariff among themselves. Several colleges, which had their own separate fees, are amalgamating. However, I am not satisfied that the understanding is being adhered to.

Furthermore, it has been drawn to my attention that there could be bizarre legal outworkings of the age discrimination legislation. As Members know, it was designed to assist older people by preventing discrimination on the basis of age. However, it seems that the legal advice that was given to colleges has been interpreted in such a way as to suggest that if colleges discriminate in favour of older people, they could fall foul of the law. I will draw that to the attention of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Since the legislation was designed to prevent discrimination against older people, it seems perverse to discover that one cannot discriminate in their favour. That point must be clarified. I will talk to the college employers about the matter, because I am aware of the inconsistencies and of colleges' concern over possible breaches of the age discrimination law.

Ms Lo: The Minister mentioned an assessment of the impact of such under-representation. What further proposals will he make to ensure fair access to third-level education, especially for people from poorer backgrounds?

Sir Reg Empey: Substantial assistance is already available. There are maintenance grants and each university here has its own hardship fund.

Many Members are concerned about the matter. As I have said to a number of them, Northern Ireland is outperforming other regions of the United Kingdom in attracting students from such backgrounds. The designated categories make up 41.5% of the student body — that compares favourably with the best-performing universities in the rest of the UK, at which levels are in and around 25%. An enormous effort is being put in, and the Department has prioritised that effort in its bid to the comprehensive spending review. The Department states that one of its objectives is to maximise opportunities, so I assure the Member that we take the issue seriously.

I commend the universities for their help. Magee College has its Step-Up initiative, and other universities' initiatives are state of the art, and are doing well. I hope that the ongoing figures continue to support my optimism that the Department is succeeding.

Economically Inactive People

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an assessment of the factors contributing to Northern Ireland's high level of economically

inactive people, in comparison with other parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 77/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Our inactivity rate is some 5.5% higher than Great Britain's, mainly because Northern Ireland has proportionately more students, as well as people out of work because of sickness and disability. The inactivity rate in the Republic is around 2% to 2.5% lower than ours, which is chiefly down to less inactivity that is attributable to sickness or disability.

Dr Farry: Does the Minister recognise those figures as being a major structural weakness in our economy, particularly given the low levels of official unemployment figures? Is the Minister prepared to commit to setting targets to reduce the figure in Northern Ireland to that of the next-lowest UK region in the near future, and ultimately towards the UK average?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question, which is pertinent. The area of inactivity rates is one on which the Executive must bear down in its economic policy. The UK region that has the next-highest inactivity rate is London. Northern Ireland was sitting at 26.7% inactivity between April and June 2007, at which time the next-highest rate was London at 24.6%.

Part of the underlying reason for that figure is that Northern Ireland has more people who are ill, and more people who suffer from disabilities. We are also bearing down on inactivity, and trying to help and make a difference, through a programme called Pathways to Work. It is designed to provide interviews in jobcentres between trained staff and every person who is in receipt of incapacity benefit, in order to try to find a way in which to help those people to find a way back into the workplace. That programme is going well and will be rolled out throughout Northern Ireland by April 2008.

I hope that those initiatives will help us to bear down on the problem. There is no doubt that, if we can combine an improvement in the essential skills level with a reduction in the level of economic inactivity, we can progressively encourage more participation in the economy, and that, in turn, will improve our wealth-creation capacity.

Mr P Ramsey: The SDLP welcomes the commitment that the Minister for Employment and Learning makes on the economic front. Given the long-term unemployment problem that exists in certain families, sometimes for generations, will the Minister consider introducing proposals to address the high level of economic inactivity in households in which no family members are working, whether they be Catholic, Protestant or other?

Does the Minister agree that the proposals would be usefully informed by the excellent report from the Committee on the Administration of Justice, 'Equality in Northern Ireland: the Rhetoric and the Reality'?

Sir Reg Empey: I share the Member's desire to see the inactivity rate reduced. There are many complicated, historical reasons, to which he has referred. Moreover, it would be foolish to deny the existence of a generational factor, particularly in certain locations.

However, the Assembly must face up to the fact that there is still a widespread belief that there are simply many people out there who claim incapacity benefit and other benefits because it is nice to have the money and sit at home. It must be understood that a larger percentage of Northern Ireland's potential workforce suffer from ill health or are disabled. We cannot pretend that they do not exist, because they do. Policies must be tailored towards them, and the Pathways to Work policy focuses specifically on them. The Department's disablement advisory service works with teams in jobcentres, particularly to try to help disabled people into work. There are many jobs that disabled people could do if they had sufficient confidence and there were programmes available to give them the opportunity for self-help, which many would take up.

The following is an interesting statistic: of the people who are on incapacity benefit for less than a year, at least 50% believe that they will get back into work. After that period, the figure drops dramatically, so early intervention is crucial.

Mr Ramsey mentioned historic reasons, and Members know that there is baggage everywhere. Mr Ramsey will be aware that in his own city, the University of Ulster at Magee works hard with my Department and other agencies to find opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get into higher education. That system is state of the art, and it works. The hon Member is, therefore, pushing at an open door. Hard work is already being done to reduce the economic inactivity that, sadly, stifles the lives of many people.

Mr Newton: I am glad that the Minister, like the rest of the House, recognises the significant contribution that economically inactive people could make to the economy. When his Department has prepared its response to the Leitch Report, will it be the case that the skills needs of small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland will be dealt with through a demand-led strategy rather than one that is supply driven?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is aware that there is little point in providing further and higher education, or any other service from the Department, which does not have a thought-through economic objective. Northern Ireland must endeavour to remain competitive and look towards its further and higher education sectors as being capable of improving economic performance and wealth-creation policies. Therefore, there is little point in having a policy that is completely divorced from the needs of the sector and employers.

I am pleased that several businesspeople have applied for, and been appointed to, the boards of governors of the new colleges. The universities work much more closely with the business community than ever before. I commend to the Member the work of the Economic Development Forum, which includes employers, universities, unions, Government and representatives from all sectors, who have all heard the message. The message is getting through to many people.

Tuition Fees

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I no longer wish to ask question 5, go raibh maith agat. The Minister has already answered it in his responses to other Members' questions.

Tuition Fees: Republic of Ireland Students

6. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action had been taken on the issue of students from the Republic of Ireland having to pay fees to study in third-level education institutions in Northern Ireland; and what communication there had been with the Government of the Republic of Ireland on this issue. (AQO 102/08)

Sir Reg Empey: This is the point at which I must not read out the wrong answer. Is that correct?

[Laughter.]

Students in higher education who are from non-UK EU countries, including the Republic of Ireland, are treated the same as Northern Ireland's students as regards tuition fees. As far as further education is concerned, the Department for Employment and Learning has introduced regulations that will permit EU students, including those from the Republic of Ireland, to have their tuition fees funded on the same basis as students from Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK. The Department has been in regular contact with the Republic of Ireland's Department of Education and Science on the matter throughout 2006-07.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Northern Ireland Tourism Product

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps were being taken to

ensure that tourism product specific to Northern Ireland was available to, and stocked by, retail outlets supported by, or under the control of, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. (AQO 84/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has a co-ordinating role in supporting the tourist information centre network throughout Northern Ireland, which includes staff training, familiarisation visits, corporate image and the provision of tourist information for visitors. NITB has no direct control over any retail operations.

The day-to-day operation of tourist information centres rests with their operators, which in most cases is the local council. The NITB and councils encourage the sale of local crafts and goods, and that proves to be successful in many instances. Tourist information centres take decisions on goods sold based on business and commercial considerations.

The Member will be interested to note that the NITB and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau are currently appointing consultants to undertake a commerciality and retail study of the Belfast Welcome Centre. Consideration of the goods and products sold there will be part of the exercise, and the results will be rolled out across the tourist information centre network.

Mr Campbell: I welcome the Minister's elaboration on the survey that will be undertaken. Does he see part of the co-ordinating role that his Department has with tourist information centres — and, I presume, with the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau as well — to be to raise the need for those retail outlets to stock items that reflect the country that tourists are visiting? It is an easy option for stockists in Northern Ireland to order shamrocks and shillelaghs, whereas they should be actively seeking out mementos relating to the Mountains of Mourne or the beauties of the north coast, etc, or items such as Ulster cottages and Red Hand logos. That would allow visitors to return to their homes with souvenirs of the country that they had visited — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please continue, Mr Campbell.

Mr Campbell: Visitors could return to their homes with souvenirs of the country that they had actually visited rather than with bland "stage Oirish" items that they could pick up in a tip in Tipperary.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that those retailers, and others, will have listened carefully to what he said. The NITB has no direct control over any retail operations. As far as Northern Ireland product is concerned, NITB has been active in that area. At the recent Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Northern Ireland's arts and crafts were given an international platform. Images of contemporary craft

ware were featured on the front of the Smithsonian associates' magazine.

Also, the NITB has given a presentation to craft manufacturers and students at the University of Ulster to encourage them to consider visitor needs when making local products. Obviously, that has been raised with me on a number of occasions. However, ultimately, commercial considerations apply. The NITB will do what it can to encourage local people to bring forward local products that can be sold in tourist information centres and elsewhere.

Mr Elliott: I notice that Mr Campbell omitted the Lambeg drum from his suggested list of tourist products. Regarding the tourist industry, will the Minister inform Members about the progress that has been made on the regional tourism partnerships and the five signature projects in Northern Ireland? Even at this stage, I would like to ask him about progress on the Destination Fermanagh project. I am curious to know if he believes that it was a mistake for the NITB to exclude one of Northern Ireland's key tourist areas, namely County Fermanagh, from its list of signature projects.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the hon Member for his question. He mentioned Lambeg drums, and I am sure that that will be noted by those who take an interest in these matters. Other items will also be noted — the list that the hon Member from East Londonderry Mr Campbell mentioned is not exclusive.

The signature projects are important. The Member is aware that there are five projects, which were designated previously by the Tourist Board. As regards the exclusion of Fermanagh, Tyrone and other areas, the aim of the projects is to boost the product for Northern Ireland as a whole. The projects were not chosen on the basis of one for each particular geographic location. They were allocated on the basis that they were believed to be the best way of enhancing tourist product for Northern Ireland and of boosting that product worldwide. I certainly hear what the hon Member says, and he will know my very strong, close, personal interest in Fermanagh and in ensuring that it does well in such matters. He can rest assured on that issue — Fermanagh will certainly not be left out of my efforts to promote tourism in Northern Ireland.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

3. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount spent on the Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre project to date, and whether his Department had done any analysis on the increased cost of the project as a result of delays.

(AQO 111/08)

Mr Dodds: A total of £1.192 million has been spent to date on bringing forward the public-sector visitor

facility proposal at the Giant's Causeway. A further £1 million would be required to take the project to contract stage.

The initial cost estimate, which was undertaken in October 2004, was £14 million. The most recent cost estimate, which was undertaken in May 2007 and was based on the actual design, stands currently at £21.5 million. The increase in the estimate is partly due to construction price inflation and partly due to the costs of delivering the actual design.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. There were 51 minutes between the Minister of the Environment's statement on the visitors' centre last Monday and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's statement on the matter. Does the Minister agree that that suggests either that it was a very easy decision — which I very much doubt, given the cost of developing the public proposal that the Minister has already outlined — or that there was a degree of co-operation or collaboration between the two Departments prior to the statements being released?

Mr Dodds: The decision that I made was an easy decision to make. I am not prepared to commit a penny piece of Government money or taxpayers' money — and it is public money that we are talking about — to something that could, in all likelihood, turn out to be nugatory or wasted expenditure. There has been criticism of the £1.2 million spent to date by previous Administrations and Ministers. I can almost hear the cries that would come in a year's time or whenever, asking why I continued to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money on something that turned out to be wasted expenditure. So that was an easy decision to make, and I make no apology for taking that decision. In the circumstances, there will be no further expenditure until the planning matter is resolved.

As far as joined-up Government is concerned, if the issue is that we are actually talking to each other, again, I plead guilty. If the planning Minister makes a decision that impacts on the possibility of nugatory expenditure in another Department, it entirely makes sense to have contact on that issue — of course it does. That is what joined-up Government is all about. So, I can satisfy the Member very easily on both those issues.

Mr Neeson: We all realise that the issue of the visitors' centre is very sensitive. Will the Minister assure the House that whatever development goes ahead at the Giant's Causeway, it will not endanger its status as a world heritage site?

Mr Dodds: That is entirely a matter for the Department of the Environment. That is a planning matter; it is not a matter within the remit of my Department. However, I have made it absolutely clear that, as far as

I am concerned, the key issue is exactly the issue that the hon Member has raised.

In addition, we need world-class facilities, and an end to the current third-rate facilities that were brought about by a combination of inaction and delays over many years. Value for money is an issue, as is the matter of how quickly this can be delivered. I entirely agree with the hon Member's comments, but the issue falls within the remit of another Department.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister assure the Assembly that no public money will be given to a certain individual private developer — who has invited himself to the table and who has close associations with the Democratic Unionist Party — to build a visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway?

Mr Dodds: First, as I understand it, that developer has put forward a proposal on his own land, so he is as entitled as anybody to submit a planning application. Secondly, as far as the use of public money is concerned, I have always made it clear that the Government, just as was the case with the Titanic Quarter signature project, should be involved only to the extent that there has been market failure. Therefore, I say openly and clearly that I would need a lot of convincing that any public money should be invested where no market failure has occurred.

Inward Investment

4. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explain why, in the last five years, the areas of Craigavon, Banbridge and Lisburn combined had had only 29 visits organised by Invest NI for inward investors, compared to 368 for Belfast. (AQO 26/08)

Mr Dodds: Factors such as the content of a visit programme, the locations that have been chosen to visit, and, ultimately, the investment decision, rest solely with the prospective investor. If an investor seeks information on specific areas of Northern Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland will work with the local stakeholders to best promote that particular area.

In the past five years, Invest Northern Ireland has made 12 offers to internationally owned companies in Craigavon, Banbridge and Lisburn, offering over £24 million in assistance and leveraging more than £156 million in planned investment. Those inward investment projects have created 2,678 new and safeguarded jobs.

Mr Gardiner: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's figures show that between them, Banbridge, Craigavon and Lisburn have over 700 acres of land available for industrial use and 16,143 manufacturing jobs. Belfast has only 137 acres and 14,904 manufacturing jobs. In the light of that, will the Minister

assure the Assembly that in future, more inward investment will be directed towards the Banbridge, Craigavon and Lisburn corridor and that the blatant bias that Invest Northern Ireland shows towards Belfast will be rooted out?

Mr Dodds: I understand where the Member is coming from. People from other areas have made similar representations to me. However, it must be pointed out that Invest Northern Ireland does not determine the visit locations for potential investors; the investor makes that decision. When an investor is preparing to visit Northern Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland will work closely with them to ensure that the locations to be visited meet their requirements. Ultimately, however, the location decision rests with the investor.

The Member mentioned the availability of land. In recent years there has been a shift in investment from manufacturing to predominantly tradable service-based sectors, and the fact with which we have to cope is that investors from those sectors in particular place an increasing emphasis on locations that have large labour pools, excellent infrastructure, and close proximity to universities.

The Member knows well that council or constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets, and a project that is assisted or is based in a particular location has the potential to create benefits for a much wider area. Travel-to-work areas are much bigger than council areas or even, in some cases, constituencies. We must examine the matter in a truly representative way, taking into account the realities of what investors are looking for today. We must realise that we are in a competition that is taking place not between Banbridge and Belfast, Londonderry and Belfast, but between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world. It will be a big challenge for all of us to get that much-needed investment into the Province.

Mr Burns: Given the way in which Invest Northern Ireland appears to be directing most inward investment towards Belfast — which is an accurate reflection of the Minister's current priorities — does the Minister see potential for strong economic growth in any other area?

3.45 pm

Mr Dodds: There should be economic growth across the board, and DETI's efforts are targeted at achieving that in Northern Ireland. I would not subscribe for one moment to my Department, or any other Department, placing emphasis on Belfast over anywhere else in Northern Ireland. I will spell it out again, because I have said it before in the House: when delivering policy and programmes, attention and focus go to areas of need, high unemployment and social deprivation. Invest NI has a target of attracting 75% of all first-time inward investment projects to locate in disadvantaged

areas. That target was almost reached last year, when 73% of all such first-time inward investment projects located in disadvantaged areas. Another target is to secure at least 40% of new business starts in those areas. The Department is already focused on that matter. I understand the Member's view, and I have a great deal of sympathy with what he says.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Miss Michelle McIlveen.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister has already answered my question.

Inward Investment

5. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he was taking to ensure that the potential for inward investment emanating from the new political climate should be fully realised. (AQO 110/08)

Mr Dodds: The year 2006-07 was Invest NI's most successful in securing inward investment since its formation. Twenty-eight foreign-owned projects were secured, promoting and safeguarding nearly 3,700 jobs. Those projects represent a planned investment of nearly £176 million and are a clear testimonial to the confidence in Northern Ireland and optimism for the future from international markets.

To capitalise on that new confidence, I am actively involved with colleagues in Invest NI in planning a United States/Northern Ireland investment conference for next year, and the associated events in the United States will highlight Northern Ireland's potential with major US corporations. I have also agreed that Invest NI should establish an office in Mumbai, India. As part of the run-up to the US/Northern Ireland conference, US Ambassadors Tuttle and Foley are leading a small number of senior US executives on a one-day visit to Northern Ireland in mid-October. The visit will involve Executive Ministers and leaders in the Northern Ireland business community. The Executive have also made a detailed submission to Sir David Varney regarding potential changes to the fiscal structure and support for investment in Northern Ireland to capitalise on the new optimism.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I thank the Minister for his answer. What focus are he and his colleagues seeking in relation to the investment effort that they are promoting, particularly with the US? Will there be concentration on particular sectors? Will the focus be on well-placed executives, or will they be more randomly invited? It seems to some of us who have been dealing with this, including the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, that to match our emphasis on innovation, which was part of the negotiations that we had with the Chancellor, we must show

that the investment effort is well focused and ties in well with the other strategies. We hope that it will work well with our indigenous businesses, because it is very important that our own enterprises know that we are interested in growing them and not just bringing in others.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the Chairman's remarks, as there was much merit in them. He has drawn attention to the need for a targeted, focused approach rather than a scattergun approach. That is absolutely right and it marries closely with my view on the matter. The conference aims at attracting 40 to 60 top chief executive officers in the sectors that DETI believes can bring high-value-added jobs to Northern Ireland, namely in our key information and communication technology and financial and business services sectors.

The Chairman is right to point out the need to work with companies that are already here, whether foreign- or locally owned. That is a key message — it is not just about bringing in new investment; it is about ensuring that more of our local companies, many in the small and medium-sized category, grow and become more export-orientated and therefore increase productivity and bring in more high-value jobs. There is a dual approach.

Given the new circumstances in Northern Ireland and the level of commitment from the United States and elsewhere, the conference provides a potentially one-off opportunity to target the particular high-value-added sectors of foreign direct investment (FDI) that I mentioned. If too broad an approach for the conference is adopted, there is a danger of missing that opportunity. That is not to say that the Department does not deal with other sectors, such as the retail sector, but it does so by working alongside, and complementing, the conference.

Mr Newton: The Minister's response to Mr Durkan answered my question. The US conference is an important —

Mr Speaker: No further questions please, Mr Newton. Order.

Economic Investment Incentives

6. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the new and existing incentives to support economic investment in areas of high unemployment or social deprivation. (AQO 107/08)

Mr Dodds: My Department is committed to using its resources to benefit the most disadvantaged, and has designated six council areas as the focus for activities aimed at tackling poverty and social need: Newry and Mourne, Strabane, Londonderry, Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon, as well as certain areas of Belfast. Invest NI's full range of services, including

the provision of advice, information, and financial assistance, is available throughout Northern Ireland and, should it be deemed necessary to secure specific investments, enhanced rates of assistance can be offered to projects that locate in disadvantaged areas.

I detailed some of the following statistics in response to an earlier question, but I will repeat them so that they are on the record. Between April 2002 and March 2006, 49% of assistance offered by Invest NI was to clients that located in disadvantaged areas. Of the 52 first-time inward investment projects offered assistance in the same period, 73% were located in disadvantaged areas, as were 37% of new locally-owned businesses with high growth potential.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that both Government spending and direct inward investment should be used for the dual purpose of building prosperity and reducing inequality? Does he agree that the pilot project carried out by the Central Procurement Directorate should be a road map for how an employment plan can be included in public procurement contracts and that that would have a positive impact on the economic inactivity register? I have a particular interest in the levels of economic inactivity in the city of Derry.

Mr Dodds: The Member mentioned economic inactivity, which is a major issue in Northern Ireland. Everyone is aware of the bald statistics that go to make good headline figures for the economy. In Northern Ireland, more people are in employment than ever before and, compared to other regions in the UK and Europe, the levels of unemployment are similarly low. However, there are high levels of economic inactivity and, therefore, the Member made a fair point. The Department must address the problem. Some of the issues that the Minister for Employment and Learning mentioned earlier, such as Pathways to Work and so forth, are relevant to this subject.

The role of Invest NI is to encourage business start-ups and the growth of local indigenous companies. It persuades companies to become more innovative and promotes greater awareness of the advantages to their employees of training and skills. It ensures that businesses become more export-oriented, if possible, thereby expanding the economy. It also attracts the kind of FDI that is needed, for which Northern Ireland is in competition with other regions and countries.

The Member's point on procurement policy is relevant, and I will examine that closely.

Mr Wells: The Minister came close to answering my question, but I will still put it to him and allow him to elaborate on what he said earlier. Will he cite a specific example of how Invest Northern Ireland's programme of incentives addresses deprivation in areas of high unemployment?

Mr Dodds: It appears that I am able to anticipate some of the supplementary questions, but I suppose that some of them are fairly obvious. Last week, I attended the opening of a set of new high-tech units in Londonderry, as part of the North West Business and Technology Zone. That is a good example of how co-operation between the two jurisdictions attracted European funding.

Also last week, in my constituency of North Belfast — as part of the wider Renewing Communities initiative — we saw the example of the Exploring Enterprise programme, which is designed to awaken and encourage people's interest in starting businesses in areas of high unemployment and social deprivation. In Northern Ireland, there are many people who have great ideas, vision and work ethic, but they can sometimes lack the confidence to turn their ideas into reality. The Assembly must try to do more to show people, through mentoring, good example and encouragement, that they can achieve much if they put their mind to it and know how to go about it.

Mr B McCrea: Bearing in mind earlier comments about the balance between tradable services and manufacturing, does the Minister agree with his colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel that it is time for the Assembly to stop talking about helping manufacturing, and actually do something about it? Would he agree with that ministerial colleague that, although industrial derating may something of a blunt instrument, given the rather limited tools that are available, it should certainly form part of the armoury?

Mr Dodds: Manufacturing is a very important sector of the Northern Ireland economy, and it was interesting to note that employment figures released last week showed that 90% of the increase in the number of people employed in Northern Ireland was in the private sector, and a high proportion of that was in manufacturing. I think that that is a good-news story.

Mr McCrea would hardly expect me to say anything other than that I agree with my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. A review of industrial rating is ongoing, and work is being carried out on that matter by the Economic Research Institute for Northern Ireland, the results of which will be a matter for the Executive. I fully endorse what the Minister of Finance and Personnel said last week on that issue.

TriVirix

7. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following the collapse and closure of TriVirix in early 2006, to confirm the amount of public funds that have been recovered from the parent company based in the United States of America, further to the parental guarantee that it provided. (AQO 18/08)

Mr Dodds: After taking financial and legal advice, Invest Northern Ireland exchanged the parental guarantee in favour of an assignment to INI of the US parent's claim against the joint administrators on the grounds that that was likely to result in a more advantageous settlement for the Northern Ireland taxpayer.

The joint administrators are still processing all creditor claims and no funds have, as yet, been distributed. They have, however, indicated that an interim payment will be made to creditors in January 2008.

Mr Attwood: I urge the Minister to watch this matter very carefully. Is the Minister satisfied that, as per the then Secretary of State's commitment in July 2006, the parent company was being vigorously pursued for repayment of public moneys? Is that really the case? Does the Minister believe to be a realistic estimate the assertion made by INI earlier this year that £1.5 million was to be returned to it from the administrator, or has that become a pipe dream?

Finally, is the Minister satisfied that, when INI was releasing hundreds of thousands of pounds to TriVirix only a matter of months before the company collapsed, INI acted with all due diligence?

Mr Dodds: I will look at those matters and get back to the hon Member; I may not have access to all of the relevant papers, for obvious reasons. I can offer an assurance that, as far as the recovery of public funds is concerned, I will be keeping a very close eye on this matter. The steps that INI took to secure the assignment of the claim were taken in the interests of Northern Ireland taxpayers. I will watch that very closely. I cannot confirm the amount of funds that will be recovered, but I promise to keep the House and hon Member informed.

4.00 pm

Lord Browne: Will the Minister advise the House on how the old TriVirix factory site is being used?

Mr Dodds: The site is now in the possession of FG Wilson, and we should welcome that. The site has been taken into ownership and we hope that it will be used for economic regeneration in west Belfast. It was an unfortunate series of events, but such things happen from time to time. I am determined to recover whatever public money is outstanding to the greatest possible extent.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Free Public Transport for Women from the Age of 60

Mr 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in the promotion of equality for all in Northern Ireland, calls upon the Minister for Regional Development to introduce free public transport for women from the age of 60.

I wish to declare an interest as — although you would not think it — from last week, I became entitled to jump on the bus on Main Street, Kircubbin and travel to Main Street, Killarney, or further, free of charge. Unfortunately, my dear wife cannot accompany me unless she puts her hand in her purse, so that explains what the motion is about.

In 2005, the Alliance Party conference passed a motion calling for all pensioners, regardless of gender, to be awarded a Senior SmartPass. Today's motion should go some way to accomplishing that goal. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues for affording me the opportunity to have this debate.

A Senior SmartPass enables the holder to travel by rail, bus or the Strangford ferry without having to put their hand in their purse or pocket. Unfortunately, female pensioners are being denied a Senior SmartPass, as they have to wait a further five years to avail of it. Surely, that is discrimination at its worst. Moves must be made to rectify this serious anomaly as soon as possible. If it is right for the Government to regard women as pensioners when they reach the age of 60 and to pay them a state pension, common sense says that those women ought to be entitled to a Senior SmartPass, among other things.

This discriminatory practice must end. I am glad to see the Minister for Regional Development in the Chamber. The Assembly has the opportunity to ensure that all pensioners are treated equally. There are two options: either female pensioners be awarded the Senior SmartPass when they reach the age of 60, or men be entitled to the SmartPass when they reach the age of 60, thus creating equality for everyone. Those options are similar to both amendments, and I am sure that Members can reach some compromise on them.

I am a little concerned by the words “considerations” and “consider” that appear in the amendments. I urge caution, as similar words were used in debates on free personal care for the elderly, and we still await its implementation. That is a word of caution at this stage.

In certain parts of Britain, women aged 60 can avail of free travel, albeit at off-peak times. As of 2008, free travel will be available to everyone in England from the age of 60. In 2002, Wales introduced free off-peak travel for all at the age of 60, and last year Scotland introduced free-travel for all at the age of 60. Once again, it appears that Northern Ireland is lagging behind in looking after its citizens.

The strategy for older people, ‘Ageing in an Inclusive Society’, published in 2005, states that older people require accessible and tailored transportation for a better range and quality of services. Therefore, there should be no illusion that free public transport solves every transport issue for older people. We must continue to invest time and resources to ensure that there are appropriate transport provisions; for example through community transport for senior citizens in rural areas.

I am delighted to support the input from Age Concern Northern Ireland, Help the Aged and other groups on equality for all senior citizens in many aspects of life, which includes free public transport for women aged 60.

The importance of adhering to the lifestyles of the over-60s is also acknowledged in the strategy for older people. Older people constitute a large proportion of the audience at arts and cultural events, and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland will be addressing the inclusion of older people in spite of its budget being slashed. Concessionary permits are now available to all over-60s who want to fish in the public angling estate fisheries, and winter-heating allowances are paid to women at the age of 60. Therefore, there is already some admittance by the Government that all over-60s should be treated equally.

I express my appreciation to the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Library Service for the quality of its information pack, which the Alliance Party received. I also want to put on the record my appreciation to the previous Executive and Assembly, who were in charge when the concessionary fare scheme was introduced in 2001-02. At that time we welcomed the scheme, despite everyone having to be 65 years old to qualify. However, time has moved on and the distress that the five-year wait for a SmartPass causes female pensioners must now be recognised.

I acknowledge the input from the Southern Government who, after working with politicians here, agreed to all-Ireland free travel, which came into effect on 1 April 2007. I know that many local people are enjoying the freedom to travel north, south, east and west across

the island. Perhaps, pensioners could soon avail of similar travel throughout all of these islands.

In conclusion, the issue must be addressed. The Committee for Regional Development has acknowledged the inequality of the current situation and will put forward proposals to address it in the near future.

The Alliance Party has long highlighted that £1 billion a year is squandered in Northern Ireland due to segregation in many aspects of life. Indeed, that figure has been overtaken by recent reports that indicate wastage of £1.5 billion. The Executive must immediately get to work to ensure that there is no more wastage and that everyone is treated equally, so that in this instance all our senior citizens — men and women — are awarded the SmartPass without further delay.

I noticed on today’s lunchtime news that the Minister for Regional Development used public transport to get to work in this Building.

Mr Kennedy: Stunt.

Mr McCarthy: Stunt or otherwise, I am using the opportunity to call on the Minister to allow women from the age of 60 to do the same for free. The Minister was calling on other public representatives to use public transport, and I agree with him. Leave the car at home and use the trains and buses, and of course the Strangford ferry — we must never forget that Maurice.

Without the pressure that I exerted on the provision of the Strangford ferry, the people of that area would have been forgotten. The Minister for Regional Development should put his money where his mouth is and without delay get all women over 60 out of the car and on to public transport by awarding them the Senior SmartPass as early as possible. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“, mindful of policy elsewhere in the United Kingdom, calls upon the Minister for Regional Development, subject to budgetary considerations, to introduce free public transport for women and men at the age of 60.”

Free transport for older people can greatly improve their quality of life. Many older people live on limited budgets, and their entitlement to the Senior SmartPass, which allows them free travel on public transport, helps them to use their limited budgets for other basic essentials, and it enables them to make additional trips to see friends and family. Therefore, the relative isolation under which they would otherwise have lived is removed and their lives are significantly improved.

I was pleased when the previous Executive approved the additional funding that allowed the relevant Minister to introduce free public transport for all people over 65. However, it is time to extend that to everyone who is over the age of 60. I tabled amendment No 1 because

I do not wish to replace one unfairness — and that has been alluded to already — with another. Surely all men and women who are over 60 should be entitled to free transport. It would be wrong for the Assembly to replace one unfairness with another, and I hope that Members will recognise that support for my amendment will prevent that happening.

The policy unit of Help the Aged sent me a briefing paper, dated 14 September 2007, and I thank them for that. It states:

“we believe the age for free travel should be reduced to 60 and in order to maintain equality between men and women, a reduction in age criteria should apply to men also. This would bring NI in line with age eligibility criteria in GB, where both men and women are eligible for free travel at the age of 60.”

Careful examination of my amendment will show that it reflects those sentiments. Entitlement to free public transport should apply equally to men and women, and the criterion that has been used in other parts of the United Kingdom should apply here.

All Assembly Members, including Ministers and Committee members, will have a role to play in ensuring that free public transport is made available to everyone from the age of 60, if that is what the Assembly agrees to. I hope that the Minister for Regional Development has included free public transport in his bids and that the Committee for Regional Development supports him. I am a member of the Committee for Finance, and I am sure that this issue will come ultimately before that Committee. I hope that the Committee for Finance and, ultimately, the Finance Minister will have a role to play in approving the issue. Therefore, if the Assembly is willing to agree the policy, it will be possible to achieve it.

I will refer to some comments made by Kieran McCarthy, a Member for Strangford, about the wording of my amendment. I did not want the House to be divided on the matter, so I sought wording to which no one could object. I am aware that Members voted against previous motions on the matter, even though they were generally supported, simply because they did not want to make any commitments prior to the beginning of the budgetary process. By supporting amendment No 1, Members will show their support for free public transport for everyone at the age of 60 and above. Subsequently, members of the relevant Committees — and the Executive, who will play their part in introducing the draft Budget — have the ability to introduce free public transport for everyone at age 60 and above, and, therefore, reduce the anomaly and prevent further injustice. I urge Members to support my amendment, which will improve the lives of many vulnerable people in society.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Wells: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “to” and insert

“consider the introduction of free public transport for everyone over the age of 60.”

All Members accept that the introduction of free fares for our senior citizens was one of the most popular policies that the previous Executive introduced, and, of course, it is no surprise to find that it was introduced by the DUP.

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

4.15 pm

Mr Wells: I know that it grieves Mr Beggs when I remind him of this, but the fact is that it was an idea hatched by Peter Robinson, the hon Member for East Belfast, and implemented by the hon Member for East Londonderry Mr Campbell. Every pensioner in Northern Ireland — whether living in Jonesboro, Londonderry or Kilkeel — appreciated and welcomed the opportunity to enjoy free public transport on roads, railways and, of course, the Strangford ferry.

All Members must admit that free travel has enormously improved the quality of life for many senior citizens. When one drives through Belfast during off-peak hours, it is amazing how many active senior citizens can be seen waiting for the bus — going shopping, visiting relatives or, perhaps, even going out for the day to the north coast. That is to be welcomed —

Mr Kennedy: Going to the Giant's Causeway.
[Laughter.]

Mr Wells: Including the Giant's Causeway. No doubt, when the new visitors' centre arrives, they will visit that as well.

Mr Kennedy: Which one?

Mr Wells: Which one indeed.

Seriously, this policy has been what we call in the business a no-brainer, and it has been universally popular throughout the country. To a large extent, it has also invigorated the public-transport system, because the times when pensioners travel are often the times when buses and trains are half empty. Why not utilise that empty capacity to improve the quality of life for those who have given so much to society throughout their working lives?

Although that success has been acknowledged, it has thrown up anomalies, and the Member for Strangford Mr McCarthy raised an important issue. However, I support the comments made by Mr Beggs. The DUP and UUP amendments are almost identical. There is no merit in solving one problem by creating another.

Members can all agree that there is a simple solution. Regardless of their status, everybody in Northern Ireland

should be entitled to free transport throughout Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland when they hit the age of 60 — and that is not far away for me. I understand that the cost of that policy would be a mere £3 million. I am sure that the Minister for Regional Development will provide Members with details of his calculations for the incoming financial year. Compared to the overall budget for that Department, £3 million is a drop in the ocean — it is barely the cost of a couple of miles of dual carriageway. That money could easily be found by identifying savings in the budget. The policy would benefit the entire community and, of course, provide an environmental benefit by encouraging more people to avail of public transport rather than be car-dependent.

On a technical point, because there is little merit in simply repeating points that have already been made, I urge Members to accept whichever amendment is called first, incorporate that into Mr McCarthy's motion, and put the resulting proposal to the Minister for Regional Development to discover whether he can find the money to implement it.

I suggest to the Minister that such a policy would be popular — popular in Jonesboro, Whitecross, Camlough, Crossmaglen and other areas where he seeks votes. It would also be popular in Kilkeel, Annalong and Rathfriland, where other Members value votes. Therefore, this concession is an action that Members can be seen to be taking for the entire community — to benefit everyone, including, if we are spared, Members.

Ms J McCann: I support the motion and both amendments. There is little difference between the amendments, which call for free public transport for everyone over 60.

In the North of Ireland, 6.3% of the population is of pensionable age — currently 65 for men and 60 for women. I know that there are plans to increase the age at which women receive the state pension to 65, and other pension reforms will result in a state pension age of 68 for everyone.

In its first Programme for Government, the Assembly recognised that older people should have a high priority, and a group was set up to promote social inclusion and to examine and address the challenges that cause older people to be at risk of exclusion. Discrimination and poverty are major barriers to older people's fulfilling their potential, and the Department for Regional Development's accessible transport strategy claims that one of the most prominent barriers is the affordability of transport services.

It also states that one of its strategic objectives is to provide help with travel costs for older people, so that they can use the transport available to them. I welcome the bid by the Department for Regional Development to provide free transport to all at the age of 60.

There are many inequalities in the pension system, mainly affecting women, particularly those who stayed at home to look after young children, worked in low-paid employment, or gave up work to become carers.

In the North of Ireland today, 7% of women between the ages of 60 and 74 care for someone in their household. Caring throughout life can result in multiple disadvantages in later life. It can impact upon income, pension accumulation and the development of social networks. Women feel the impact most, as they depend most on non-contributory old-age pensions, so their incomes are lower.

Both state and private pension outcomes are lower for women than for men, and there are very clear differences between women and men when it comes to pension income. For example, single women receive an average of £180 a week, compared to single men, who receive £197. Fifty-nine per cent of women pensioners have an income below that required to secure a basic minimum standard of living, and only 30% of women who retire are entitled to the full basic state pension.

Women who are part of a couple receive, on average, £128 a week, compared to £236 a week for men who are part of a couple. Women have a right to live in dignity, not poverty, and to have their economic and social contributions recognised. Section 75 promotes equality between men and women generally, and, although the current retirement age is 60 for women and 65 for men, no one should be discriminated against because of their gender.

Many pensioners do not have access to cars and depend on public transport, as other Members have said. Therefore, adequate, affordable and appropriate transport should be available to all people at the age of 60. I ask the House to support the motion and the amendments.

Mr Dallat: This is an interesting debate, particularly as Mr McCarthy drew the parallel between free travel and public transport. I share his admiration for the Minister, although I understand that the Minister chose first-class travel, and most people do not qualify for that. Perhaps all travel will be first class in the future.

The age-old row about who found the money for free travel has emerged again. Just as Peter Robinson holds the purse strings now, Mark Durkan held them then, and, in an effort to coax the DUP, he very generously gave them the money for the new trains. That is a fact. Before that, all parties lobbied the direct rule Ministers and got all sorts of excuses as to why free travel was not possible.

The motion is very simple; it is to allow women of 60 years of age and over to enjoy the benefits of free travel. That is simple, and the Minister could deal with it immediately. However, my concern is that the two

amendments could push the matter into a sort of “Noddy land”, where he might or might not implement it. I have no particular objection to the amendments —

Mr Beggs: There is a genuine concern, as the Member will know from the Help the Aged piece that I read out, that there is an equality issue, which, if it is not addressed, might invalidate the motion, and the Minister would not be able to implement free travel in that format.

Mr Dallat: I was just coming to that. Free travel for those over 60 was introduced in England in April 2006. It is restricted to off-peak times, but there is no reason why that cannot be built upon. Before that, the Transport Act 2000 linked travel concessions for elderly people to pensionable age as defined in the Pensions Act 1995, which age is 60 for women and 65 for men.

Until 2010, women can continue to retire at 60, but cannot avail of free travel, so it is not a good argument to use one inequality to justify another.

Since this issue was first acknowledged as a factor in promoting equality, there has been too much of the half-loaf mentality, and not enough of a broader vision of the benefits of free travel. Given that one-in-four people in society live below the breadline, surely it should be obvious that the time for the Scrooge mentality is over, and that it is time for a reality check.

There are currently 45,000 women between the ages of 60 and 64 who are affected by the restriction — surely that is a desperate inequality that needs to be given priority. Many of them live alone because they are single or widowed, and many are experiencing one of the worst forms of poverty — loneliness, which frequently leads to mental-health problems and poor-health lifestyles. What could be healthier than being able to travel to visit places of interest, meet other lonely people, or, indeed, fulfil lifelong ambitions — something that they could not do when they were rearing their families and scraping to survive?

Today, the Assembly has the opportunity to recognise the contribution that women made to this society during one of the worst periods of our troubled history. Let this Assembly not go down in history as a bunch of wimps who could not see beyond the tunnel vision of previous direct rule regimes, who gave the impression they had a God-given right to preside over the rights of older people in a manner that, at times, appeared obscene.

Members have the opportunity to stamp our identity on this Assembly and remove the increasing notion that it is nothing more than a rubber stamp for what went before. All Members know that what went before failed not only pensioners, but many others.

I welcome Mr Wells's notion that free travel for the over 60s will bring loads of visitors to the north coast. I am sure that the few remaining businesses there will

appreciate that, given that Portballintrae and Portstewart have been severely damaged by people buying second homes in those areas.

Mr G Robinson: According to the Department for Regional Development's website:

“The Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme was established to promote accessible public transport for members of the community who are most vulnerable, through discounted fares.”

That is the reasoning behind the introduction of concessionary fares.

I am pleased to be able to support the motion, for a number of reasons. Unlike the younger generations, not all people who are entitled to a state pension have their own transport, for perhaps health or financial reasons. That leaves them dependent on public transport for their travel needs — particularly in the more rural areas of our Province. Anything that aids their ability to access public transport on a frequent and eminently affordable basis is to be welcomed.

As we heard in an earlier debate today, isolation can result in health problems. The proposed extension of the concessionary fares scheme will encourage greater social inclusion, and help with the maintenance of good health. The extension of the concessionary scheme to women who are 60-plus years young can only be welcomed, particularly because, since 2 April 2007, the scheme enables holders of the Translink SmartPass to travel for free across the border as well.

Translink have invested in new buses and trains that make access to vehicles much easier for older people. It is therefore essential that the numbers of people who will undoubtedly appreciate that substantial investment are encouraged to use Translink services.

Age Concern, in a 2007 report, states that:

“Accessibility to transport is crucial if older people are to be able to keep in touch with friends and family and to get necessary goods and services that mean they can continue to live independently. Adequate, affordable, accessible and appropriate transport should be available to help prevent isolation and to ensure that older people can participate fully in society.”

We must also take into consideration the fact that supermarkets have a tendency to choose sites that are not central, which creates an additional problem for full participation in society. Surely, that alone is justification enough to extend the scheme.

The extension of the scheme will be of most assistance to those who live on their own. Only 20% of single-person households have cars, whereas, for couples, that figure is 65%.

4.30 pm

Sadly, 40% of pedestrian fatalities are people aged 60 plus. Extension of the concessionary scheme will greatly aid women living on their own and may help to reduce that figure. Current demographic changes will

continue: the population will continue to age and retire earlier; and women will continue to outlive men. Therefore, I am confident that women will appreciate this move to extend their entitlement to a SmartPass at retirement age for the reasons I have mentioned.

I take great pleasure in supporting amendment No 2.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion as amended. The benefits of providing travel passes for older people are beyond doubt. It helps, for instance, to reduce the marginalisation often experienced by older people in society. Up to 75% of older people questioned agreed that they felt marginalised.

Free travel will also help to maintain ties with family members who have moved to other areas in the North. It will also help to keep older people involved in the community and allow them to meet like-minded groups without incurring travelling expenses. Since its introduction in April, Ireland-wide travel has been a great success among those who qualify. I am aware of constituents who have benefited from it. I know of people who, for instance, travelled to Dublin to spectate at the Mahon Tribunal. Others have used free travel to continue lifelong learning.

Free travel passes should be made available to the greatest possible number of people; therefore I welcome this debate. Free travel for the over-60s will benefit a large number of people, and there should be no discrimination on the basis of gender. As has been stated already, there is disparity between the pensionable age for men and that for women. That will be addressed by the Pensions Bill, which, instead of reducing the pensionable age for men, will raise the pensionable age for women. Eventually the pensionable age for all will be 68.

A Member: Some will look forward to that.

Mr Brady: Some may look forward to it; others will not. Obviously, some are closer than others.

[Interruption.]

I will talk to Mr Kennedy about that later.

Free travel should be available to all over 60 years of age to enable them to benefit from the concession. I welcome that, in the recent budgetary bids, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) sought funding to roll out the travel pass programme to everyone over 60. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Irwin: For many years the Democratic Unionist Party has prided itself on its commitment to the elderly. We are concerned to reward, empower and support older people so that they can live full and active lives for longer. Our dedication to the elderly was demonstrated when we pioneered the warm homes scheme and introduced concessionary travel on public

transport for those aged 65 and over. Our party is openly and fully committed to extending the free fares scheme to include women and everyone over 60.

No one will deny that the population is ageing. Studies carried out by different Government bodies and the 2001 census demonstrate that. Help the Aged notes that there are over 275,000 people of pensionable age living in Northern Ireland. That is 16% of the population, and it is estimated that that will increase to 24% by 2013.

We all understand that with old age comes a degree of poverty. Help the Aged states that 22.2% of pensioners in Northern Ireland live in poverty owing to lower incomes. The reality of an ageing population and the degree of poverty amongst the elderly reiterates the need for a reduction in the age of free travel fares to 60 to enable all elderly people to continue enjoying an active and full life by being able to travel throughout the country unhindered.

We should respect and reward the elderly in our society. The Executive have an opportunity to show that they are committed to and appreciative of the many years of service that senior citizens have given to our society.

The policy review carried out by the Department for Regional Development shows the enormity of the scheme's success. Amendment No 2 to today's motion would further fulfil the Department's aim to promote social inclusion by improving public transport accessibility through free travel and concessionary fares for the elderly, who are vulnerable, especially to social exclusion. Concessionary fares could also be used as an incentive to encourage activities such as work and education, which have the potential to combat the causes of social exclusion.

A total of 212,118 SmartPasses were issued between their introduction in 2002 and 2006. Of those, 197,209 were issued to senior citizens. There are 197,209 SmartPasses circulating in a population of 275,000 — an overall take-up rate of 83%, which reduces to 70% once the approximate number of 31,000 deceased customers is taken into consideration.

The average number of journeys taken by senior citizen SmartPass holders in 2005-06 was 38. Therefore, the scheme is being used, and it is possible that some of the elderly customers may not have taken the journeys had they not received their passes. Our aim must be to increase the availability of the scheme.

It would be remiss not to mention that women are currently eligible for the state pension at age 60, and men at 65. That women have to wait until they are 65 before receiving free travel is a contradiction of policies. The DUP believes that everyone should be able to avail of such a privilege at the age of 60, in keeping with the Government's commitment to equality.

Furthermore, it is essential to have consistency throughout the UK and align our policy with that of England, Scotland and Wales, where for a number of years there has been a commitment to providing free travel for everyone aged 60 and above.

Bearing that in mind, the DUP is fully committed to such a proposal and calls on the House to support amendment No 2.

Mr McCallister: Unlike other Members, I have no need to declare an interest in the area, nor have I any plans to date a lady who is over 60.

A Member: You could not get one. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: I may have to review that policy if things do not improve. *[Laughter.]*

I am glad to see the conversion by my fellow South Down MLA Mr Wells, who is now so proactive in devolution. There are two ways of looking at it: either the Executive at the time could have taken the credit for the policy, or the DUP can take the credit for it, in which case we can ask it why it introduced a policy that has led to such an inequality.

Mr Wells: I am not going to answer that.

Mr McCallister: I should hope not.

I agree with Mr McCarthy that the Strangford ferry would be an important addition as it links two of the most scenic constituencies in the country and encourages tourism throughout that area.

The issue of equality is at the heart of the debate. Why should women have to wait five years after they have reached pension age, until the age of 65, to avail of free public transport? Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK that tolerates that continuing inequality.

The rest of the country is well ahead of Northern Ireland. In England, such schemes will be administered by local authorities from 2008 onwards. Free travel will be available to eligible men and women from the age of 60. In 2002, the Welsh Assembly introduced free off-peak bus travel for pensioners anywhere in Wales: those who are 60 years of age and over are eligible. In 2006, the Scottish Executive introduced free travel throughout Scotland for pensioners: the age for eligible men and women there is also 60.

Many Members have pointed out the fact that the issue is simply one of equality. There are a great many benefits to society in tackling poverty and social exclusion through giving Northern Ireland's senior citizens an active and full life. I urge the Minister to do the right thing and introduce the policy. I support my party's amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I do not wish to repeat arguments that have already been articulated over and over again in the Chamber. However, I want to make

three brief points. The Committee for Regional Development has raised the issue on several occasions. I trust that all Members are committed to ensuring that the anomaly is removed.

Although other issues have been regurgitated in the Chamber, the one that is important is that of discrimination against women. The scheme is not the first to have discriminated against women. For years, women who were 60 years of age were discriminated against by the warm homes scheme. The neighbourhood parking scheme is another example of when women of that age are discriminated against. Those are forms of institutionalised discrimination against women. In the words of the old song, "This is a man's world" — and that is the problem.

If the Assembly is committed to equality, as it says it is, any instance of women being discriminated against should be removed. It is not an issue of finance but one of equality. As Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I am sure that I speak on its behalf when I urge the Minister to deal with the issue. That is the first of my three points, and, I believe, the most important.

It is not possible to reduce the age for free public transport to 60 years of age for women without doing the same for men. The reason, which has been explained on numerous occasions, is that if the age is reduced to 60 for women and 65 for men, men are, therefore, being discriminated against. If the age is to be reduced to 60, it must be reduced for everyone. That is why Mr McCarthy's motion cannot stand.

As Members are aware, free travel was designed to combat social exclusion, and I was pleased to hear Mr Wells talk about how many people are using the system. He said that, at one stage, there were far too many people using it: some people were even getting buses to Dublin.

Mr Wells: It is important that I place that comment in context. I referred to one individual who gets the Enterprise to Dublin at 12.00 noon every day, has lunch with his daughter and returns home. Of course, the bill goes to the Department for Regional Development. That has been going on for three or four years. My point was not about pensioners getting the bus to the shops or to visit their sons or daughters in Belfast.

Mr Cobain: As far as I am concerned, the issue is one of social exclusion for pensioners. As many people as possible who are over the age of 60 should avail of the service, irrespective of the cost. It is not a financial issue. I want the Minister to tackle the issue as a matter of equality rather than of finance.

4.45 pm

In all those schemes that I mentioned, women get a raw deal. Very few Members speak up on behalf of

women, except those with a direct interest. Very few men in the Chamber speak up on behalf of women. When we speak of equality, is it equality for everyone? Members scrutinise Bills — which clearly discriminate against women — throughout their many stages, yet we ignore that discrimination and allow the Bill to pass.

John McCallister made a point about the introduction of Bills and people who unfairly claim credit for various matters relating to them. When the warm homes scheme discriminated against people who were 60 years old, no-one raised that issue. When the concessionary fares scheme was introduced by the Executive — and it discriminated against women of 60 — no-one raised that issue. Because it has become fashionable to raise issues of equality, everyone claims credit for doing so. Until we get a framework of equality for everyone, all of those issues will continue to haunt the Members in the Chamber. We must keep equality at the forefront of our minds when addressing individuals or groups who are disadvantaged, such as those who are over 60.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I thank the Members for today's debate. I have welcomed it and I thank Mr McCarthy for introducing the matter. I will attempt to address the issue of concessionary fares and equality. The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee made the point that it is about an inequality towards women. However, a further inequality would be created if we were to move in the direction that is proposed by Mr McCarthy. That issue was addressed in some of the Members' contributions to the debate.

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

The concessionary fares scheme is important for many people in the North and is a significant element of my Department's spending on public transport. I have listened carefully to a lot of the points that have been made by the proposer of the motion and by all of the other speakers. It is helpful to have this debate now because the issues relating to the concessionary fares scheme are being considered as part of the comprehensive spending review.

Before dealing specifically with the issue of concessionary fares for women between the ages of 60 and 65, it might be helpful if I were to give some background information on the system of concessionary fares that now operates in the North. The current scheme dates back to the late 1970s. The Transport (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 gave the Government wide powers to reimburse public transport operators for concessionary fares. Those powers were used in 1978 to extend the concessions available in Belfast to the rest of the North. At that time, half-fare travel was provided for senior citizens, for children and for those in receipt of a war-disablement pension.

Free travel was made available for those who were registered as blind. There was also free travel for children below the age of five. That concession was, and continues to be, provided by public transport operators, without Government support. Then, as now, eligibility for concessionary fares passes was on the basis of residence in the North.

The system remained, largely, the same for a number of years. The first significant change was in 1995, when the Irish Government introduced a scheme for free travel on journeys across the border. That benefited senior citizens, the blind and war-disabled residents in the North.

The first major change in concessionary fares, in the North, came during the initial period of devolution. I will not get into the debate about who was responsible for that. In October 2001, free travel was introduced for senior citizens over the age of 65. In May 2002, free travel was introduced for war-disabled persons. In April 2004 the scheme was changed to give half-fare travel to a wider range of disabled people.

The most recent change in the concessionary fares system was introduced earlier this year. Following an agreement between the two Governments, the all-Ireland free travel scheme for older people got under way in April. Under that arrangement, the North pays for the cross-border travel of eligible older people who are resident in the South. In turn, the cost of travel in the South, for older people who are resident in the North, is met by the southern authorities. That may allay some Members' fears about people dining out in Dublin.

I am pleased to say that the arrangements seem to be working smoothly. Over 22,500 SmartPasses have been issued to residents of the South, while residents in the North have been able to use their existing passes to access services across the border. There has long been a perception that the concessionary fares scheme in the North is less generous than schemes in the South and in Britain. Roy Beggs and John McCallister referred to that matter. That is not the case.

In Britain, for example, many schemes are restricted to off-peak, local bus travel only. Here, eligible people can travel throughout the North on bus and rail service and, perhaps, even on the Strangford ferry, at any time of the day. Eligible senior citizens can travel throughout the North at the age of 65, whereas a senior concessionary fare in the South is available only from the age of 66.

From the outset, as Members have mentioned, the purpose of the concessionary fares scheme has been to tackle social exclusion by making public transport more affordable for the most vulnerable members of society. As a result of the arrangements introduced in 1978, and change since then, there is in place a concessionary fares scheme that costs about £19.5

million per year, and which is projected to grow to £22 million by April 2008.

The most significant beneficiaries of this scheme are those over the age of 65. Since 2001, over 200,000 senior-citizen SmartPasses have been issued. Free travel for senior citizens currently costs about £10 million and is set to grow to about £12 million by 2015. Part of that growth is a result of better mobility and better services. However, a key factor is the growth in the number of people aged 65 and over. It has been estimated recently that the number in that age group will increase from 236,000 to 281,000 in the 10 years between 2005 and 2015.

The second major group of beneficiaries is children, who benefit from the half-fare concession. In the current year, supporting their journeys will cost about £6.7 million. Children and young people have been identified as being at relatively high risk of poverty and social exclusion. The half-fare concession is very important, not only to them, but to their parents as well.

The remaining category of beneficiaries is those with disabilities, some of whom are eligible for a full-fare concession, but the majority of whom are not. People with disabilities are recognised as being at relatively high risk of social exclusion. About 13,000 half-fare SmartPasses have been issued to people with disabilities.

Taken as a whole, the various components of the concessionary fares scheme have had a major positive impact on the lives of a great number of people, but, like any system, it may need to be reviewed and refreshed. Last year, officials in my Department undertook an important policy review of the concessionary fares scheme, and they have put forward a number of different options, which I have been able to consider.

Before I talk about those options, I will turn to an issue that did not form part of the Department's current review, but which is at the heart of this current debate — whether free travel should be extended to women between the ages of 60 and 64. Members have dealt with the issue today already, and it will not surprise them that it has been raised over a number of years.

I should say at the outset that current eligibility for the senior scheme is based on age and residence. It is not necessary to be in receipt of a pension to be eligible for free travel — contrary to what some have said today. That arrangement is consistent with the legal position that it would be unacceptable under European legislation for the scheme to be restricted to citizens of the North or to be tied to a condition that could not be met by other EU citizens.

In 1978, when the qualifying age for the concessionary fares scheme was being set, the Department of the Environment, which was then responsible for the scheme, took advice from the Department of Health

and Social Services. The conclusion was that the qualifying age should be set at 65. Obviously those considering the issue at the time were aware of the differences in the state pension age for men and women. However, the advice then, and now, is that a scheme to give concessionary travel to women at the age of 60 but to men at the age of 65 would be discriminatory and would be in breach of the Sex Discrimination Order 1976. That remains the Department's understanding of the position. Clearly, I would not want to embark on a change in policy on concessionary fares that would run directly contrary to our equality and fair treatment policies.

I have already mentioned the recent review of the concessionary fares scheme carried out by my Department. It has analysed the current concessionary fares scheme in considerable detail and compared the position here to that in other jurisdictions. It put forward several options for change and development of the scheme.

Having considered the options, I have put forward a number of bids as part of the comprehensive spending review, totalling about £11 million. If they were met, they would enable me to extend the concessionary fares scheme in several important directions. In view of today's debate, Members should be aware that that figure includes a bid for over £4 million that would enable me to introduce free travel for all people — men and women — over the age of 60. I think that it was Jim Wells who asked that question directly. I think that Mr Dallat remarked that that would be easily done now. That begs the question: why did the Minister of Finance and Personnel not introduce free travel for all people over 60 when he was Minister for Regional Development? Such an introduction could not be so easily done now — it must be bid for as part of the Department's bid in the budgetary process.

I am conscious that we are entering a budgetary process in which other priorities will be put forward. I am also very conscious that the best way to secure these matters is not to bid in a public forum, but to bid and secure the support of the Regional Development Committee, as Roy Beggs said — indeed, to secure the support of the Finance and Personnel Committee for bids that the Assembly would consider a priority.

Were the bid to be met in full, I could extend free travel to disabled people, who are currently eligible for half-fare travel only. That would be of considerable benefit to a particularly vulnerable group of people, and such a move would be widely welcomed. About 150,000 people would benefit from that change, which would cost more than £4 million.

I could extend half-fare travel to children up to the age of 18 years. Current eligibility for half-fare travel is linked to the school-leaving age and the school term. Given the risks of poverty and social exclusion that

children face, it makes more sense that the concession be made available to all children, up to the age of majority. Such a change would cost about £1.2 million.

I could also offer a concession to the unemployed who are returning to work, in order to help them with their transport needs and expenses at a time when that support might be critical to them. The scheme that I have in mind would cost about £500,000.

Finally, Members should be aware that one criticism of the concessionary fares scheme is that it is of greatest benefit to those who already have access to existing public-transport services. As a result, the take-up of concessionary fares is highest, in the main, in urban areas and in the east. Take-up is lower in rural areas and in the west, where public-transport services are more limited, or do not exist at all. For that reason, I have also made a bid for £1 million to enable me to reduce fares paid by people who use community-based transport schemes. Strictly speaking, such an arrangement will not form part of the concessionary fares scheme, but I hope that it will go some way towards addressing current imbalances.

I am conscious that the bid that I have made is no more than that — a bid. It must be considered against other public spending priorities, not only in other Departments but in mine. I have also made bids for resources that will enable me to improve general public-transport services for all users, whether they are in receipt of concessions or not. I am also aware that if I receive less than I have sought for concessionary fares, I must consider where my priorities lie. I am grateful for the views that have been expressed today. Those views reinforce what I believe to be a priority.

In conclusion, I consider the concessionary fares scheme, as it stands, to have made, and to continue to make, a major, positive contribution to the issues of mobility and social inclusion. I recognise that there are other changes that would benefit the scheme, but, for the reasons that I have set out, I hope that Members will accept that it is not possible to make those changes. Anti-discrimination laws mean that I cannot offer free fares to women from the age of 60 without offering the same concession to men of that age.

Lord Morrow: I listened intently to what the Minister had to say, and he chose a lot of words that evaded dealing with the issues. It seems that constituencies such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone always fare badly when it comes to expenditure. In rural constituencies such as mine, we do not have trains or planes, but we do have a very poor and inefficient public-transport system. Nothing that the Minister has said today will make me believe that that situation will change.

My party considered tabling an amendment similar to Mr Beggs's, but we decided to proceed with our own amendment, because its wording contains a

challenge to the Minister. It is up to him, having received his budget, to allocate his priorities. The challenge to the Minister today is very simple: is free public transport for everyone over the age of 60 a priority or not? If it is, how high is it on his list of priorities? Towards the end of his speech, the Minister did say that he thinks that it is a priority. If he thinks that it is a priority, he will prioritise it, and if he does not, he should come out and tell us why not.

The Minister cannot, by any imagination, no matter what words his speech-writers might conjure up, tell us any reason why that change should not happen. This is supposed to be the age of equality for everybody, in which there is no discrimination in any shape, size or form, whether one is male or female.

5.00 pm

It is blatantly obvious that Mr McCarthy's motion would legislate for discrimination; that is its fundamental weakness. The first amendment supports the introduction of free public transport for women from the age of 60, "subject to budgetary considerations". The DUP amendment, on the other hand, asks the Minister to consider whether he regards such a measure as a priority. If he does, he should get on with implementing the policy; if he does not, he should explain why to the House. It is an easy call to make.

It is not good enough for the Minister to say that he will go to the Minister of Finance to put forward his claim for extra money and that he will implement the policy if the money is made available. The Minister for Regional Development will receive his budget, along with every other Minister, and he must decide what his priorities are. Does the Minister think that the issue merits a hike in his priority budget? If the answer is yes, free public transport for women from the age of 60 will be introduced. The Minister need not try to wriggle out of giving an answer by saying that there are restraints on his Department. Every Department has restraints, and I suspect that every Minister could ask for an extra couple of 100 million pounds.

The DUP amendment tells the Minister that this is an important issue and everyone, whether male or female, must be treated equally. Whether a person's journey takes them to Dublin or Timbuktu, we contend that if you are over the age of 60, you should be entitled to free travel. Therefore, we cannot support Mr McCarthy's motion. I ask him, in the cold light of the debate, to accept amendment No 2. I know that he will consider that.

I ask the Ulster Unionists to think similarly. It is not their duty or mine to prioritise on behalf of the Minister. He will call his budget and spend it as he sees fit according to how his priorities stack up. That is why the DUP suggested that free public transport be made available to all aged over the age of 60. Rural

communities always suffer with public transport, whether it is free or not.

Mr Beggs: We must be sure that one inequality does not replace another. I understand the reasoning for the motion, but its proposers have overlooked the fact that enacting it would replace the inequality that female pensioners from the age of 60 do not qualify for free public transport with the inequality that men from the age of 60 do not qualify. My amendment will rectify that.

It must also be remembered that the additional money that it will cost will not disappear into the profit of a private company. It will be additional money that the Assembly will pass to Translink, a publicly owned company, which can reinvest in buses, additional routes or trains. In effect, the policy would oblige the Assembly to spend more money on public transport. It is a laudable purpose that would help not only the individuals concerned, but would improve public transport for everyone. It would greatly enhance the lives of many people aged 60 and over.

As I said earlier, we can make progress on this by gaining the support of the Committee for Regional Development. I understand that that is a direct process in the Assembly, and subsequently for the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). As has been said, choices may have to be made.

It may be a question of choosing between the policy and constructing two additional miles of dual carriageway. The Assembly should choose to adopt the policy, because it will have a clearer impact on the lives of many people who may be isolated and vulnerable. The existing inequalities must be removed and no new inequality created. I ask all Members to support the amendment in my name and subsequently progress it through the various stages. It should be implemented by April 2008 at the latest, or sooner if money becomes available. There should be long-term recurrent funding to deliver free transport for everyone from the age of 60.

Dr Farry: It is fair to say that a broad consensus is breaking out in the Chamber. It is important to bear that in mind, even though there may be some dispute about the particular minutiae of how to go about implementing the policy and whose responsibility it is to deliver it. As the proposer of the motion, the Alliance Party is happy to accept either or both amendments, as Kieran McCarthy pointed out at the start of the debate. Our broad concern is to ensure that the matter is addressed, not merely considered and put into the long grass for another day. In our capacity as Members of the Assembly, we can deliver on this issue quickly.

I recognise that the provision of free public transport for everyone aged 65 and over was one of the last Assembly's major achievements. There may be different claims on who takes the credit for delivering that policy, but the entire Assembly can take credit, because all

parties supported it. It reflected broader policy changes on public transport that were happening throughout the United Kingdom at the time.

Essentially, the motion tries to address an anomaly in the system. There is equality of entitlement to free public transport at the age of 65, but there is not equality in the ages at which men and women receive their pension. There is an argument to be had about whether the current system should be equalised so that women and men retire at the age of 65. Mr Brady referred to the Pensions Bill. That is a wider issue to be debated another day, but it raises the issue of equality, to which several Members referred. Under equality legislation, is the current system sustainable whereby men retire at the age of 65 and women retire at the age of 60, and women do not have access to free public transport until they are 65 years of age?

It is worth noting that in England, Scotland and Wales, the tendency was for legislation first to provide free public transport for men at the age of 65 and women at the age of 60, and subsequent legislation to equalise the age at 60: in England, the Transport Act 2000 was followed by the Railways and Transport Act 2003. Nigel Dodds, wearing his hat as the MP for North Belfast, asked Angela Smith if it would be possible to provide free public transport for men at the age of 65 and women at the age of 60 in Northern Ireland. The Minister's response cited the equality imperative, and she said that it would only be viable to introduce it for everyone at the age of 60.

There are many reasons to take such a step, but the main justification is that it addresses social exclusion, and Jennifer McCann presented a particularly detailed argument on that point. Older people are not sufficiently included in society. It is important to give them a sense of independence and to allow them a full range of opportunities to engage with friends, colleagues, families and wider society. Social exclusion is a worse problem for women, particularly single women.

In its 2004 accessible transport strategy, the Department for Regional Development recognised that ensuring that older people were availing of public transport presented a major policy challenge. There are other aspects to consider, such as a boost to the economy. Many of my Assembly colleagues and I will encourage people to continue to work beyond the formal pensionable age if they so wish. Older people have much to offer the economy. The ambition to achieve future economic growth will require sustainable jobs that must be filled. Older people have a role to play in that.

If people can get to and from work from their homes, it would be better, but jobs are not always on people's doorsteps, and they often need to commute. This provision will also enhance the community and voluntary sector, for older people in particular are the

backbone of the system, and society as a whole benefits from their contribution.

Mr Dallat and Mr Beggs addressed the issue of assisted public transport. Anything that renders public transport more viable is to be welcomed. The transfer of money to Translink can be reinvested in improving the overall public transport system. I would like a lot more money to be invested in public transport — in essence, another £4 million. Public transport is very much the poor cousin of the private system in Northern Ireland, and that imbalance must be addressed. The issue is much broader within the comprehensive spending review, and I hope that the Minister will take it on board. Public transport is a much more environmentally sustainable form of transport, and decreasing the use of cars and increasing the use of buses and trains would benefit society.

I recognise Mr Cobain's point that it is essentially a matter of equality, and the Assembly has an obligation to address inequality where it exists. Financial considerations should be secondary to that. That said, £4 million is a fair estimate of what the provision will cost the public purse — comprising £350,000, which will be spent issuing the passes, and £3.5 million, which will be used to reimburse Translink and other public transport providers for lost fares.

In essence, £4 million is relatively small when one considers the overall £16 billion Northern Ireland Budget and the substantial benefits that the amount would mean for pensioners and for society overall. I am encouraged that the Minister has said that the matter is part of the bid that he has put into the forthcoming Budget process and the comprehensive spending review. There will also be support — certainly from Members on this side of the House — for other aspects of the Minister's bid regarding free travel for people with disabilities, the under-18s, and those returning to employment.

I regard the broader discussions on the Budget priorities as very useful, as they inform those in the Executive who will be taking the initial decisions on where priorities lie. I hope that there will be a unanimous vote in the Assembly calling for free transport for men and women at age 60.

Bearing in mind that the parties in the Chamber reflect those in the Executive, I hope that the message sent by the Assembly today will be borne in mind by those Ministers who will be taking the decision. All Members have the ability to influence their Ministers to ensure that free transport is delivered. I do not regard this as purely a matter for the Minister for Regional Development: it is a matter for all the Ministers in the Executive, and there should be collective responsibility for why things are, and are not, addressed. It is a matter for the Assembly, as it

will be called upon to approve the Budget by cross-community consent when it reaches that stage.

The Assembly can move forward in a united front, sending a clear signal to Ministers that this is a major priority. It is a relatively small amount of money in the grand scale of things and would be very well received by those, particularly between the ages of 60 and 65, just as the initial scheme was well received by the population as a whole.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I put the question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if the amendment is agreed, amendment No 2 will fall, and I will proceed to put the question on the motion as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, mindful of policy elsewhere in the United Kingdom, calls upon the Minister for Regional Development, subject to budgetary considerations, to introduce free public transport for women and men at the age of 60.

Adjourned at 5.15pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 18 September 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I want to deal with a point of order. At the start of yesterday's business, Mr Gregory Campbell raised a point of order regarding the Hansard report of last Tuesday's debate on attacks on Orange Halls. Mr Campbell said that although he made a remark, which could be clearly heard, during the speech of the junior Minister Mr Kelly, it was not reported in the Hansard report.

I have reviewed the relevant section of last Tuesday's proceedings. It is clear that Mr Campbell did indeed make a remark from a sedentary position. It is equally clear that the junior Minister Mr Kelly did not respond or refer to the remark.

As Members should be aware, the convention is that Hansard reports remarks made from a sedentary position only if they are referred to by another Member or, indeed, the Speaker. That point is made clear on page 117 of the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion', where it is pointed out that, on 6 December 1999, the then Speaker stated that:

"remarks made from a sedentary position are recorded into Hansard only if they are referred to by the Member who is on his feet at the time."

Given that there was absolutely no reference to Mr Campbell's remarks, which were made from a sedentary position, Hansard, quite properly, did not record them in the report of that day's business in the House.

I hope that that clarifies the matter. In addition to the ruling this morning, I have written to Mr Campbell to further clarify the point.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that the First Minister wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Mr Speaker, in compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following report on the ninth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which was held here in Parliament Buildings on 16 July 2007. Each Executive member and junior Minister who attended the meeting has approved the report, which we make on their behalf.

The British-Irish Council is a forum for its members to exchange information, and to discuss, consult on and agree, as they see fit, co-operative measures in areas of mutual interest.

The Deputy First Minister and I welcomed the heads of delegations. We were accompanied by the Minister of Education; the Minister for Employment and Learning; the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the Minister of the Environment; the Minister of Finance and Personnel; the Minister for Regional Development; the Minister for Social Development; and the junior Ministers in the Office of the First and the Deputy First Minister.

The Irish and British Government delegations were led by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern TD, and the Prime Minister, the right hon Gordon Brown MP, respectively. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by their Deputy First Minister, Ieuan Wyn Jones, and the Scottish Executive were represented by their First Minister, the right hon Alex Salmond MP MSP.

The Bailiwick of Guernsey was represented by its Deputy Chief Minister, Stuart Falla, and the Bailiwick of Jersey was represented by its Chief Minister, Senator Frank Walker. The Isle of Man Government were represented by their Chief Minister, Mr Tony Brown MHK — that means "Member of the House of Keys".

Council members acknowledged the historic nature of the meeting, which was the first summit meeting of the Council since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2007, and the first Council summit to take place in Northern Ireland. It was also the first occasion on which the eight heads of the Administrations had had the opportunity to meet since recent elections in many of their territories.

If I may take the opportunity, Mr Speaker, I wish to thank you and your staff, on the Deputy First Minister's behalf and my own, for making the splendid facilities of this Building available for the meeting. We received

numerous appreciative comments from the other participants about the hospitality that they received.

As for what was achieved, the Council reviewed and discussed how it might develop its work, now that all eight members are again properly represented by their respective Administrations. Recognising the Council's potential to strengthen relations and to develop co-operation further among its members across a range of sectors of mutual interest and benefit, members agreed that it was now opportune to review the Council's future direction. In that context, Scotland proposed energy as a useful work area for the Council to explore, and offered to lead on the issue.

The Council tasked its secretariat, in consultation with the member Administrations, with undertaking a strategic review of the Council's work programmes, working methods and support arrangements, including arrangements for a standing secretariat. The secretariat will report back with firm proposals as soon as possible.

On specific issues, we lead the work of the Council in the transport sector. In that regard, heads of Administrations discussed the current and future state of transport infrastructure links. They recognised that the provision of well-planned infrastructure is critical to the economic and social development of these islands, and that this is particularly the case with transport. Fast, efficient and integrated transport links are important for all the member Administrations to enable the movement of people and goods and the further promotion of investment, trade and tourism between them and the rest of the world.

The Council, therefore, agreed to examine the potential for further co-operation and collaboration on transport planning and investment to strengthen further the integration of transport networks across its boundaries and transport modes.

The Council also noted the agreement by Scotland and Northern Ireland to examine the case for restoring ferry links between Campbeltown and Ballycastle.

The Council concluded that it should continue to build on the valuable progress made in road safety, including a more consistent approach to driver disqualification and lesser offences, and in sharing best practice on sustainable travel and mobility.

The Irish Government are leading the Council's work on the misuse of drugs. At its last ministerial meeting in December 2006, the Council focused on the challenges presented by cocaine use. Ministers found that each Administration is facing similar issues, and that the problem is at various stages of development in the different jurisdictions. Ministers resolved to continue to co-operate and exchange experience, with particular emphasis on initiatives that have led to successful outcomes and that may lend themselves to broader application in other Administrations.

The environment sector is led by the British Government and was the focus of the summit held in London in June 2006. At that summit, the focus was on climate change, including work on understanding the impact of unavoidable climate change and on developing adaptation strategies. The Council continues to intensify co-operation and the exchange of information between members on this and other important areas, including understanding extreme weather events, integrated coastal-zone management and managing radioactive waste.

The Isle of Man Government are leading work on e-health, which is the remote diagnosis and treatment of patients through the use of telecommunications technology. Work continues on technical issues, such as common technical standards, a relevant clinical governance framework, protocols for the secure exchange of confidential data, and quality standards for e-health on the Internet.

The Council is also examining legal, regulatory and ethical issues in the e-health sector. These issues have come to the fore recently and will require firm guidelines to allow the sector to continue its current rapid development.

The Bailiwick of Guernsey is taking the lead on the Council's tourism work sector. That sector has completed several projects, including a model to measure the economic impact of tourism in the regions and training programmes for staff who work in the sector. A review of the future work and direction of that group will be carried out by the date of the next ministerial meeting in the sector.

10.45 am

The Bailiwick of Jersey is taking the lead on the Council's work on the knowledge economy. Work is under way to enhance business continuity planning among small businesses that may be affected by serious threats such as terrorist incidents. Possible preventative measures and business continuity planning are being developed to strengthen business sustainability. An assessment of the readiness of small, medium- and micro-sized businesses has been carried out, and a common set of best-practice guidelines on preventative measures and business continuity planning is being developed.

The Welsh Assembly Government are taking the lead in the indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages work sector. The most recent ministerial meeting in October 2006 focused on three areas: language transmission in the family; adult education; and information and communications technology (ICT).

Language transmission in the family is recognised as being vital to the process of maintaining a language. Ministers endorsed further work in that area to explore how best to support language transmission in the family, how models could be transferred to other languages,

identifying gaps in knowledge and how British-Irish Council Administrations could work together to fill those gaps.

Ministers agreed that, although the approach adopted and the support for adult education provision would vary from one Administration to another, there were valuable opportunities to be gained by continuing to share and exchange experiences in that area.

The indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages group continues to advance work in those areas. It is also working on two new areas: planning and linguistic considerations; and research, data and language-use surveys.

The Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government are jointly taking the lead on the Council's work on social inclusion. That group is now examining child poverty, with a focus on lone parents. The work is focused on transition points in people's lives and the proper provision of support at those times. The British-Irish Council is also examining how Administrations identify, and take account of, the views of parents, young people and children when formulating their policies.

Demography is the newest work sector, and it is led by the Scottish Executive. The group has recently commenced work and has agreed to focus its efforts on migration, which has a broad and varied impact on the eight members. I am glad to say that the Minister for Employment and Learning is representing the Northern Ireland Executive's interests in that sector.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I can report that the next British-Irish Council summit meeting will be held in late 2007 and will be hosted by Ireland at a venue to be announced. I think that I should add: here endeth the first lesson.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I welcome the First Minister's statement on the British-Irish Council summit meeting that took place on 16 July 2007.

However, I am concerned that, although the meeting took place on 16 July, during the summer recess, the statement has been made only today, instead of at the Assembly's first opportunity, last week. The system appears to have been subject to some delay and slippage.

I have a number of questions. Will the First Minister indicate a more precise timescale for the formation of a standing secretariat for the British-Irish Council?

I note that the British-Irish Council is examining the issue of child poverty. That matter is of particular interest to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, which will be considering terms of reference for an inquiry into child poverty at its next meeting. I ask the First Minister to state when we can expect a report on child poverty

from the British-Irish Council. If a full report will not be available for some time — as is likely — will the First Minister share the findings of the British-Irish Council with the Committee on a regular and ongoing basis?

I ask the First Minister to detail the mechanisms that are in place to communicate and engage with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and other Assembly Committees before and after meetings of the British-Irish Council to enable those Committees to uphold their statutory scrutiny functions.

Finally, I wish to ask a question in a personal capacity, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. The First Minister will be aware of the recently declared intention of the governing party in the Irish Republic — Fianna Fáil — to organise politically in Northern Ireland. Will the First Minister indicate whether he was consulted in advance of that development by Mr Ahern, and will he —

Mr Speaker: The Member must take his seat. I try to give Chairpersons of Committees as much latitude as possible when asking questions on ministerial statements, but those questions must relate to the statements. The Member's last question does not, in any way, relate to the First Minister's statement. That is my ruling.

The First Minister: This is the first opportunity to make the statement to the House because it first had to go before the Executive. The Executive must see and approve statements that are a matter for the whole House. That is what we did, and there was no slippage whatsoever, except the slippage of the Member in not knowing that.

As for the politics of another country, that is no concern of mine. I will defend our right to have our own political parties, which will do the job that the people of Northern Ireland want them to do. Perhaps I am speaking out of turn, but I want to put that on record.

The Member asked about a standing secretariat for the British-Irish Council. We are taking up work that has been the subject of previous consultation. I remind the Member that the St Andrews Agreement states:

"Following consultation with its other members, and with a view to giving further impetus to its work, the two Governments would facilitate the establishment of a standing secretariat for the British-Irish Council, if members agree."

The strategic review will examine the arrangements for a standing secretariat. The Council members have agreed on that matter, and that process is under way. I trust that that process will be speedy because the Council deserves such a standing secretariat to address the very large agenda with which it must deal.

Recommendations and outcomes that arise from the review will be subject to agreement by all the Administrations concerned.

I will write to the Member and bring him up to date on the other matters that he mentioned.

Mrs Long: I thank the First Minister for bringing the report to the Assembly. I should like to add to what Mr Kennedy said about the mechanisms whereby his Committee and the other Assembly Committees can feed into the agenda of the British-Irish Council and scrutinise issues on that agenda at an early stage. For example, it will be important for Members to receive feedback on child poverty as we are seeking to carry out an investigation into the matter. If an arrangement could be facilitated, it would be most welcome.

I wish to raise two issues. First, the First Minister said that Northern Ireland is taking the lead on transport. Will he clarify whether real connectivity between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland will be on the agenda? Clearly, transport is of strategic importance across the island, but it is particularly important to Northern Ireland as regards connectivity with its closest neighbour.

Secondly, sustainability is the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and a co-ordinated approach to sustainability would be welcomed in these islands. I am interested to know whether the First Minister will state whether he will be putting sustainability on the agenda of future British-Irish Council meetings.

The First Minister: The answer to the hon Lady's first point is yes; we are taking the lead on transport. The British-Irish Council agreed to examine the potential for further co-operation and collaboration on transport planning and investment to strengthen further the integration of transport networks across its boundaries and transport modes. As that work will include all member countries, it is quite clear that we are looking for an integrated transport system that will link all the countries concerned.

There will be a meeting in the spring to consider the first steps that will be taken to eradicate child poverty. As regards the involvement of Assembly Committees in the work of the British-Irish Council — an issue that I did not respond to when answering the questions put by the previous Member who spoke — my answer would be yes. I am sure that we would all want the fullest possible agreement on those matters, and the usual channels can be used when meetings of the British-Irish Council are being arranged.

Knowing the Council's work programme, as regards the items that are essential to our meetings here, it would be impossible to consult with every Assembly Committee.

Mr Hilditch: My interest is in tourism and the economic impact for the Giant's Causeway area. Will the First Minister state what progress has been made to

reinstate the ferry service between Ballycastle and Campbeltown?

The First Minister: Officials from Northern Ireland and the Scottish Executive held a video conference on Friday 20 July 2007. The principal outcomes of that conference were as follows: all previous work — the business case, transport appraisals and the current tendering exercises — needs to be revisited as soon as sufficient time has elapsed from the project commenced and the current position came into play.

The Scottish Executive, with whom we have been in touch, will develop new terms of reference for a fresh economic transport appraisal and timetable for delivery. A steering group, on which the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will be represented, will be created as agreed in the terms of reference, and will manage the review process.

I am personally in constant touch with the First Minister of Scotland, and he is, of course, enthusiastic that the project should be completed and the service reinstated. It is also possible that the service could continue further along the Scottish coastline than had been intended in the first proposition.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his statement. I welcome the fact that the environment has been highlighted as an important issue and that there has been agreement to intensify co-operation and exchange of information. Given that this work sector is being led by the British Government, is it possible that the BIC will examine serious concerns across the island of Ireland about Sellafield and the management of radioactive waste? Furthermore, will the First Minister agree that a roll-out of nuclear power stations across the water will have serious implications for the island of Ireland?

The First Minister: The BIC has no regulatory role in respect of Sellafield. Regulatory responsibility rests with HM Nuclear Installations Inspectorate and the Environment Agency. However, I am sure that the BIC will take an interest in those matters, which affect all of us.

11.00 am

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for presenting today's report on behalf of the Executive. Like other Members, I welcome the fact that the BIC meeting took place. I note that, in the "family photograph" of the leaders of the delegations on 16 July 2007, there was only one Englishman — who happened to be a natural-born Tory named Shaun. People would not have predicted that a number of years ago.

More importantly, the British-Irish Council, as the First Minister reflected in the report, allows Administrations to share experiences and challenges in quite a

number of areas. The subject matters on which the different member Administrations are leading were established in the last period of devolution. I am glad to see that those areas have stood the test of time and that the work is continuing.

Will the emphasis that is now going to be applied to child poverty mean that the previously published Northern Ireland anti-poverty strategy will be re-examined and reconditioned in light of the BIC work that is being carried out on social inclusion?

I remind the First Minister that the proposal for a standing secretariat was first made back in 2001 and 2002. I hope that the permanent secretariat will not only service the meetings of the eight Administrations, but will have a specific role of encouraging and monitoring bilateral and multilateral engagement by the member Administrations — all eight of them do not need to work together on everything or to meet at the one time.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I encourage the First Minister and his colleagues to support the Scottish Executive's proposal that the British-Irish Council should examine energy and the overlap between energy and the environment. Obligations regarding renewable energy sources need to be examined at BIC level, because the Whitehall Department has proposed significant changes that could have implications for us and the wider islands, vis-à-vis the single electricity market.

The First Minister: I thank the hon Gentleman for his remarks. The review that is commencing will take in the broad sweep of issues that he mentioned. The BIC will return to the matters that have already been discussed and will pursue them in order to find a way forward. I shall write to the Member about some of those matters and assure him that they are on the agenda. I cannot, of course, say what the decisions might be.

Mr Easton: Will the First Minister ensure that the British-Irish Council is not merely a talking shop, and will he give an example of practical co-operation?

The First Minister: The recent summit demonstrated the commitment of members to develop practical co-operation and arrangements that can make a meaningful impact on people's lives.

The British-Irish Council is most certainly not just a talking shop; it is an extremely valuable forum in which vital aspects of policy in a wide range of sectors are discussed. It is also valuable for ensuring that we in Northern Ireland are aware of, and can share, best practice with our BIC partners and with others across Europe. We want to see more tangible evidence of the impact of that co-operation, and the review will examine how that can be achieved. We also look forward to engaging with the other Administrations in deciding how to make best use of the body, which is unique in

Europe. Together with the other institutions, the BIC can have a powerful role in making life better for us all.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. One of the areas of practical co-operation that the BIC has concentrated on is the issue of drugs misuse. I welcome the First Minister's comments about that. I also welcome the programme of work that has been set out, particularly the training and employment for recovering drug misusers and the formal and informal education for young people. Will the First Minister outline any further areas of co-operation in relation to this most serious issue?

The First Minister: The BIC secretariat, in consultation with member Administrations, has developed certain programmes on matters such as transport, the misuse of drugs, the environment, and language. The review will address those issues, and decisions will be made on them. I will keep in mind the Member's comments about his interest in the issue of the misuse of drugs, and I will probably be able to write to him more fully when the review commences. However, I assure him that that matter will certainly be on the agenda.

Mr Spratt: What plans are there to develop the work and the future direction of the British-Irish Council?

The First Minister: That will depend on the review, on which, of course, we all have to agree. Therefore, if we agree, the BIC will move forward, and if we make no such agreements, it will not move; it really depends on ourselves. However, there is plenty of basis for agreement in many of the areas that have been discussed.

Mr Elliott: I thank the First Minister for his report on the British-Irish Council meeting. I also note the participation of high-level delegates from each of the areas. My question relates to the possibility that the Province should receive a financial package, mention of which was absent from the report. Given that the Rt Hon Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was present at the meeting, were there any discussions about a special economic package for Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: The BIC talks were not about the personal relationships that exist within the United Kingdom. We certainly took the opportunity to probe the Prime Minister as best we could, but his mind was on other matters. The BIC is not a forum in which we extract what we want from the British Government: it is a forum in which, along with other parts of this area, we face up to matters of common interest on which we can all work together if we so desire.

Mr O'Loan: I, too, thank the First Minister for his report, and I welcome the substantial workload with which the BIC is proceeding.

I note the First Minister's answer to Mr Hilditch on the Campbeltown-Ballycastle ferry service. At the time

of the press announcement, there was specific reference to extending the route to Troon. Given that he represents North Antrim, I know that the First Minister will be as keen as I am to ensure that the project comes about. Is the extension of the service to Troon a significant part of the thinking behind the project?

More broadly, given that the project failed previously because the private sector was not willing to become involved, are other specific incentives being considered to encourage that sector to do so?

The First Minister: I welcome the hon Gentleman's comments. Reinstatement of the service is really a Scottish matter, and without breaking any confidences, I can tell him that the First Minister of Scotland has been giving it a sympathetic hearing. Our Scottish brethren are discussing the matter, and I trust that they will soon give us some answers in order that we can proceed. *[Laughter.]*

Some fellow Members did not like the word "brethren"; they can call them sheep, goats or whatever they like, but I look upon them as sheep.

Mr Ross: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive statement, and I welcome the fact that east-west relations are being strengthened. Will the First Minister inform the House what the cost of hosting the British-Irish Council summit was to Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: As hosts of the summit, Northern Ireland bore the cost, which was in the region of £21,000. Without exaggeration, for that price, we got a good deal as far as publicity was concerned. The effect of that will be that people will look more closely at Northern Ireland and will hopefully bring into our Province those higher-paid jobs that we all know are sorely needed.

Mr T Clarke: I congratulate the First Minister on the report. What work is being undertaken to increase east-west activity to make it on a par with North/South arrangements?

The First Minister: At last there is agreement that both east-west and North/South co-operation will be equal in our political fields. Neither North/South nor east-west co-operation will take precedence; they will run at the same velocity and will take on board the questions that each needs to discuss and answer.

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

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Chéad-Aire as an tuairisc shuimiúil chuimsitheach atá sé i ndiaidh a chur os comhair an Tionóil. Chuir mé suim ar leith sa chuid sin den tuairisc a bhain le mionteangacha dúchasacha, agus baineann mo cheist féin leis an ghné sin den obair.

I thank the First Minister for the comprehensive and interesting report that he has delivered to the House. I was particularly interested in that part of the report that deals with minority and indigenous languages. Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider proposing to its British-Irish Council colleagues the use of immersion in indigenous languages as an educational tool? The aim of that would be to share research, aid development, and exchange experiences between Ireland, North and South; Scotland; the Isle of Man; and Wales. Go raibh míle maith agat.

11.15 am

The First Minister: I can reply to the second part of the hon Member's question. I was not at Pentecost, so I do not have the gift of interpreting languages.

The National Assembly for Wales is taking the lead in the indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages group. Its representatives will set up the necessary arrangements, but we will make an input. If any country has had a problem with language, it has been Wales. Therefore, the Welsh know what obstacles to look out for, and they have learned, through experience, how to deal with them. I am sure that the Welsh delegates are the best people to lead this group. However, we will have the right to put our views to them, and I am sure that the hon Gentleman will ensure that his views are heard.

Mr McQuillan: What benefits will be derived from the British-Irish Council?

The First Minister: There is potential for many helpful improvements to be made. I am particularly worried about the large number of deaths on our roads, and that point was brought out firmly at the BIC meeting on 16 July.

All countries and places involved in the BIC need to have a proper disqualification law, because there are many people using our roads who are unaccustomed to them. A young man who attended my church was killed recently by a driver who had arrived in Northern Ireland from another country in Europe only a few days previously. The driver had only a provisional licence. He drove into the car that my friend was in, and my friend was killed. That accident brought the seriousness of the situation home to me. In that area alone, we could make progress. However, there are other areas on which we will have to wait and see. I am biased, of course, but North Antrim ought to have back its ferry service to Scotland.

Mr Craig: Will the First Minister inform the House when the review into the workings of the Council will be undertaken?

The First Minister: The review is the responsibility of the participating Administrations. We will press for the review to be completed and will report back with

firm proposals as soon as possible. I understand that the review will begin in a few days' time.

Mr I McCrea: Will the First Minister inform the House what progress has been made on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland?

The First Minister: I would like to see a good relationship between both parts of this island without any political claims of jurisdiction by either one. We are not claiming that the South of Ireland should be part of the United Kingdom, and they should not claim that we should be part of the Irish Republic. That should be borne in mind. This is not a place for arguing constitutional positions: it is a place for arguing for the best arrangements for the ordinary people who can benefit from them.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the First Minister's report. A priority work area for the British-Irish Council in its former manifestation was the Irish Sea, and lead responsibility on that — as I understand it — was to be with the Isle of Man and Irish Governments.

Will the First Minister check that the priority area of the Irish Sea is still part of the programme of work of the BIC, given his comments on the environment and the nuclear industry and following the comments from my colleague in Sinn Féin?

Will the First Minister consider introducing affordable housing and suicide prevention to the work programme of the BIC? Both issues are of concern to Members, and I am sure that a lot can be learned from BIC members about how they are addressing the issues.

Finally, will the First Minister, given his well-made comments on traffic offences, comment further on driver disqualification and lesser offences? His colleague, the Deputy First Minister, may have some information that would be useful for the Assembly to hear.

The First Minister: I will keep in mind what the hon Member has said, and I will enquire of the BIC whether those items can be included in the review.

A question was asked about the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the United Kingdom and other parts of these islands. As far as the UK, and Northern and Southern Ireland are concerned, there is an intergovernmental commitment between the UK and Ireland to co-operate as soon as possible in recognising each other's driving disqualifications. We will have to wait until that comes, and I have been told that there will have to be subordinate legislation if it is recommended. Officials in the United Kingdom and Ireland are working closely to initiate mutual recognition of driving disqualifications as soon as is practicable. I hope that my answer will help the hon Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the First Minister's statement.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that the Deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). I call the Deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): A LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement on the fifth plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, which was held in the Armagh City Hotel, Armagh, on 17 July, 2007.

All the Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have approved the statement, and I am presenting it on their behalf. The Executive delegation was led by the First Minister and me, and we jointly chaired the meeting.

In addition to the First Minister and myself, our delegation comprised the Minister of Finance and Personnel; the Minister of the Environment; the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the Minister for Regional Development; the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development; the Minister of Education; the Minister for Employment and Learning; the Minister for Social Development; and the junior Ministers in OFMDFM.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and comprised the Táinaiste and Minister for Finance, Brian Cowen TD; the Minister for Transport and the Marine, Noel Dempsey TD; the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern TD; the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Micheál Martin TD; the Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism, Séamus Brennan TD; the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív; the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Mary Coughlan TD; the Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin TD; the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley TD; and the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Eamon Ryan TD.

All Ministers acknowledged the significance of the occasion — the first meeting of the NSMC in plenary sitting since 2002. They welcomed the opportunity to meet on the North/South Ministerial Council to consult on and promote mutually beneficial co-operation and take a number of decisions on a range of issues in the Council's work programme.

With regard to infrastructural matters, the Council noted the Irish Government's intention to make available a contribution of £400 million — €580 million — to help fund major roads programmes to provide dual-carriageway standard on routes in the North serving the north-west gateway and the eastern-seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne. The Executive confirmed their

acceptance, in principle, to take forward those two major road projects, and the Council noted that the road project from Belfast to Larne would be taken forward by the Executive and their agencies.

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed that the route serving the north-west gateway will be taken forward in line with funding and accountability, planning, management and delivery arrangements agreed between the Irish Government and the Executive. It was agreed that the relevant Ministers would take the necessary steps to progress that project, including the early commencement of a route corridor study.

The Council agreed to proceed with the restoration of the section of the Ulster Canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne in the light of the Irish Government's offer to cover the full capital costs of the project. In line with the relevant legislation, Waterways Ireland, a North/South implementation body, will be responsible for the necessary restoration work and, following restoration, for its management, maintenance and development — principally for recreational purposes. It was agreed that relevant Ministers meeting in the NSMC inland waterways sector would agree plans to take forward that restoration work, including details of funding arrangements, and would report on progress to the NSMC plenary meetings.

The Council received a report from the joint secretaries on the work of the NSMC since 2002. It noted that the work of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland had continued, and expressed its appreciation to the boards and staff for their contribution.

The Council also noted the mutually beneficial co-operation taken forward between Ministers and Departments. The Council agreed to take forward the review provided for in the St Andrews Agreement of the North/South implementation bodies and areas for co-operation. The review will commence in September 2007, and a final report will be presented to the first NSMC plenary meeting in 2008. The review will be undertaken by a group including senior officials and an advisory panel of four expert advisers, two to be nominated by the Executive and two by the Irish Government. The Council noted that the Irish Government would consult their social partners in relation to the North/South consultative forum. It also noted the review of arrangements for consulting civic society here and agreed to consider the matter on completion of that review.

The Council noted the provisions of the St Andrews Agreement relating to the North/South parliamentary forum. It recognised that any development of a joint parliamentary forum was a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas. Officials from the two Administrations were charged with making contact with the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas, and with reporting

back to the NSMC at the earliest opportunity on the prospects for the development of such a forum. The Council considered and approved a schedule of NSMC meetings to take place over the coming months and agreed that its next meeting in plenary format would be held in Dundalk towards the end of the year. Go raibh maith agat.

11.30 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): As Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I welcome the statement made on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council that took place on 17 July 2007. Will the Deputy First Minister detail the mechanisms in place to communicate and engage with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and other Assembly Committees, both before sectoral and other summit meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and afterwards, to enable the Committees to uphold their statutory scrutiny functions? Will the Deputy First Minister confirm who the Northern Ireland Executive intend to nominate to participate in the advisory panel to take forward the review of the North/South implementation bodies, and the areas for co-operation?

Wearing my party-political hat, I ask the Deputy First Minister to provide details of how the North/South consultative forum will operate, outlining its remit and the timescales that will be involved. What preparatory work has been carried out on the proposed North/South parliamentary forum?

I almost said paramilitary forum then. *[Laughter.]*

Will he confirm whether officials have commenced work on that body? To whom will those officials report?

The Deputy First Minister said that the North/South Ministerial Council considered and approved a schedule of meetings for the coming months. Will Members have access to that schedule, and will it be published and available in the Assembly Library?

The Deputy First Minister: Each Committee will consider matters that are relevant to its respective Department. Likewise, on policies on which the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is designated to lead, we will engage with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The Assembly will be advised of the agenda and attendance list of every NSMC meeting prior to its beginning. Following each meeting, the relevant Ministers will make a full report to the Assembly.

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed that a group comprising senior officials drawn from both Administrations and an advisory panel of four expert advisers will undertake a review and report on it to the

Council. Two members of the panel will be nominated by the Executive and two by the Irish Government. The First Minister and I are currently considering that issue, and we understand its urgency.

The NSMC joint secretariat will, of course, support the review group's work, which, it has been agreed, will commence in September 2007. A final report will be presented to the first NSMC plenary meeting in 2008. However, interim reports may be presented to the NSMC as the review progresses.

The review will objectively examine the efficiency and value for money of existing implementation bodies. It will also consider the case for establishing additional bodies to deal with areas of mutually beneficial co-operation within the existing NSMC framework. The review will not affect the work of existing North/South bodies.

At its plenary meeting in June 2002, the NSMC agreed to the establishment of an independent North/South consultative forum. Since then, several changes have taken place in the North. We have agreed that a review will be conducted to examine the arrangements for consulting civic society here. We will await the outcome of that review and consider the impact that that might have on the establishment of a North/South consultative forum. We do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of that review; therefore, the North/South consultative forum will be considered after the review has been completed.

We should remember that the Civic Forum was originally established as a consultative mechanism on social, economic, and cultural issues. The First Minister and I have agreed that things in the North have changed significantly since then. Many new people have come to live among us, so there is a need to review the Civic Forum. Therefore, we have commissioned a fresh review to examine fundamentally the structure, membership and role of the Civic Forum and to consider the most appropriate arrangements for engaging with civic society.

At the NSMC plenary meeting in Armagh, the Council noted those provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement that relate to the North/South parliamentary forum. The Council recognised that any development of such a joint forum is a matter for the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

It was agreed that officials from the two Administrations would contact the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas on the prospects for developing such a forum and would report back to the NSMC at the earliest opportunity. Officials have now written to the Assembly.

I am more than willing to place the outline schedule in the Assembly Library.

Mrs Long: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his report. All Members are relieved that the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council are

up and running. We hope that the Assembly's relationship with both bodies will be productive for Northern Ireland.

I raised the issue of infrastructure with the First Minister. I note that expansion of the roads programme was discussed, as were waterways. One issue, which I am sure is quite dear to the hearts of both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, is that of the rail link to the north-west, which runs through north Antrim. It seems to be continually under review and under threat. Will that matter be addressed at future NSMC meetings?

Rail travel is not only a sustainable transport option; it would provide the north-west with a key gateway. There is also the huge tourism potential for the island to be considered, and rail links could be extended into the Republic of Ireland. Could the subject of rail links be put on a future agenda of the NSMC?

The Deputy First Minister: Ministers, both North and South, take railways very seriously. We all know and understand the pressure on our roads, and the Assembly has had many debates about the contribution that an improved rail system could make to the quality of everyone's lives.

A sectoral meeting on transport was held last Friday in County Fermanagh. It was attended by Arlene Foster, the Minister of the Environment; Conor Murphy, the Minister for Regional Development, and Noel Dempsey, the Minister for Transport in the South. I noted that they talked about increasing the frequency of the Belfast-Dublin train service, with the prospect of an hourly service between the two cities. I have no doubt that that important issue will be the subject of intense discussion in the NSMC in the near future.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's announcement about the injection of funds from the Irish Republic into the Northern Ireland economy. However, many people in Northern Ireland would say that it is a belated contribution by a country that harboured those who destroyed our economy for a long time. Compared to the destruction carried out by IRA units based in the Irish Republic over the past 30 years, the contribution does not even scratch the tip of Northern Ireland's economic iceberg.

However, will the Deputy First Minister tell us how much of the funds that have been allocated will be made available for upgrading the A8? What contribution is expected from the Northern Ireland Executive? Is there a time limit in which those funds must be spent, and is the Deputy First Minister convinced that the Executive will bring forward proposals to ensure that the funds are spent in that period?

The Deputy First Minister: That matter is the responsibility of the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy. There can be no doubt that, as a result of the decisions taken by the NSMC, Ministers are

now charged with the responsibility to proceed and to expedite those matters.

Principally, the responsibility to articulate a view on that issue lies with the Minister for Regional Development, who will make a statement to the House shortly. He will provide a comprehensive report on the meeting that was held last Friday in County Fermanagh.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Deputy First Minister's report on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. I also welcome the Deputy First Minister and the First Minister to Armagh at any time.

The commitment of the Irish Government to provide €400 million to support the development of roads infrastructure is to be welcomed, particularly the upgrading of the main arterial route in the north-west, and that of the M14, A5 and N2. That is something that Sinn Féin, and, in particular, my colleague Pat Doherty, MP for West Tyrone, has campaigned for for some considerable time.

Will the Deputy First Minister please outline what progress has been made in bringing forward this project, which is vital to the future of the entire north-west region? Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy First Minister: As I reported to the Assembly, the NSMC met in its transport sectoral format on Friday 14 September 2007, and Ministers discussed arrangements for taking forward those important roads projects. As I also said, the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, will be making a full report on that meeting to the Assembly in due course.

The Irish Government's contribution, and the Chancellor's package that was announced on 26 March 2007, will help to fund a major roads programme to upgrade roads to dual carriageway standard on routes in the North that serve the north-west gateway and the eastern seaboard from Belfast to Larne.

Those schemes are on two of the five key transport corridors in the North, as identified in the regional transportation strategy. Both schemes received positive support from a public consultation process, which was undertaken last year, on proposals to expand the strategic road improvement programme.

The issue of the road from Belfast to Larne will be taken forward by the Executive and their agencies, and that of the north-west gateway will be taken forward in line with funding and accountability, planning management, and delivery arrangements agreed between the Executive and the Irish Government. The Irish Government are providing part funding to improve the road infrastructure to the north-west gateway, and to the port of Larne. That funding will provide mutual benefits for both jurisdictions and will assist in opening up the

north-west region to further economic growth and development.

The upgrading of the remainder of the Belfast to Larne route will improve journey times to the port of Larne. It normally takes at least six years to progress major works projects through the statutory procedures concerned with the environment, planning approval and land acquisition. For a very large project, such as that on the A5 — that is, the Aughnacloy/north-west gateway — construction could take a further four years. However, officials are considering alternative delivery arrangements that may shorten those timescales, and that is something that we would all very much welcome.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's report on behalf of his office. It was particularly thoughtful of the First Minister, after the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, to confirm his agreement to the establishment of the North/South parliamentary forum — a matter that was detailed in that report.

Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that, as far as he and his office are concerned, it should now be full speed ahead with the establishment of the North/South parliamentary forum? Although the establishment of that body is in the gift of the Assembly and the Oireachtas, it would, nonetheless, be desirable to see that happening in a period of months.

I noted the Deputy First Minister's comments regarding the St Andrews Agreement review of North/South implementation bodies. Is he in a position to confirm who the four experts and advisers might be? I noted that he said that there are conversations taking place with the First Minister regarding the matter. However, from recent experience, we know that conversations about people being appointed to fulfil public duties — such as the victims' commissioner — can result in no decision being taken for a long time. I want a reassurance from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that people will be appointed, and appointed quickly, and that the review will commence in September, as has been committed to, even though the SDLP has grave doubts about the value and validity of such a review.

It is particularly welcome that the Irish Government have offered to cover the full capital costs of the restoration of a section of the Ulster Canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne.

Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that there are no hiccups in respect of the Northern Ireland Executive's and the relevant Ministers' acceptance of that money, and that no issues will be raised over contributions to future maintenance? Difficulties over those issues might impede this valuable project.

11.45 am

The Deputy First Minister: The Member referred to the comments made by the First Minister in the aftermath of the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting in Armagh; all the remarks made by the First Minister were helpful and very much in the spirit and mood of that important occasion. The North/South parliamentary forum was discussed. I have attended previous meetings of the NSMC — and, indeed, the British-Irish Council — and this meeting was important in that there was free-ranging debate and discussion. All the Ministers present contributed, and not just through scripted contributions put before them by civil servants. There was a valuable and progressive discussion which will hold us all in good stead as we move forward.

As to the processes that we have to take forward, it was agreed that officials from the two Administrations would make contact, and I have reported to the Assembly this morning that that is happening. We will see what progress can be made, but it will primarily be a matter for the Oireachtas and the Assembly.

I accept the importance of making speedy appointments vis-à-vis the review. The decisions that need to be taken are eagerly awaited, because it is important work and we are committed to furthering it with all speed.

The Ulster Canal is a matter for Minister Poots, since it is the responsibility of his Department. A meeting of the Waterways Ireland sector is planned, and the issue will be taken forward from that point.

Now that decisions have been taken on the important infrastructural projects — the roads and the canal — the NSMC understands the need to expedite all of those matters as quickly as possible.

Mr Hamilton: I noted the reference in the Deputy First Minister's statement to the North/South consultative forum and the North/South parliamentary forum. Can he confirm that the genesis of both those proposed bodies was the Belfast Agreement, and that any decision on their future is a matter to be decided on both sides of this Chamber?

The Deputy First Minister: I agree absolutely. It is vital that we get agreement on the work of the NSMC and all the areas of responsibility with which we are charged. All the participants in the NSMC are presently in that mode. We must move forward with the recognition that we have a responsibility to heal the divisions of the past, and to do so in a way that does not threaten the political views or aspirations of any Member.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Deputy First Minister's statement. In both the roads infrastructure and the upgrading of the main arterial route to the north-west, I hope that there will be a specific benefit to Enniskillen,

or perhaps the bypass question in Enniskillen, as the gateway to the north-west of Ireland.

My question is about the Ulster Canal. Sinn Féin has been involved for a considerable time in efforts to bring about the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. Will the Deputy First Minister outline the next step in bringing the project to completion and what further consideration is being given to restore the Ulster Canal, given its huge potential for the economy and tourism in general?

The Deputy First Minister: I noted the remark about the Enniskillen bypass, but that is not principally a matter for the NSMC, the First Minister or myself, but rather for the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Conor Murphy. No doubt Mr McHugh and other Members from Fermanagh will take the opportunity to have that conversation with him.

The Irish Government have offered to cover the full capital costs of the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. In light of that offer, the Executive have agreed to engage with the Irish Government to progress that restoration and share the ensuing costs of the restored and re-opened section, when it is complete. However, that decision does not confer any commitment on the Irish Government or the Executive to fund further restoration of the Ulster Canal. Both Administrations will keep the issue under constant review.

Waterways Ireland will be responsible for restoring the section of the Ulster Canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne, and following the restoration, will be responsible for the management, maintenance and development of that section, principally for recreational purposes. The relevant Ministers in the NSMC's inland waterways sectoral format will agree plans for the restoration work, which will include forwarding details of funding arrangements and progress reports to NSMC plenary meetings.

Recently, when I opened the Scariff Harbour Festival in County Clare, I received a tour of the amazing facilities at the canal there, and I saw first-hand the benefits of having an effective canal system. The restoration project for the Ulster Canal will provide mutual benefits for both jurisdictions. On the basis of the Irish Government's offer, the Executive have agreed to engage with them on the restoration, and, once completed, in the ensuing shared and recurrent costs of the restored and reopened section.

There have been many debates about the Ulster Canal in the House over the years. The former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, was an enthusiastic fan of the restoration of the canal. Those Members who appreciate the benefits of having an effective canal system, particularly for recreational use and tourism, will understand that it is an important

project. However, the difficulty with all important projects is having adequate funds to proceed with the speed that most Members would like to see.

Mr Newton: I am sure that the Deputy First Minister is aware of the high level of concern on this side of the House about religious imbalance in the staff of Waterways Ireland. Will he assure this side of the House that employment in Waterways Ireland will be based on merit alone? What actions will he take to ensure that selection and employment in Waterways Ireland will be based on applications being considered on merit alone?

The Deputy First Minister: I am speaking for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and I am sure that the First Minister will agree with me that nobody is interested in seeing anyone discriminated against because of his or her religion. As political leaders, we have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that we move forward on the basis of fairness and equality. All issues that may arise from the employment levels of religious groupings in any of the North/South Ministerial Council sectors will be kept under review, not just by the sectors, but by the NSMC itself.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his report. I have noted that, in his responses to a few questions on roads infrastructure, he has thrown the matter back to the Minister for Regional Development. Clearly, however, that matter is dealt with in the report. Therefore, I must press him on an issue that Mr McHugh mentioned, namely that of providing infrastructure finance to the Fermanagh area.

Although the areas that have been referred to, such as those that surround the north-east gateway and the eastern seaboard, are important to the infrastructural position of Northern Ireland, County Fermanagh takes a significant volume of traffic from North and South in both directions, particularly from Donegal to Dublin and from Sligo to Belfast and Larne, and vice versa. I am disappointed that the report does not refer to either of those corridors. Can the Deputy First Minister tell me whether those matters have been discussed at NSMC level?

The Deputy First Minister: As a frequent traveller through County Fermanagh, I appreciate that it has difficulties with regard to roads. However, I must reiterate — and it is not a cop-out — that that is principally a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy. Obviously, he works with a limited budget, and does a fine job, in my opinion.

The NSMC's ability to resolve all the roads problems that exist, whether they are in the North or the South, is limited. The responsibility of the NSMC is to consult and to agree on mutually beneficial projects. I readily agree that the infrastructure of border areas,

such as Fermanagh, must be kept under review and account taken of them by the Council. I have no doubt whatsoever that the people who are charged with taking forward the Council's work will listen carefully to Mr Elliott's remarks.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the statement from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Members have placed a particular emphasis on infrastructure. Will the Deputy First Minister tell the House whether consideration might be given to a future approach whereby money that is available from the Irish Government is not simply used on a project-by-project basis, but that a dedicated North/South fund could instead be created — an all-Ireland version of European structural funds, which would provide a much better context for the type of bids that have been mentioned in the Chamber to be advanced?

Will the Deputy First Minister tell the House whether, in the future, the NSMC will be used to recognise whether the Irish Government's national development plan has unallocated reserves, not only for infrastructure, but across its other key areas for investment? Perhaps the NSMC should be used to ensure that the North's structures and spending systems can mesh better with those of the national development plan in order to make the most of that money, rather than jockeying on a project-by-project basis.

Will the Deputy First Minister also tell the House whether the future work programme of the NSMC might include a return to the study on obstacles to mobility that it previously commissioned? That study may need to be updated or, perhaps, an entirely new study may need to be carried out, not least because of issues that have come to attention recently; for example, when people who have rightly, properly and naturally moved across the border to live, they have found that they and service providers are being put in an invidious position because of the anomalies and absurdities of cross-border life. If that study were to take place, it would help to improve service planning and would make people who live and work in border areas much more comfortable in planning their lives.

12.00 noon

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his questions. He mentioned the Irish Government's national development plan. Through their interest in contributing to important road projects in the North, the Irish Government have demonstrated that they are willing to review continually the work that they and the Assembly will carry out on mutually beneficial projects.

This is an important time for the Assembly. It is making progress, in that a Programme for Government is being developed. We are also dealing with the comprehensive spending review and the impact that that will have. We have a 10-year investment strategy

to which large sums of money have been committed. All of that will decide how we prioritise and make progress on future projects. Therefore, we must consider seriously Mr Durkan's remarks.

The North/South Ministerial Council has implemented procedures under which such matters must be considered. As we move forward, our attention must turn to how we can make better use of the resources that are available in order to deal with the difficult matter of ensuring that we begin work on infrastructure projects that will bring the benefits that all our people clearly deserve.

Since 2002, work has continued on implementing the recommendations of the report 'Study of Obstacles to Mobility'. Following extensive consultation with Departments North and South regarding the report's 50 recommendations, 27 have been implemented, and work is ongoing on 15 of those that relate mainly to mutuality on qualifications and pensions. As the Member said, those are complex issues, and work continues with the relevant Departments to resolve them. However, the NSMC agreed in June 2002 that no action should be taken on the remaining eight recommendations.

A website that is dedicated to providing information on cross-border mobility is currently being developed, and it will become operational in the autumn. Increased mobility means that many people live in border areas, North and South. They cross the border regularly, and that creates particular difficulties for some families. We all have a duty and responsibility to work together. The Irish Government and this Executive, through the North/South Ministerial Council, have made a commitment to tackle those issues head-on.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an tuairisc seo, nó is maith an rud go bhfuil muid ar an aon bhóthar amháin le chéile agus ag obair in aon treo le chéile.

I welcome the Deputy First Minister's statement. I also welcome the renewed focus on removing obstacles to cross-border mobility, as both the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan and the Deputy First Minister discussed. It struck me in the past week that a great deal of work needs to be done on cross-border mobility, not least on postal services.

This week, I was told about a lady in Strabane who has moved just one mile inside the border to Donegal. Her letters arrive one week late and are stamped par avion. I would like the NSMC to discuss why that should happen. Such letters have included a young girl's A-level results.

Will the Deputy First Minister reassure me about the standard of the North/South Ministerial Council secretariat's accommodation? Having visited those offices, I have seen they are not fit for purpose. I want a commitment that suitable office accommodation will

be made available without delay so that those people can be housed properly and can carry on with their vital work, Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Deputy First Minister: As regards postal services, I am sure that all those charged with responsibility for the NSMC will note the Member's remarks and try to make progress for fear that the Member might end up on 'The Stephen Nolan Show', criticising the NSMC over postal services in border areas. *[Laughter.]*

The Member asked about permanent accommodation for the NSMC. As everyone knows, the NSMC joint secretariat is currently located in temporary accommodation in Armagh. That accommodation is considered unsuitable from both health and safety and operational perspectives. I have visited that facility down the years, and I was very interested to hear during a visit as Minister of Education that serious consideration was being given to turning Armagh jail into the NSMC headquarters. I suppose that a certain Member for East Antrim would think that that might be a good idea, particularly given this morning's photograph in 'The Irish News' of the junior Minister Mr Kelly behind bars in Crumlin Road jail yesterday.

A Member: Did he escape?

The Deputy First Minister: I think he did escape, yes.

In June 2002, the NSMC asked officials North and South to examine options for permanent accommodation and to report back in the future. Since then, a business case recommending that the secretariat lease suitable accommodation has been approved by officials in both Administrations, subject to political and financial considerations. A procurement exercise yielded seven expressions of interest; these are under consideration, and a report will be made to a future NSMC meeting.

Mr Shannon: The Waterways Ireland restoration of the Ulster Canal is a fantastic scheme. However, it looks as if it will benefit only one constituency, Fermanagh and South Tyrone. That is wonderful for the people there, of course, and I would not take that away from them. However, what will be the direct or indirect benefits of that scheme for the rest of the Province?

The Deputy First Minister: It is obvious that the opening of any new section of the Ulster Canal raises the potential for further development in this area. There is popular support in the House for as much progress as possible to be made to ensure that every area through which the Ulster Canal originally passed can benefit in terms of recreation, sporting facilities and, not least, tourism. As we all know, there has been a huge increase in tourism in the North in the last few years. We want to build on that for the future, but we will be able to do so only if we can provide the facilities that tourists would like to visit.

As someone who saw the beginnings of the development of the canals in the South, particularly around the Carrick-on-Shannon area of County Leitrim, I find it incredible to see how much development has taken place. Thirty years ago, Carrick-on-Shannon had just one or two boats, but today it looks almost like Monte Carlo. That is what is ahead of us. Such development will not only make a further incredible contribution to the success of our tourism industry, but provide important recreational facilities for our own people. The quicker we can progress this matter to ensure that we all share in the benefits, the better it will be for all of us.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin has consistently argued for an increase in the number of North/South implementation bodies and areas of co-operation. For example, I would like mental health and suicide prevention to be included. Can the Deputy First Minister assure this House that the review of the North/South Ministerial Council will also consider the case for additional all-island bodies and areas of greater co-operation? Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy First Minister: Obviously, we are all very conscious that that matter lies within the remit of the review that was authorised by the St Andrews Agreement and taken up by the NSMC. I have no doubt whatsoever that those who will be considering these matters will recognise the importance of our all working for everyone's mutual benefit. The issue of mental health affects everybody living on the island, as do many other matters.

I am as interested as anybody else in the outcome of the review.

Mr McCallister: Infrastructure is a matter for the NSMC and not just for the Minister for Regional Development. Will the Deputy First Minister agree that the proper provision of a Southern relief road would be of great advantage to the economy, particularly in the South Down constituency, and would also provide a vital link to the port of Warrenpoint? We should not, as some people in the Republic were pressing for, pursue the no-brain idea of a bridge at Narrow Water.

Will the Deputy First Minister also confirm that the new inter-parliamentary forum has been agreed not only by the two Governments but by him and his right hon Friend, the First Minister?

The Deputy First Minister: I do not need to refer again to the issue of the inter-parliamentary forum, except to say that the First Minister and I always endeavour to get agreement on how we progress. That is essential, and the First Minister and I will be sensible about moving that situation forward.

The state of the roads in South Down is, I am afraid, a matter for the Minister for Regional Development. However, I accept that because County Down is a border

county, we must consider the most effective use of the available resources to ensure that we have a proper roads network. That applies equally to Fermanagh and South Tyrone and to South Down.

All of those matters will be considered by the Ministers responsible, and any schemes that they wish to bring forward will be decided upon in plenary sessions of the NSMC.

Mr A Maginness: In his statement, the Deputy First Minister said that all Ministers acknowledged the significance of the meeting of the NSMC, given the fact that it was the first meeting since 2002. It was truly significant, and everybody involved, including the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and all other parties should be congratulated on that event; it was of historic importance.

Let us fast-forward to the situation in which policing and justice are devolved. The Deputy First Minister will be aware that there is a British-Irish agreement on justice matters, which involves the exchange of law agency personnel from North to South and vice versa. Will the Deputy First Minister give an assurance that in the event of devolution of criminal justice and policing powers, there will be a commitment by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to the continuance of that agreement, and that a new North/South agreement on justice matters will be arrived at so that related issues can be pursued vigorously in the future?

The Deputy First Minister: Criminal justice and policing matters are currently outside the remit of the NSMC. There is no doubt that in the event of the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Assembly and the Executive, the NSMC, the Executive and the Irish Government will have to decide how to develop our approach to criminal justice and policing on the island. That will have to be agreed between the major parties in the Assembly and, through the Executive, with the Irish Government. All of the other parties have an interest in the issue, and have contributed immensely to the debate in recent times. However, my report is solely concerned with the first meeting of the NSMC since 2002. Criminal justice and policing powers, and the surrounding issues referred to in the Member's question, were outside the remit of that meeting, but in speculating about what the future might bring, those matters will have to be resolved.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will have to look afresh at that matter, but it will principally be a matter for the Executive. The Executive will have to reach agreement and they will have to agree with the Irish Government on how progress can be made on that issue.

12.15 pm

Criminality on this island does not respect borders of any description. We all have a duty to work together to defeat criminals on this island. I have no doubt that if progress is made on the transfer of policing and justice powers, as suggested in the St Andrews Agreement, the Irish Government and the Executive will face up to their responsibilities to ensure that they have the best possible processes to combat criminality.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Deputy First Minister outline what steps have been taken to address the obstacles to mobility across the island of Ireland, particularly the issue of mutual recognition of qualifications and pensions? Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy First Minister: In response to the contribution of the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan, OFMDFM's approach to that matter was made clear. Following extensive consultations with Government Departments North and South, OFMDFM is moving forward on the basis of the recommendations that have been made in the report of the study on obstacles to mobility.

There are complex issues to consider. As a result of working in two jurisdictions, there are important issues in dealing with the mutuality of qualifications, pensions and many other matters. There has been much controversy in the past few weeks about education in border areas. It must be recognised that such problems will not be resolved overnight or in one fell swoop, but there is a commitment to understand the difficulties that individual families have experienced as a result of relocation, whether to the South or to the North. The Executive and the Irish Government have a duty to work under the auspices of the NSMC to try to resolve the difficulties that those families face.

Mr McNarry: I welcome the joint report of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, delivered by the Deputy First Minister. It will no doubt have dawned on the Minister that the promised money that the Irish Government wish to invest through their national development plan concentrates on nationalist-majority areas. One of the Irish Government's parties has now declared those areas as an obvious electoral target for the future. Can the Minister return a focus on investment in my constituency of Strangford, and other similar constituencies, for legitimate funding to offset the money-for-votes funding that the Irish are putting forward for their declared political interests?

The Deputy First Minister: I do not accept for one minute that the motivation of the Irish Government is related to seeking votes.

Mr McNarry: You are very foolish.

The Deputy First Minister: I am not foolish at all; I am very wise in this matter. In the course of the processes that we have been through in recent times, which led to the re-establishment of these institutions, people recognised the critical importance of all of us working together for the mutual benefit of everyone who lives on the island. That is done without fear or favour.

If there are particular difficulties in Strangford, it is the duty of the Executive to try to resolve those through our Departments. It is not my view that the reason for the Irish Government's contribution of huge sums of money to resolve the infrastructural difficulties in some areas of the North is related to seeking votes in County Donegal.

When one meets people and sees that they have a real empathy for the North and a wish to contribute in a meaningful way to making life better for all of us, one recognises that we have a duty and responsibility to work together. The Member's suggestion of an electoral motivation is rather silly.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his statement on behalf of OFMDFM. The Narrow Water bridge project — and I want my colleague from South Down to listen carefully — was included in the Programme for Government that was announced in June this year and in the Republic's national development plan announced on 13 January 2007. Louth County Council was initially allocated almost €400,000 to carry out a feasibility study in the area. As mentioned earlier, at a meeting last weekend in Enniskillen, the Republic's Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey, endorsed the project. Therefore, I am disappointed that it has been omitted from today's statement. What is the reason for that omission?

The Deputy First Minister: The House will receive a full report of the transport sectoral meeting that took place last Friday in County Fermanagh, which Noel Dempsey, Conor Murphy and Arlene Foster attended. Those of us who have attended all sorts of important meetings recently have not failed to notice the contributions that various Members of this House have made to that project.

However, the priorities are to make progress on the Belfast to Larne road and the north-west gateway initiative. Any further expansion must be subject to a decision by the NSMC. Members should wait for the Minister for Regional Development to present a report to the House in the coming days, after which the Assembly can further discuss all those matters.

At the end of the day, whatever the Minister reports to the House, the Narrow Water bridge project has been raised as an issue. It will be taken forward by agreement — or not — and I have no doubt that those who have a legitimate interest, particularly those who

live in the County Down area, will continue to canvass for that project.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. As Members know, the Business Committee has arranged to meet as soon as the Assembly suspends for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.22 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Fuel Poverty

Mr 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

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 for the winding-up speech.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the strategy for the eradication of fuel poverty, particularly amongst pensioner households and households with children.

I am pleased that this subject has been selected for debate again. Some Members have questioned why my colleague and I have decided to bring the subject back to the House as it was debated in May 2007. I hope that my address will make the reasons clear.

I will not repeat everything that I said in May, but I must state that no one should have to choose between food and heat, which can happen. There is clear evidence that a warm, dry home can improve life expectancy, and, of course, the opposite is true: a cold, damp home can reduce life expectancy and increase the need for intervention from the Health Service.

From a financial perspective, it is important to invest in eradicating fuel poverty at an early stage to avoid the future costs that will incur if it goes unaddressed. Apart from the personal issues and terrible circumstances that some people endure, there are sound financial reasons to right this wrong. Which of the following would be the best use of taxpayers' money: dealing with fuel poverty by removing energy-inefficient homes as a one-off cost investment, or dealing with the ill-health consequences of fuel poverty amongst families, children and older people, which would be an ongoing drain on the public purse? It is the old story: early intervention is the most effective way of saving money.

One of the triggers for the motion was a report which came to me from Mr Cobain, who is a member of the Committee for Social Development. Mr Cobain noted a complacent comment from the permanent secretary of the Department for Social Development, who stated that the Department is on target to eradicate

fuel poverty as set out in 'Ending Fuel Poverty: A Strategy for Northern Ireland'. In other words, by 2010, fuel poverty in vulnerable groups such as children and older people would be eradicated, and by 2016, fuel poverty would be entirely eradicated. I was astounded, when I heard this. Mr Cobain asked the permanent secretary to repeat the claim, and he reiterated that he was confident that the target would be achieved.

I believe that this will be a very difficult task: it is difficult to identify all those who are in the vulnerable category and difficult to get assistance to them. It is not something that anyone should be complacent about. It would be great if the target were met, but there is a lot of work to be done if it is to be achieved.

There are a number of reasons why it is important to have this debate again. First, the Assembly has entered a new term, and I want the matter to be fresh in Members' minds. Winter is approaching, and last night, frost was reported in Northern Ireland for the first time this season.

Mr F McCann: Following on from what the Member said about Mr Cobain, I am also a member of the Committee for Social Development. I, too, was shocked by the, admittedly, very commendable statement that fuel poverty will be eradicated by 2010. After questioning, a number of Committee members felt that there may be some doubt about how that could be achieved. Does the Member agree that, if there is a new strategy, the Minister should explain to the House what it is, and how fuel poverty will be eradicated by 2010?

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his intervention. Indeed, that is the purpose of the debate: we want to know what has happened since we last debated this motion, to pick up the pieces and to learn any lessons that members of the Committee or any other sources have presented to the Department.

As I said, we have now entered the first cold spell of the winter, and it is more meaningful for most people to talk about this subject not as we enter summer, but as we enter winter. Our constituents will face harsh weather.

More importantly, we are entering the budgetary process. I was concerned that, as we had debated this motion in May, it might not be fresh in everyone's mind. I hope, by having the debate once more, to put the matter on everyone's list of priorities and to raise it where appropriate, so that it gets the support that it deserves. If it is necessary to have additional resources to achieve that objective — and I suspect that it will be necessary — I hope that those resources will be available.

Incidentally, I first learned that this debate had been scheduled when I received a phone call from Pat Austin, director of National Energy Action Northern Ireland. She was delighted to see the motion on the agenda again. Perhaps those who wish that this debate would not happen could explain themselves to the charities concerned.

Ms Austin has also written to me to say that she has serious concerns that the objectives of eradicating fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010, and in non-vulnerable households by 2016, will be missed. Those who work in that area are also concerned.

I had a look at the Department for Social Development's website to identify what was happening on this issue. I do not serve on the Social Development Committee, and have not been following it at that level. I came across many documents, some of which were very dated. The last motion on fuel poverty was about reviewing the policy to see what additions were needed to achieve improvement in the area. I did not find anything particularly new and refreshing there.

I did note that the Minister had, in the course of the summer, reminded everyone who might have to apply for winter fuel cash to do so — which is commendable — and that there had been a meeting of the Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Advisory Group. I did not, however, see a range of issues emerging from that meeting to give me confidence that the permanent secretary's complacency should not be an area of concern.

In the course of that meeting, the warm homes scheme was discussed, as was benefit uptake — those are very pertinent issues — and research into the whole area of the working poor and those on low incomes. That research is just starting. How long will that research take? How long will it take to develop policies to address the research? I am still concerned about the time frame and the complacency of the permanent secretary.

What has actually changed since the Assembly last met to debate the subject? Has a review of the strategy occurred? Who here believes that the situations of 100% of those in vulnerable groups will be addressed before 2010? Will all those entitled to a winter heating allowance receive it? What efforts will be made to trace those who have not applied? Is there sufficient money in the Department for the warm homes scheme? When will the insulation and heating systems in all social housing be brought up to date? I have come across constituents, living in upstairs flats, who are spending £20 a week on coal to heat their homes. We have to provide appropriate heating systems and insulation in social housing. Is there sufficient money in the Department's budget to address that by 2010?

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that there is a generational and cultural resistance to entering into some of the schemes that have been devised to help people to have warm homes? That in itself will be a barrier to 100% take-up.

Mr Beggs: I agree with the Member; it is difficult to achieve a 100% take-up in any scheme. All possible routes must be followed in an effort to encompass everyone who is entitled to assistance.

I have explained the purpose of the motion. I now turn to the amendment, which I believe is helpful because it states that the elimination of fuel poverty should be given priority in the Programme for Government. Such a move may create savings in the health budget in the long term. As such, I find the amendment helpful, and it may assist the Department for Social Development in achieving some of its objectives. Therefore, I am happy to accept the amendment, and I hope that Members will do likewise in an effort to continue the unanimity of the House on this matter. I hope that Members will advance this issue in the relevant Committees as we try to get more funding to end fuel poverty.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“notes the debate on fuel poverty which took place on 29th May 2007 and the resolution adopted; and calls on the Executive to prioritise the elimination of fuel poverty in the forthcoming Programme for Government.”

I thank my friend the Member for East Antrim for accepting the thrust of my amendment. The purpose of the amendment is to ensure that the Executive make a total commitment to the elimination of fuel poverty in our society. That must be regarded as a top priority of any Programme for Government. It is very important that the amendment be accepted by the whole House to send a straight and clear message to the Executive that the elimination of fuel poverty must be a top priority for everyone in Northern Ireland.

I listened carefully to the Member for East Antrim, who explained the circumstances surrounding the introduction of the motion. However, I am not absolutely convinced that the arguments that he advanced are as clear as he has represented them. It seems to me that the Minister, in her address to the House on 29 May 2007, made it very clear that she was totally committed to the previous Administration's targets of 2010 for the elimination of fuel poverty in vulnerable groups, and 2016 for the elimination of fuel poverty in the rest of our society.

I do not fully understand the misgivings and concerns that have been presented. I was going to reiterate what the Minister for Social Development said by referral to pages 20-21 of the Hansard report of 29 May. I shall not repeat her words, but she made very firm commitments. Of course, the Minister is a member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and, as a lifelong social democrat, she is committed to social democracy and to the elimination of social problems that affect the most vulnerable in our society. I am certain that the Minister is firmly committed to those social democratic principles in the pursuit of policy on this matter.

It would be wrong to attempt to repeat all the arguments, facts and figures that were advanced on 29 May, but it is safe to say that considerable progress has been made in dealing with the problem, not just by the

current Administration, but by the previous direct rule Ministers. However, we must guarantee that that approach will continue. I become a little concerned when I hear rumours about cost-cutting and economies that must be made in the forthcoming Budget and in the Programme for Government. It is important that, at least in the area of fuel poverty, funding is ring-fenced. There should be no reduction in funding to deal with the problem.

We all support the efforts that have been made to introduce economies and efficiencies in households across Northern Ireland through various measures such as the warm homes scheme, the work of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), and the promotion of grants for home improvements.

All those efforts have been important in bringing about efficiencies in the home, and they are part and parcel of the measures to tackle fuel inefficiency and fuel poverty.

2.15 pm

There has been progress in other areas. For example, 97% of homes in Northern Ireland now have some form of central heating. That is a positive development, and it should continue to be encouraged.

However, some people live on poor incomes, and that major source of fuel poverty must be tackled. The Minister made it clear in several announcements that she is committed to ensuring that the Social Security Agency will redouble its efforts to encourage people to take up their rightful benefit entitlement. One third of those who are entitled to benefits for fuel poverty do not take them up. Were they to do so, consider the significant impact that that would have on those who suffer because of low incomes. The Department for Social Department, in its attack on the problem, which affects communities throughout Northern Ireland, must continue to encourage uptake of benefit.

The Department should carefully scrutinise particular problems; for example, the message of home energy efficiency has not reached those who live in rural areas, where isolation means that the problem of fuel poverty is worse than in urban areas.

Moreover, there is a divergence between those who live in social housing and owner-occupiers. In the social housing sector, there has been significant and substantial success in assisting tenants to improve their housing conditions. That is to be welcomed and must be further pursued. However, owner-occupiers — many of whom are elderly and without the wherewithal to deal with the problem — do not keep pace with those living in social housing, and I emphasise to the Minister that that gap must be narrowed. I hope that the Department will place even greater emphasis on that problem.

The Assembly has no control over winter fuel payments; they are under the control of Westminster, and I hope that the Minister will continue to put pressure on Westminster to improve the fuel grant. That grant is important in ameliorating the conditions for many people in Northern Ireland, and, because of the disproportionate decrease in its value, it is wrong that the grant has remained at £200 since 2000. Over recent years, there has been an increase of 70% to 100% in fuel prices.

Therefore, there is absolutely no justification for the static winter fuel payment. I hope that the Minister for Social Development, with the full backing of the Executive, can take our case to Westminster and explain that winter fuel payments must be greatly improved.

I have one word of caution: because of the current volatility of international energy prices, we must act carefully. At any stage, price increases could undermine the substantial work that the Department for Social Development has undertaken, to which the Minister is forthrightly committed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I welcome the motion and the fact that its proposer has accepted the amendment. I hope, and suspect, that such an issue will attract cross-party support. Some Members may make the case that not much has changed since the previous debate on fuel poverty on 29 May 2007. Nonetheless, it was an important topic in May, and it is still an important topic.

I will start with the proverbial good news and will get to the bad news later. The proposer of the amendment, Mr Maginness, has already mentioned the good news: recent surveys of house conditions indicate that there has been a year-on-year improvement in the social housing stock. Over the years, I have crossed swords with the NIHE on several issues. However, the NIHE must be commended, because, over the past 15 to 20 years, the quality of housing stock has improved significantly. Despite that improvement, there is still some way to go in the private-rented sector. The fuel poverty strategy, which targets families that are in need, is having some effect, and the quality of homes is improving, particularly in the social-housing sector.

In recent house conditions surveys, it is unclear whether there is universality in fuel poverty. A survey covering Belfast indicates that the level of fuel poverty is quite low: the percentages in west Belfast and east Belfast are almost identical — 4.2% in east Belfast and 4% in west Belfast. Those low levels of fuel poverty are to be welcomed. However, it is likely that such surveys do not get to the root of the problem, because the household sample is not wide enough to target those areas where fuel poverty exists. Data collection must be improved in order to target the areas that are most in need of help.

Once again, I wish to commend the warm homes scheme. That scheme is aimed at those in the private-rented sector and homeowners; people must be in receipt of certain benefits in order to qualify. The Minister supports that successful scheme. However, because of its very success, and the fact that Members continue to encourage people to take it up, the Minister may have to bid for additional funding for the scheme.

Of course, I and, I suspect, the Committee for Social Development, will gladly support the Minister's bid for additional funding, because initiatives such as the warm homes scheme will help to alleviate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

However, we need to target areas, particularly those in rural parts of Northern Ireland, where although people know that they are entitled under the scheme, they feel that it is a form of charity that they do not wish to avail of. We need to dispel that notion. We need to ensure that people are aware of the scheme; know their entitlement; know that they should apply, and, that if they qualify, that they will receive assistance. In that way, increasing the amount of money available and ensuring that there is a more widespread knowledge of the warm homes scheme will help to address fuel poverty. Whether fuel poverty can be totally eliminated by 2010 — as indicated a couple of weeks ago during a meeting of my Committee — is open to question.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion as amended. The strategy for ending fuel poverty was developed by the Department for Social Development following a consultation process that took place at the end of 2003. That strategy was stated to be an important element of the policy of targeting social need, which covers the period up to 2016, with a focus on 2010 as a key date for the eradication of fuel poverty. That is not an attainable target. As has been mentioned, Alan Shannon, the permanent secretary of the Department for Social Development, stated that the Department is on target to meet the 2010 deadline, but I reiterate that it is not attainable.

The strategy identifies the main causes of fuel poverty as low income, poor energy efficiency and high energy costs. Households whose occupants are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the cold weather on their health and social well-being — and it is worth reminding Members about those who are directly affected — contain an elderly person, someone with a disability or long-term illness, or a family with at least one child under 16. Approximately 200 older people die here every year from cold-related illnesses, which is an appalling statistic.

Households headed by older people are much more likely to be living in fuel poverty; 39% of people aged 60 to 74, and 42% of those aged 75 and over, are more

likely to be suffering from fuel poverty than younger age groups. Older people are more likely to live in older houses, which are less likely to be energy efficient. The Housing Executive's 'Interim House Condition Survey 2004', clearly demonstrates that a large proportion of older people live in accommodation that is in an unfit state of repair, or below the decent homes standard. That is something that must be addressed, urgently and effectively.

Statistics produced by the Child Poverty Action Group for 2003-06, indicate that 25% of children in the North are at risk of living in poverty. Indeed, a recent report from Save the Children indicates that 7,000 children in my constituency are living in poverty.

Fuel poverty has an impact on the health of both the old and young in society, which impacts directly on healthcare provisions. There are many schemes in operation to help relieve fuel poverty, such as the warm homes scheme. In 2006, 6,000 homes had insulation measures installed, at a total cost of £11 million, and 320,000 people received winter fuel payments. However, the continuing rise in the cost of oil, gas and electricity leaves many people, who are on low and fixed incomes, at risk of fuel poverty.

A home is in fuel poverty if, in order to maintain an acceptable temperature throughout the house, occupants have to spend more than 10% of their income. Low income has been clearly shown to be a significant cause of fuel poverty. In 2004, 68% of households with an annual income of under £7,000 were in fuel poverty. Realistic benefit and pension rates need to be implemented to enable people to enjoy an acceptable standard of living.

Prior to 1988 — under the old supplementary benefits scheme — heating costs were included as part of benefits, and there were central heating additions. Those were abolished in 1988 with the advent of income support, and people now rely on the Social Fund, which is budget limited and does not cater for heating costs. Other benefits such as tax credits have been introduced to supplement low wages and encourage people back to work. That scheme is a shambles, and it has resulted in some people owing more than they receive. Fuel poverty is a scourge on society, and its eradication requires a concerted effort from all Departments, particularly DSD. Only when that happens will fuel poverty be alleviated to any degree. Go raibh maith agat.

2.30 pm

Mrs Long: Fuel poverty is a serious issue, which not only affects many households in East Belfast, but households across the Province. The importance that the Assembly attaches to this issue is evidenced by the fact that it was debated on only the fourth sitting week following restoration of the devolved institutions.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Long: Although the Alliance Party welcomes any opportunity to advance practical actions and proposals to address the blight of fuel poverty, I am disappointed that today's motion does not progress the issue beyond what the House agreed on 29 May. That does not do justice to the seriousness of this issue — rather, today's motion is a verbatim copy of the motion on fuel poverty that the Assembly debated and agreed unanimously on 29 May 2007 — only 13 sitting days ago and six sitting weeks ago.

The wording of today's motion is identical to the motion that was debated on 29 May, and it is clear that it was resubmitted by the UUP in error after the recess. However, when that fact was highlighted, the proposer tried to justify the unaltered motion's resubmission after such a short time, as if it were intentional. He would not admit that it was a mistake.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No. To say that the resubmission of an unaltered motion is normal parliamentary procedure in order to keep an issue on the agenda is nonsense. It is neither normal practice, nor good practice. There is no rule barring the return of a motion, but one would reasonably expect — as the Business Committee obviously did — that Members who have serious concerns about important issues such as fuel poverty would take the time and effort to progress the debate or develop its arguments, rather than regurgitate the same wording, parrot-fashion, only weeks after its initial airing.

There are many ways of monitoring progress on fuel poverty since the previous debate. For instance, the submission of questions for oral and written answers and follow-up through the Committee for Social Development would more effectively hold the Minister and her Department to account, and such measures would serve to keep such critical issues high on the Assembly's agenda.

Deciding that the best form of defence is attack, the proposer made a number of serious criticisms in the media about the alleged complacency of officials in the Department for Social Development and about the Minister's failure to undertake the review that was agreed. However, the motion does not contain any reference to that departmental complacency or any criticism — explicit or implicit — of the Minister or her departmental officials. Neither does the motion request an update on progress or use the word "again" to emphasise that the motion represents a repeat call on the Minister. Any of those alterations would have prompted the Minister to address those concerns in her response and afford her the opportunity to answer such criticism. I wonder why those alterations were not made. One wonders if those criticisms were the drivers

for the motion returning to the House, or were they simply half-baked excuses concocted in the light of the Ulster Unionists' oversight. In fact, the proposer indicated that he became aware of the motion returning to the Chamber only when a representative from an outside body informed him of it.

As a member of an opposing party, I am not in the habit of defending any Minister, or his or her performance. I do, however, believe in fair play, so I draw Members' attention to the debate on 29 May. The Minister said that a full house-condition survey was carried out last year, but that the full results would not be available until October of this year. I imagine that the results of that survey will be critical to any comprehensive review of fuel poverty strategy as it will provide a measure of progress to date, and it will be a basis for the assessment of the effectiveness of the current strategy.

It is possible for anyone to make a mistake, but, for some, it is probable. However, what has been objectionable in this instance is that, rather than seeking to correct his party's mistake via an amendment to update the motion or a withdrawal and resubmission of wording that would reflect current concerns, the proposer has, instead, made an effort to discredit the Minister and the Department's efforts in an attempt to justify and deflect attention from the error.

I thank Alban Maginness for tabling the amendment, which moves the debate on in the context of the Programme for Government and the Budget process. Some Members have mischievously suggested that my objection to the motion's being rehashed, word for word, is due to my disinterest in fuel poverty. That is unfounded and offensive. I have worked closely with the warm homes scheme and the Warm Start project in my constituency. Take-up of the schemes has been low compared to other areas, but I have promoted them in the press, as well as signposting them in hundreds of thousands of leaflets, which I have circulated.

Many Members have quoted statistics, but I am going to finish with the case of an elderly constituent, because it highlights the issue. The gentleman lived in a draughty Victorian flat rented from a private developer. There was no heating in that house except his open fire, and he had to move his bed into that room to get any heat. He was finally rehoused last November after I visited him and wrote to the Department. Unfortunately, he passed away from a chest complaint in the intervening period, and never actually set foot in his new home. It is unacceptable for anyone to be living in those conditions. I will support the Minister, the Department and the Executive in all serious efforts to address this issue.

Mr Hilditch: I support the motion and the amendment, although, like others, I am surprised to see it back before us so soon despite the widespread support that it

received in May. However, perhaps today will be of further benefit.

As politicians we should be fully aware of the worsening impact that fuel poverty has on our communities, and of the fact that it is costing lives. The figures are totally unacceptable. The Department for Social Development's 2004 strategy, 'Ending Fuel Poverty', revealed that some 33% of households in Northern Ireland could not afford to heat their homes. That means that one in three of us is spending more than 10% of their annual income on heat in what they call their homes. It is a poor state of affairs when the older population have to make a choice between fuel and food. Surely, a home is not a home without warmth and food.

In Northern Ireland we are proud that other countries acknowledge us as being home- and family-orientated, yet the reality is that 33% of our homes are freezing, and the elderly are dying in them. The matter that Ms Long finished on needs to be taken into consideration.

It has long been established that we have some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in the UK. In my own constituency of East Antrim, 23% of people in Carrickfergus were unable to adequately heat their homes, and in Larne the figure was around 36%. Unfortunately, Craigavon and Magherafelt were identified as having the highest rate, at more than 45%.

According to the 'Interim House Condition Survey 2004', Northern Ireland has 152,000 people — or 24% of households — living in cold homes. Those vulnerable people are having their home life, health, environment, children's educational attainment and social well-being affected by the knock-on effects of fuel poverty.

Is the Minister for Social Development still confident that we can eradicate the fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and in non-vulnerable households by 2016? Is that a realistic target? In addition, by 2010 the Minister hopes that no household in the social-rented sector will be suffering. Is that achievable, and has the Department got the tools of the trade to do the job?

The Department for Social Development's strategy for ending fuel poverty was to focus on people; adopt a partnership approach; build on the commitment of community and voluntary groups, businesses, local authorities and statutory agencies; promote equality of opportunity, target social need and promote inclusion; focus on the maximum practical help for households in fuel poverty; seek to provide cost-effective solutions to fuel poverty; and benefit the environment.

In May the Assembly decided that the strategy had to be urgently reviewed, and now it is time to show our communities what the Department is going to do to ensure that the 2010 and 2016 deadlines are met. Not

all the options have been totally exhausted, such as looking at the advice we have to offer. Are we offering enough simple free advice on the grants that are available through the warm homes scheme? Are people really aware that they can save money on their energy bills?

Research shows that thousands of people in Northern Ireland could make significant savings by availing of the insulation measures that are available. Not everyone is aware of them, but another problem could be the cultural resistance issue mentioned by Mr Ken Robinson. On average, 25% of the heat in homes escapes through the walls, 25% is lost through uninsulated lofts and between 10% and 15% escapes through gaps around doors and windows. We should be emphasising that loft insulation, draughtproofing of windows and doors, cavity wall insulation, reflective radiator panels on solid walls, hot-water-tank jackets and compact fluorescent lamps are all available through the scheme. The number of homes that have already availed of them has risen from 8,250 to 10,000, which is to be welcomed, through the warm homes scheme. In 2004, 91% to 94% of people who did avail of the grants found them very successful, and found that they changed their homes for the better.

The Assembly should also explore the promotion of renewable energy, which has the potential to save 25% on energy bills. Over the past few years, we have seen an increased interest in the use of solar panels, wood-burning boilers and alternatives to fossil fuels. More people should be encouraged to choose those types of heating systems.

More promotion could be done in schools to encourage children to get involved in saving energy. Our environment would reap the rewards in years to come if that type of energy-saving behaviour were instilled in children from an early age. The costs involved would be an investment in the fight against fuel poverty.

The Assembly should be making a concentrated effort to co-ordinate the work of the Department for Social Development with the other relevant Departments — the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Finance and Personnel, and the Department for Employment and Learning. That would not only eradicate fuel poverty, but would save lives, reduce child poverty, create a greener environment, reduce our Health Service bills, decrease and control rates during the winter season, encourage more people to seek employment, and upgrade the overall standard of our homes and properties.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. At the risk of setting off Naomi Long again, I commend the proposer of the motion. If MLAs do not see any substantial movement on any matters, they have a right to come back and debate the issue again in the Assembly. That is called accountability.

I welcome the Minister to the debate. She covered many of the issues that have arisen today during the previous debate in May this year. However, the effects of fuel poverty are serious and wide ranging, and are not simply the discomfort of low temperatures. Cold, damp environments cause or worsen the effects of a wide range of physical conditions. Children who live in fuel poverty have higher levels of asthma and other diseases. We are all too aware of the impact that the cold weather has on older people. According to a report that was sent to all MLAs, 1,360 older people die each year as a result of cold weather in the North. We have a duty to come back and debate issues in the Assembly if we do not see substantial movement.

During the previous debate on this matter, the Minister highlighted that ill health associated with cold weather cost the Health Service here around £40 million a year. We must see fuel poverty tackled so that money is freed up to ensure that other health issues are dealt with.

It is essential that DSD's strategy for ending fuel poverty, which was in place in 2004, addresses and delivers on its targets of eradicating fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010, and in non-vulnerable households by 2016. Figures suggest that there has been a reduction in the total number of fuel-poor households between 2001 and 2004. However, I hope that the Minister will outline whether targets are being achieved, although she will probably not have that information available today. In 2004, the target number for vulnerable fuel-poor households was 158,000, in 2006 it was 110,000, and in 2007 the target is 80,000. I would appreciate it if the Minister could outline to MLAs if those targets are being reached, or whether they are being carried over on a yearly basis. We are not far away from 2010, and I want to know now whether those targets will be reached.

Those figures do not show that account has been taken of the impact of substantial increases in fuel prices. Previous contributors to the debate have referred to the impact of the cold weather, and yesterday was probably one of the coldest days that we have had in a long time. Everyone needs oil and gas, and fuel prices could further increase. Energy prices have already risen by around 80%, whereas incomes have increased by 6% and benefits by 2%, meaning that for every 10% increase in the price of fuel, another 8,000 households are added to the category of those suffering from fuel poverty.

There is also concern that there could be new and emerging groups living in fuel poverty, particularly among the working poor. It is of great concern that 47% of all children who live in fuel poverty live in households with one working adult.

2.45 pm

Previous Members spoke about another group that is particularly vulnerable to fuel poverty: the isolated rural poor. The Department for Social Development's strategy must adapt to meet the needs of that group.

The Department and the Minister must make an even more concerted effort if they are to meet their targets. The Minister has probably received the strategy for ending fuel poverty, which was emailed to all Members. I will quote some statistics that were gathered by Pat Austin, who is on the fuel poverty advisory group and who the proposer of the motion mentioned. All Members received those figures yesterday. However, that group asks whether any progress has been made on the strategy, given that it was launched 26 months ago.

Resources must be allocated for energy efficiency, education and training, ending fuel poverty, and measures to improve physical conditions. There must be improved data collection. The Assembly can deal with some issues, so I will pass them on. Members are not asking those questions; they are being asked by the advisory panel.

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

Mr Craig: Similar to other Members, I have noted with interest that questions have been asked in the past few days as to why, in the space of a few months, we are once again debating fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Long: Will the Member take a short intervention?

Mr Craig: Very short.

Mrs Long: To clarify, the problem is not that we are debating fuel poverty; I object to the identical, word-for-word motions of the debates.

Mr Craig: As I was going to say, whatever the reason for this motion being tabled, the issue is not the number of debates that Members have on the matter, but what we, as a newly formed Assembly, can do to continue the good work of the previous Assembly to address the important issue of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

As I stated in the previous debate on fuel poverty, some good work has been done to reduce the number of households that fall into the poverty trap. As Assembly Members, we should not rest on past achievements, but continue the good work that has been done to bring everyone out of the fuel-poverty trap that so many are still in.

The '2004 Interim House Condition Survey' shows that between 2001 and 2004 there was a reduction in the total number of people suffering as a result of fuel poverty: in 2001 there were 203,000, falling to 152,000 in 2004. As with all such figures, a health warning should be attached. Since 2004, there has been a major hike in fuel costs, which automatically caused deep distress to many households in the Province.

In comparison with the 2001 survey, the 2004 survey shows that massive strides have been taken by the Housing Executive to reduce the numbers of those suffering as a result of fuel poverty. In 2001, over 70,000 people living in Housing Executive accommodation were in fuel poverty. In 2004, that figure had decreased to 25,000. That massive decrease did not happen by chance but as a result of the Housing Executive's hard work on two levels: strategic and local. At the local level, district managers implemented programmes that have rejuvenated their areas, and they have upgraded the age and condition of their housing stock. It is right that the Assembly recognises the hard work that the Housing Executive has done on the issue.

The introduction of the warm homes scheme by the then Minister for Social Development, Lord Morrow, has been another major success in tackling fuel poverty. That scheme has been tremendously successful and has been the vehicle that many vulnerable people have used to introduce energy-saving measures to their homes.

In its first year, the warm homes scheme had a budget of £3.7 million, but that has risen to £20.5 million.

However, the fact that 52,000 homes have benefited from the scheme can be counted as money well spent.

Schemes cost money, but can the Assembly put a price on the quality of citizens' lives, many of whom are senior citizens who live in old properties and who need help from Government bodies and schemes?

The way to tackle fuel poverty is to examine the successes and learn from the failures. All schemes so far have failed to reach elderly people who own their own homes and have a small occupational pension. That, in addition to the rising cost of upgrading home heating systems because of new building control regulations, leads one to the conclusion that perhaps now is the right time for a review of the warm homes scheme to allow it to target more effectively those who are still in fuel poverty. We have a job of work ahead of us.

Mr McCallister: Mr Beggs mentioned that we had the first touch of frost last night, but it did very little to cool Mrs Long down. I want to point out to Mrs Long that the motion was tabled with the best intentions. I am glad that she knows so much about the internal workings of the Ulster Unionist Party; she is welcome to join the party.

Mrs Long: Thank you, but no thank you.

Mr McCallister: I have just been told by my deputy leader that the party does not want her.

I am surprised that Mrs Long stated that submitting questions for oral or written answer would have been better than the Minister being present for a full debate; she thinks that that is a more effective way to achieve accountability. A debate is the proper channel for the issue of fuel poverty, which is why the motion was tabled using the same wording as the May motion. It is an important debate, and it becomes more relevant at this time of year as winter draws in. I am surprised that Mrs Long made such an issue about the motion when the majority of Members have said that it is right and proper that this relevant issue is debated.

The Minister has been a member of the SDLP for many years, and her colleague Mr Maginness pointed out that winter fuel payments are a Westminster issue. It is strange, therefore, that the SDLP sits on the same Benches as the governing Labour Party.

To turn to some of the points made by Ms Ramsey, there are several strands to the fuel poverty debate. The health implications of fuel poverty are a big issue; it is a key interest of mine, as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Many families in Northern Ireland that live in fuel poverty suffer from respiratory conditions and other ailments. Hospital treatment for those conditions would cost the taxpayer more than alleviating fuel poverty.

Like other Members, I pay tribute to the warm homes scheme, which has done tremendous work in Northern Ireland by tackling issues such as inefficient home heating. As other Members said, there is a huge job to be done in rolling out that scheme as quickly and effectively as possible. It is a particular issue for Members such as me who represent large rural constituencies.

As Mr Robinson mentioned, there is also a problem with people not claiming their entitlements. The Department for Social Development and the Minister have a responsibility to ensure that entitlements are claimed.

I have some concerns about — and I ask the Minister to comment on — the Department for Social Development's reforms and modernisation. If some offices close as a result of those reforms, how will that impact on the Department's work and getting information on entitlements to members of the public and to the target groups that we should be focusing on?

This is an important issue, and I am glad that so many Members are present to listen to the debate. As Mr Hilditch mentioned, several issues about the various options have to be addressed, such as renewable energy. The cost of health, if those issues are not addressed, needs to be considered.

I am proud that my party has again proposed this subject for debate. Members of the Alliance Party should hold their heads in shame for being so critical of the motion. It is right and proper that the Minister should come to the House to update Members on the work that is going on. That is the proper avenue in which to do that.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the amendment. I have every confidence that something will be done about the issue of fuel poverty. I am not going to quote all of the figures — that has already been done by almost every Member who has spoken in the debate.

I am sure that all Members agree that the people who suffer most from fuel poverty are older people and children. A recent report funded by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the Department of Finance and Personnel highlighted a disgraceful situation: our children are less valuable than children in England, Scotland or Wales. Indeed, they are less valued by £226. Scotland spends £513 per head on children's services, Wales £429 and England £402. In Northern Ireland, children are valued at £287 — that is what is spent on a child. If our children cannot be kept warm, dry and nourished, there is definitely some failure in the system.

There is also the issue of the working poor — the people that have jobs with low pay. They get little help. What financial assistance they do get comes from a benefit called tax credits, which is generally a hindrance as more often than not it is taken back in huge amounts and labelled as an overpayment. That forces people into debt and affects the amount of money that they have to keep their homes warm — the main priority is to try to feed their families.

Another issue is the warm homes scheme. Over the past number of weeks, my constituency office has received more than a few complaints from people who have been contacted by agencies to make arrangements to install heating systems, only to be contacted again and told that the work cannot be started, or, in some cases, completed. The agencies run out of money because their budgets are totally inadequate. I want that issue to be addressed. If older people and families can at least keep their homes warm, and still have enough money to live on, it would go a long way towards tackling fuel poverty. We, as representatives, should do all that we can to bring fuel poverty to an end.

We all have concerns that the target for the eradication of fuel poverty by 2010 will not be met. However, I hope that we are on track to make that happen. In order to be able to make a dent in the economic blight that is fuel poverty, agencies must be given the proper budget allocation.

I am not going to mention anything about what Naomi Long said, or anything else — Naomi is entitled to do what she wants. However, I welcome the fact that the motion is being debated in the Chamber today because the aim of eradicating fuel poverty must be kept on track. It is very important that fuel poverty is dealt with in order to allow people to live comfortable and, indeed, contented lives.

3.00 pm

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank Members for their contributions. I hope to address each of the issues raised; however, if I cannot do so today, I am happy to write to Members on any outstanding matters.

There is some surprise that the Assembly is discussing a motion similar to the one debated at the end of May. However, I welcome Members' continuing interest in the work of my Department in tackling the scourge that is fuel poverty.

I was, however, disappointed to hear it reported that there was complacency in my Department's work to eradicate fuel poverty. Since I became Minister for Social Development, I have made it clear that I am fully committed to the eradication of fuel poverty which, as we all know, impacts on housing, health, the environment, the educational attainment of our children and the social inclusion of some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community.

Let me be clear. My Department and I are committed to tackling fuel poverty and there is no room for classifying me, or my Department, as complacent. There is no room for complacency.

Northern Ireland and GB-wide targets on eradicating fuel poverty were included in 'Ending Fuel Poverty: A Strategy for Northern Ireland', which was launched in November 2004. Those targets sought to eradicate fuel poverty in all vulnerable households by 2010, and in all other households by 2016. Even back in 2004, those targets were recognised as challenging and dependent on the volatility of fuel prices. That remains the case. However, we must not lose sight of what we are trying to achieve. Although the timescale is challenging, and may ultimately prove beyond us, we must remain focused on the outcomes that our people deserve. It is simply unacceptable that, in this day and age, people live in cold homes because they cannot afford to heat them. That is one issue on which the House is united.

During the last debate on fuel poverty, I gave an undertaking that I would write to the Minister responsible for winter fuel payments in the UK Department for Work and Pensions. I raised the issue of rising fuel costs and the impact that they were having on GB and Northern Ireland targets. Moreover, I highlighted the fact that those most at risk were often those who most

needed help, such as the ill, the elderly and those on low incomes — often referred to as the working poor.

Members will be surprised to hear that the Minister of State for Work and Pensions declined my request to increase winter fuel payments — *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: Shame.

Ms Ritchie: I have, nonetheless, been given an assurance that he will keep under review the possibility of further action on fuel poverty. I have asked my officials to arrange a meeting with the Minister of State and I will revisit the subject with him — of that Members may be assured.

However, much progress has been made, particularly in recent years, and it would be wrong not to recognise that. My Department will shortly publish the results of research undertaken on temperature-related mortality. Early findings indicate that, in recent years, there has been a substantial decline in such deaths. For example, in the past six years alone, the proportion of deaths linked to temperature has fallen by around 10%. Over the past 25 years, and particularly in the past decade, the number of circulatory and respiratory deaths has reduced. There were nearly 8,700 fewer such deaths in the period 2000 to 2004 than in the previous five years, and far fewer of those were linked to temperature. However, the numbers are still too high.

Those findings serve only to demonstrate the real progress that we have made in tackling fuel poverty.

The results are encouraging, and I expect to publish the full report by November 2007.

Much of the success to date is due to initiatives such as the Housing Executive's improvement and maintenance programme, and the warm homes scheme, which has been duly acknowledged in the House today. It is an indication of the importance of those programmes that the Department for Social Development continues to channel significant amounts of money into them. For example, in the last financial year, the programmes spent approximately £44 million, and, as a result, around 16,000 homes were provided with energy efficient measures. In the past year alone, the warm homes scheme has supported 10,000 homes — nearly 2,000 more than the previous year. In addition, the eligibility criteria for central heating systems has been extended to include those aged 60 or over who are in receipt of non-means-tested disability-related benefits.

Funding is also available for a number of fuel poverty partnership schemes operating in conjunction with our main programmes, which help to address the needs of those vulnerable people who may fall just outside the scope of the warm homes scheme.

This year, Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE), will manage a package of measures worth £4.5 million, aimed at providing central heating and insulation to priority

vulnerable households across the North. That funding has been provided by the Energy Efficiency Levy programme, and will provide affordable warmth to households that are ineligible for the Government scheme.

It is important that a new category is not created for those likely to be affected by fuel poverty from across the most vulnerable and needy in society. I want to eradicate, not simply manage, fuel poverty. I want to reach those on low incomes, and the working poor. The grants from NIE will directly target that group, and will complement existing Government schemes.

The number of households affected by fuel poverty dropped from 33% in 2001 to 24% in 2004. I eagerly await the findings of the full survey that was carried out last year, the findings of which will be available soon. In addition, 97% of properties across the North now have a form of central heating. Those results certainly do not reflect the work of a Department that is complacent in tackling fuel poverty.

Members have correctly identified the problems associated with rising fuel prices. The increases that we have witnessed in the past few years represent a significant threat to our target for eradicating fuel poverty. Although increased costs are not unique to this region, the impact is felt much more in Northern Ireland, given the costs for coal and other forms of fuel, which are historically higher when compared with other regions in Great Britain.

I am pleased to see that there have been price reductions in both gas and electricity earlier this year. I understand that Phoenix Natural Gas may announce a further price reduction before the onset of winter. I am sure that all Members will join me in welcoming such a reduction, if and when it is announced.

The vision of a society where people live in warm and comfortable homes will only be realised through the continuation of such combined efforts. People should not have to worry about the effects of the cold on their health, nor should they be too frightened to turn on their heating when the temperature falls.

A great deal has been achieved, but there is significantly more to do. I have re-established — and chair — the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, which examines new and innovative ways to tackle fuel poverty. All Departments and Executive Ministers must buy into the eradication of fuel poverty. I am confident that we will continue to make significant progress in tackling the issue by working in partnership.

I have also asked the Northern Ireland Fuel Poverty Advisory Group to carry out research to identify how to best help the working poor.

We must also tackle the level of assistance that goes unclaimed each year. It is frustrating that those people who are, quite often, most in need do not always

realise that help is available to them. I am determined to do more to help people to access the full range of support that is available to them. I encourage Members to do all that they can in that respect through their constituency offices.

In coming weeks, the Executive will meet to identify a Programme for Government and a Budget to deliver that work. That is why, at the outset of the debate, I welcomed the opportunity to discuss fuel poverty with the Assembly and place it in central focus once again. The timing of the debate could not be more helpful. However, there is a cautionary warning; the amendment calls for the Executive to make the eradication of fuel poverty a priority in the forthcoming Programme for Government. I recognise that there are many demands on the Executive as it seeks to identify its first Programme for Government. However, I assure Members that I will do all that I can, both in my Department and with Executive colleagues, to ensure that the eradication of fuel poverty remains at the forefront of the work being done to target social need, tackle disadvantage and lift people out of poverty. I hope that the view of my colleagues in the Executive will coincide with mine and that of the Assembly.

Many years ago, I entered politics to campaign for those who are on the margins of society; the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. Having spent all those years lobbying from the outside, the Assembly can be sure that I will not miss my opportunity now that I am on the inside. I represent a rural constituency, where there has been a substantial uptake of the warm homes scheme, and it is an important issue for me. Members can rest assured that I am not in the least bit complacent about the challenge ahead.

I want to address several issues that were raised. Mr Maginness asked how rural fuel poverty is being targeted. I understand the complexities of fuel poverty and I am convinced that its alleviation requires strategic intervention from my Department and others. Work is already ongoing in that respect. However, I accept that further work is required to address the inequalities between urban and rural areas. One of the priorities for the Northern Ireland fuel poverty advisory group and the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty is the issue of rural fuel poverty; in particular, the low uptake of measures, especially west of the Bann. The goal of the Executive and my Department is to refocus our efforts on targeting and education.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Campbell, raises significant issues. I thank him and the Committee for their continuing support for my Budget bids. I have no doubt that that support will continue. I also thank Mrs Long for her support in acknowledging that the road ahead will be difficult, but that we must all work together collectively to eradicate fuel poverty.

The warm homes scheme is also available to those who live in the private-rented sector and to owner-occupiers. Since the scheme began, it has delivered insulation and heating measures to 6,000 households in that sector.

My constituency colleague Mr John McCallister referred to benefit uptake and social security returns. Members will recall that in May, shortly after taking up my appointment, I announced a benefit uptake campaign for 2007 in which I encouraged people to apply for all the benefits to which they are entitled. Later in the year, that was followed up by a letter from the Social Security Agency to all people who are elderly, infirm or who are suffering from mental ill health to urge them to take up those benefits. Many of those people fall into the category of those who could suffer from fuel poverty.

3.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: I thank Members for their contributions, particularly on the amendment. I thank the Minister for the reassurance that she and her Department are totally committed to the eradication of fuel poverty. If nothing else, the motion has served a good purpose in uniting the House in a commitment to the pursuit of that objective. I hope that in the coming weeks, when the Executive are drawing up their Programme for Government, the eradication of fuel poverty will be a top priority.

The Minister said that action has been taken on the issue since it was last debated. She said that the inter-departmental body dealing with fuel poverty has been re-established and that she, as Minister, is chairperson of that body. That is to be welcomed. The Minister also said that she will renew her efforts with Westminster to have the winter fuel payment increased — as it should be, in all justice. It is totally disproportionate, compared to its original value in 2000. I hope that the whole House, including those Members who are also Members at Westminster, will support the Minister in putting pressure on the Government to make that increase, which is essential.

The Minister said that, if we had waited a little longer, the household survey would probably have been completed and the findings could have been discussed in the House. *[Interruption.]*

I did not hear what the Member said.

There were many other contributions, all delivered with real concern by Members who were united in tackling the issue. I thank Mr Beggs for accepting the amendment; I hope that it can be passed with the unanimous support of the House.

Mr Campbell, as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, said that he was concerned about some aspects of the Department's policy on the

elimination of fuel poverty, but he gave his general support. He also gave his support to any bids that the Minister might submit in order to tackle fuel poverty, which is to be welcomed.

Mr Brady was concerned that the target dates were unattainable — although he did not offer any evidence of that. Mrs Naomi Long, in her inimitable fashion — a breathless tour de force — outlined her concern about the motion being reintroduced in the House. I had tremendous sympathy with her, as I too could not divine the real reason why the motion was reintroduced. Nevertheless, its reintroduction has allowed Members to revisit this vital subject. I thank Mrs Long for her support — despite the efforts of Mr Kennedy and others to interrupt her.

Mr Hilditch, in characteristic fashion, committed himself to supporting the Department and its policy on fuel poverty, and hoped that its targets would be realistic. Sue Ramsey also said that she supported the motion. However, she felt that there had not been any substantial movement on the matter. I cannot understand the full force of that criticism, as we are dealing with a three-month period only. Ms Ramsey wanted more concerted action; the Minister has proven that there has been concerted action on the issue of fuel poverty, and that concerted action will continue.

Mr Craig, Mr McCallister and Mrs Bradley made interesting contributions and showed their full support for the motion, as amended.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Members who contributed constructively to the debate and who continue to show their concern about fuel poverty.

I was taught that reiteration is a good method of reinforcing one's point. That was one of the reasons for the wording of the motion. I was pleased that the all-party Business Committee selected the motion for debate, giving us the opportunity to discuss this matter today.

Complacency on the part of senior civil servants has been observed. Members who work on this matter raised concerns about the strategy to end fuel poverty. This debate has given the Minister an opportunity to update the Assembly on the progress that has been made since we last discussed this issue.

I would also point out to some Members that, in other places, debates on the same issue are held year after year, as methods of reinforcing the point. For example, in the House of Commons, there have been early-day motions on fuel poverty in 2007, 2006, 2005, 2004 and 2003. That can happen, and it is important to reinforce an issue.

I appreciate and accept the clear commitments made by the Minister to work constructively to end fuel poverty. I ask the Minister to note that the comment that I made about complacency was not directed at her,

it was about a permanent secretary. I was not attacking her — I accept the commitment that she has made, and I am aware that she will continue to work on this issue. Perhaps she will address that matter with the appropriate staff.

I also hope that, in the short term, more statistics on fuel poverty will be published. That is an important way of driving the issue forward and identifying whether progress is being made, and what additional strategies and actions may be needed. I ask the Minister to take up Sue Ramsey's suggestion that measurements should be published regularly. That is a constructive way to identify whether progress has been made or whether the strategy has stalled.

I also draw the Minister's attention to the questions that Members asked during the debate. I ask her and her staff to review the Hansard report and provide answers to those questions.

The debate has been helpful in that it will remind civil servants of the importance of fuel poverty. I support the amendment because it will move the matter forward, and, I hope, help to prioritise it in the Programme for Government. As I said yesterday, there is also a role for ordinary Assembly Members, particularly those who are members of the relevant Committees — as they view the draft Budget, they can give the issue the necessary priority. Choices will have to be made, and that will perhaps mean disappointment in other areas.

I hope that there are methods by which we can make progress on this issue, and that Members will drive the issue forward through a variety of methods. That would be worthwhile. I also hope that we can come together to support the amendment — as all sides have indicated — and that the House, as a whole, will make progress and help to end fuel poverty in our society.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the debate on fuel poverty which took place on 29th May 2007 and the resolution adopted; and calls on the Executive to prioritise the elimination of fuel poverty in the forthcoming Programme for Government.

School Openings and Amalgamations

Mr 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. 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 for the winding-up speech.

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern some of the decisions taken by the Minister of Education over the summer recess on school openings and amalgamations; and calls upon the Minister to clarify her approach to the recommendations of the Bain Report and the Sustainable Schools Policy published by her Department.

Let me make it clear to the House, lest I cause some of my colleagues on the Committee for Education to jump up and down, that I am moving the motion in a personal capacity and not as the Chairperson of the Committee. I was instructed to say that because I was told that I might be censored by the Committee; although, to be truthful, I wonder whether that might not be a bad idea. *[Laughter.]*

Jo Moore got herself into trouble on 11 September 2001 for saying that it was a good day to bury bad news. The Minister of Education has learned from the example given by Jo Moore, because over the summer, she has taken the opportunity, when the eyes of Members of the Assembly and its scrutiny Committees were turned elsewhere, and perhaps, when the press were not as focused on political issues, not just to bury bad news, but to bury departmental policy, to hide inconsistent decisions and to engage in biased decisions. In fact, the Minister of Education has been digging so furiously that she is like some kind of demented political gravedigger, and the holes are littering the drive up to Rathgael House. Indeed, because of the holes that the Minister has dug, the drive up to Rathgael House is probably worse than some of the roads that Barry McElduff says exist in the west of the Province.

For a minute or two, I want to go through some of the decisions that the Minister has made, and then I want to examine some of the policies that her Department has published. Thirdly, I want to consider some of the things that the Minister has said to the Assembly and analyse the consequences of her decisions.

The first decision that the Minister announced during the summer holidays was the amalgamation of two maintained schools in and just outside the village of Ahoghill — St Joseph's Primary School, and St Patrick's Primary School in Aughtercloney. Between them, those two schools had a total of 43 pupils. Even when amalgamated, they did not form a school that met the criteria set out in the Bain Report. They had a

combined deficit of £300,000. There was no chance that pupil numbers would increase; indeed, the North Eastern Education and Library Board made it clear to the Minister that the amalgamation would not result in the long-term viability of the schools, but would, in fact, incur longer-term consequences.

The two schools are now lumbered with the costs of protected staff salaries, which will probably lead, in two years' time, to another deficit of about £200,000 when protected staff status is lost. The decision to amalgamate the schools was contrary to the views of the North Eastern Education and Library Board and totally contrary, as I will show in a moment, to the policies that the Minister has tried to tell the Assembly that her Department must follow, and for which she hopes to get support in this House.

The second decision made by the Minister was the announcement of three Irish-medium schools: one in Londonderry, one in Crumlin and one in Glengormley. The schools in Londonderry and Glengormley each had an intake of 15 pupils, and the school in Crumlin had an intake of 12 pupils — well below the standard set in the Bain Report, and well below the standard set in the Minister's consultation document on sustainable schools policy. Yet, those decisions were made against a background — that the Minister knows her Department faces — of 50,000 extra, but unnecessary, school places in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

According to the Bain Report — which is the Minister's own document — those 50,000 places represent unacceptable "excessive recurrent costs" and are a financial strain on the Department of Education. The Bain Report has made it clear that rationalisation will be required, and it has set certain thresholds for when schools should be considered for closure. At times, the Assembly has challenged those thresholds, but, even allowing for some flexibility, the schools that I have mentioned are well below the Bain thresholds.

The second Department of Education document to which I shall refer is called 'A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools'. That sets out certain criteria that must be adhered to before the opening of a school can be considered.

The first criterion is that the financial viability of the school must be examined. The document points out that primary schools that have 80 to 100 pupils will cost around 16% more than primary schools that have more than 140 pupils — the size of an average school. A school that has fewer than 50 pupils will cost nearly 200% more than the average, and a school that has fewer than 20 pupils will cost nearly 300% more.

What has the Minister done? At a time of financial constraint, she has opened one school by amalgamating two that have 43 pupils, with an average cost of nearly

200% more than a school that has 140 pupils. She has opened three schools, with costs that are nearly 300% more than those of the average school. Despite that, I anticipate that the Minister will tell the House that her Department is under financial strain.

The second criterion is that schools should be not only in a sound financial position, but should be able to offer quality education. The Minister has opened three Irish-language schools at a time when, as she said in a written answer to me before the recess, around 23% of teachers in Irish-language schools are unqualified, contrary to the Teachers' (Eligibility) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997. The Minister cannot get enough qualified Irish-language teachers, yet she gaily opens more schools in the absence of trained staff. How on earth will she ever guarantee quality education in those schools? The schools have small pupil numbers and a curriculum that is not broad enough and that is taught by unqualified teachers, yet the Minister gaily indulgences in her own personal prejudice.

The third criterion in the sustainable schools strategy is that there must be stable enrolment trends. I know that the Minister will say that for the next seven years only 15 pupils in each year group have to enrol. However, she does not know that that number will enrol; she knows only what the enrolment in Irish-language schools will be this year. Perhaps the Minister knows how many youngsters who are aged one, two, three and four will enrol — but does she know how many of those people who are interested in the Irish language will conceive youngsters in three or six years' time? If she has those predictive powers, I want her to pick my lottery numbers this week.

Mr Kennedy: Shame, shame. Resign, resign.
[Laughter.]

Mr S Wilson: OK, I withdraw that; I do not want her to pick my lottery numbers.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will give way later, but I want to finish.

Mr Kennedy: It would be better if the Member resigned now before he is pushed, given the admission that he has just made.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for those remarks.

The Minister is asking us to fund schools on the basis that she can predict an intake for people who are not even born. How can she claim that there is a guaranteed, stable enrolment trend? She has not tested it in any of those areas, as there are no other schools.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the Minister really did not believe in those policies and criteria. I thought that I would have to delve into comments that she made to the Assembly or to the Committee for Education in May or June.

In fact, I need only go back to yesterday's Question Time, when the Minister said the following about small schools:

"Politicians cannot be ostriches ... We ignore the current demographics in our society at our peril." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p322, col 1*].

She went on to say that it is "not in the best interests" of children to be taught in schools with only 20 or 30 children.

The Minister did not make those comments a year ago, six months ago or even before the summer; she made those comments yesterday. However, the decisions that she made during the summer contradict all her comments.

Her decisions have consequences for the education budget and, as I was informed in a letter from the North Eastern Education and Library Board, for future rationalisation. The board's chief executive told me that he would find it hard to sell the idea to people in his area.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús ba mhaith liom a rá nach mbeidh mé ag caint mar LeasChathaoirleach an Choiste Oideachais.

I want to make it clear that I am not speaking as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. I have proposed an amendment to the motion, because the motion states that the sustainable schools policy has been "published" by the Department, whereas that has not yet happened.

I agree with the sentiments of the original motion, in so far as they refer to the need for the Minister to clarify her approach to the Bain Report. The best way for the Minister to do that is to publish her Department's sustainable schools policy. Although the consultation on the policy ended on 16 April 2007, it has still not been published.

Even though parents, teachers and pupils are in a state of uncertainty as to what the future holds for them, the Minister told the Assembly that she will not be rushed into telling Members, or the general public, what form of transfer procedure will replace the 11-plus. I hope that the Minister does not say to the Assembly today that she will not be rushed into publishing the sustainable schools policy, because a huge part of the review of public administration (RPA), as it relates to education, depends on it. Under RPA reforms, the Department of Education is tasked with establishing:

"the strategic direction for education, setting policy, priorities and standards for schools and youth services".

As the policies are not in place, even though some 21 months have elapsed since the beginning of the process, how can the Department achieve that? As

Members know, policy drives practice, and the fact that many policies, including this one, are not yet in place is a clear case of the cart being before the horse. In fact, the horse seems to be grazing the long acre with the shafts of the cart stuck in the ground somewhere.

Clear policies are needed to ensure an even-handed approach in all sectors according to their need. Policy is required to bring clarity and transparency to the situation. Many issues in the reforms depend on a workable, sustainable schools policy. For example, under area planning rules, the planning of the school estate cannot be implemented without such a policy. The Department plans to begin the movement towards reform through the convergence of the education and library boards with the education and skills authority (ESA).

Area planning is to be introduced by administrative means followed by legislation. In a two-Bill approach, the first Bill will give the ESA a duty to secure the effective planning of schools, which will pave the way for the development of the area planning process. The second Bill will be more detailed and contain new provisions to replace the current legislation on development proposals.

However, the Department says that the legislation must be informed by further policy development from the early work of the boards and the ESA. Where is the sustainable schools policy that will be an essential signpost? There is uncertainty in many schools, homes and among education providers about what the future holds. As Members know, uncertainty breeds fear and lowers morale. The Assembly is setting out on a road to change, but does it know where it is going?

The policy signposts have not been erected, and without them we are in danger of going astray and ending up in a place we never intended to be in. Direction needs to be put into the process, and the first step on the journey would be to have the sustainable schools policy published without further delay.

The previous Minister of Education, Maria Eagle, accepted the Bain recommendations in full. The current Minister of Education has indicated that she accepts the recommendations in principle, but Members need clarification as to which recommendations are now to be subject to further discussion or change. The Bain figures for enrolment — around 115 pupils for a primary school; 500 pupils for a post-primary school; and 100 pupils for sixth-form provision — were not set as the minimum threshold for retention but rather as reviewed thresholds. Does the Minister accept and agree with those figures? The Assembly requires the Minister's answer.

With regard to small primary schools, Bain also refers to schools having composite classes, with no more than two year-groups per class. That equates to

having four teachers. The current average pupil-teacher ratio and the local management of schools (LMS) arrangements in primary schools would allow such schools to function with around 80 pupils. Does the Minister accept that estimate?

A significant number of schools have around 55 to 60 pupils and three teachers. While those schools require additional support for the challenges they face, in the main they are financially and educationally viable, and an option for their retention should be available. I would like to know the Department's and the Minister's stance on those particular schools.

Mr Wilson mentioned the amalgamation of two schools in Ahoghill. The proposal to merge those schools into one small primary school did not meet the criteria set out in the Bain Report. However, according to that report, policy must take account of the needs of communities, whether they are rural communities or communities representing one sector. The report also states that there will always be a need to retain a few schools that sit outside the recommended figures and that policy should accommodate such exceptions.

There is an urgent need for clarification, and the only way that that can be achieved in a useful and transparent way is through the publication of the Department's sustainable schools policy.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom achoimriú a dhéanamh ar an méid atá ráite agam ar an leasú: gur chóir don Aire a dearcadh ar mholtaí Thuairisc Bain a shoiléiriú. Níl bealach níos fearr ann le sin a dhéanamh ná an polasaí um scoileanna inchothaithe a fhoilsiú gan a thuilleadh moille.

Mar a dúirt mé, is é an ról atá ag an pholasaí ná an cleachtas a threorú. Mura bhfuil polasaí ann, beidh an próiseas gan treoir agus i mbaol dul ar bhealaí aimhleasacha. Tá inní ar mhúinteoirí, ar thuismitheoirí, agus ar an phobal go ginearálta. Caithfear deireadh a chur leis an inní sin — agus deireadh a chur léi gan mhoill.

Bhí beagnach dhá bhliain ag an Roinn a polasaí ar na ceisteanna seo a shoiléiriú agus a fhoilsiú. Chuaigh Bain i gcomhairle le riarshéalbhóirí; d'fhoilsigh sé a thuairisc; rinne an Roinn comhairliúchán ar na moltaí a bhí inti — comhairliúchán a chríochnaigh ar 16 Aibreán. Ach, fós féin, níl aon iomrá ar an pholasaí.

To conclude, without a clear policy, we are in danger of going astray.

I call on the Minister to publish her Department's sustainable schools policy without further delay. Go raibh céad maith agat.

3.45 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a

ghabháil le Sammy Wilson as deis a thabhairt dúinn labhairt ar cheist na Gaeilge inniu. *[Interruption.]*

Some Members might get a bit of an education today.

The motion is part of a campaign waged against both the Minister and Sinn Féin since the Department of Education was allocated. There is an orchestrated campaign, led by the Chairperson of the Education Committee, Sammy Wilson, and other Members of the DUP and the UUP on that Committee. That campaign is a political witch-hunt against Caitríona Ruane. Shamefully, those involved all sit on the Education Committee, and should therefore be working with and supporting the Minister, and trying to deal with the complex issues that face all of us in the education sector. Instead, those people within unionism are using the education of our children as a political football.

The attacks on the Minister have been relentless over the last number of months, and the number of questions submitted to the Department of Education is a clear example of an orchestrated campaign. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should not speak from a sitting position.

Mr McNarry: Can Members stand up and challenge the Member?

Mr Deputy Speaker: If Members wish to ask whether the Member will give way, or if they have a point of order, they may speak.

Mr Butler: As I was saying —

Some Members: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: No, I am not giving way. Nearly 400 questions have been submitted to the Department of Education since Caitríona Ruane became Minister of Education. That is more than the total combined number of questions received by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the Department of Finance and Personnel; and the Department for Employment and Learning. That illustrates the campaign to try to undermine Caitríona Ruane as Minister of Education. The motion is yet another example of that campaign.

In short, this is a political point-scoring exercise.

Níl an rún seo ach ag iarraidh a bheith ag scóráil pointí polaitíochta.

The motion is dressed up as concern for the education of children, but it is really — and this is the heart of the matter — an attack on the Irish-medium education sector. The manner in which the DUP is playing politics with the issue of the provision of schools, and its attacks on Irish-language schools in particular, is appalling. The recent comments of Michelle McIlveen, who called on the Catholic sector, the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector to be disbanded and replaced by controlled schools, were disgraceful. Those comments

were a calculated insult to the children, teachers and parents involved in those sectors.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: No. The DUP has a long way to go in reassuring professionals in the education system that it is serious about addressing the many challenges that lie ahead, and that it can — through the necessary reforms — bring the education system to a point where it matches the entitlement of parents and children to choose a form of schooling, as guaranteed under the Good Friday Agreement. The motion is a particular attack on Caitriona Ruane because she opened three Gaelscoileanna — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if they have a question to ask —

Mrs I Robinson: The Member will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If the Member does not wish to give way, he does not have to. If Members wish to speak, they must put their names down. Do not speak from a sitting position.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat.

Let us take away all the alarmist scaremongering that has been purported today — and in past weeks — and look at the facts about Irish-medium education. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 placed a duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which the British Government signed up to, obliges the Department of Education to provide Irish-medium education to those families who request it, provided that there are sufficient numbers.

There has been an increase in demand in the Irish-medium sector. In the 1980s, parents had to travel the length and breadth of the country to buy bricks to build their schools. In those days, there were 400 children being educated in the Irish-medium sector; that number has increased to almost 3,000.

Mr B McCrea: I tried to understand the difference between the amendment and the motion, but, regrettably, I cannot accept the amendment — although I agree with my colleague's sentiments. The implication of the amendment is that if the Department published its views, they would be the same as those of the Minister. However, that is clearly not the case. On such issues as early-years provision and school closures, the Minister is on a solo run. She is interested only in the things that she is interested in. Many people in Lagan Valley are worried sick about their schools and their children, as Paul Butler said. It is not a political football as far as they are concerned: it is a tragedy, and nobody appears to be doing anything about it. The Assembly must do something about it.

It was suggested that getting rid of the 11-plus would reduce stress. The current situation, where nobody knows what is going on, is 10 times worse than anything we ever had with the 11-plus. The pupils, and their parents waiting outside, are suffering confusion, fear and stress. People want to know what is going on. Some year 5 children in Lagan Valley are sitting assessment tests again, just in case. When we look to the Minister for guidance, we only get smiles and sweet words — “I want to do the best for you.” Let us look at the decisions that she has made and at what she has done. She has brought about muddle, confusion and countermanding. Only yesterday, the Department of Education had to issue statements of clarification. Why did she open three new schools and close one? One might look through the Bain Report and try to work out what is going on. Why is she dealing with those issues and not dealing with the bigger issues? When will academic selection, Irish-medium education, early-years provision, and so forth, be dealt with?

The Minister's approach comes across — perhaps unintentionally — as arrogant, perhaps even provocative. It does not encourage engagement, co-operation or buy-in from the Assembly, and she will need those things if we are to tackle the real challenges that face our education system. Perhaps there has been a misunderstanding. I often hear the Minister say that she will meet the Committee and listen to what its members have to say, and the Chairman of the Committee will confirm that. I heard it at the Belfast Fáilte, but — and there is always a but — when she has heard what we have to say, she will go ahead and do whatever she was going to do anyway. That is the real issue, and it is not a winning strategy. Her approach shows a lack of confidence, and it suggests an inability to make a coherent or cogent argument. It has profound implications for how the Assembly will work in the future.

There are hard decisions to be made, and those decisions can only be made if consensus is built. The place to make those decisions is in this Chamber. The Minister should bring these issues to the House and let Members discuss them separately so that we can reach some sort of consensus. The solo business does not do anyone any favours. Instead of having these nice — albeit unstructured — debates on Mondays and Tuesdays in which Members table motions on subjects that they think are important, we should get down to business. When will the Minister bring to the Chamber a discussion on the value of the Irish-medium sector? Let Members talk about it. If she can convince us that it is the right way forward, let us do it.

When are we going to talk about academic selection? The Minister takes the views of everyone else in the world, but she does not talk to elected

representatives. The Assembly is at the very heart of the process of getting people to buy into — and move forward on — policies.

I am quite sure that some of my colleagues will ask serious questions, but I want to know why we are investing in a strategy that does no good for anyone. Can we please have a proper debate?

Mr Lunn: I fear I am going to reduce the temperature slightly. The Alliance Party supports the amendment. We would like the Minister to clarify her approach to the recommendations of the Bain Report, and to give her reaction to the consultation process on sustainable schools, which closed in April. The Alliance Party does not particularly share the concerns expressed in the motion about the specific decisions made during the summer recess.

The DUP motion mentions amalgamations, and we would be interested to hear the Minister state when she will outline her views on possible mergers between controlled and maintained schools — that being the obvious solution in areas of small population, such as Ahoghill, where, as has been mentioned, an integrated school has effectively been created. I shall read a couple of lines from the consultation document ‘Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools’:

“In decision-making on new schools or re-organisation/rationalisation of schools, proposals will be required to demonstrate that options for collaboration/sharing on a cross-community basis have been considered and fully explored”.

Perhaps that would have sorted out the situation in Ahoghill.

Since I have mentioned integrated schools, how would the Minister answer the concerns of parents who wish to see their children educated in a genuinely integrated environment, but find their wishes frustrated by the decisions of the Department of Education? I am thinking of Saintfield, where an integrated school is now operating, but with private funding, and Ballycastle, where a group of determined parents refused to accept the Department’s view and opened an integrated primary school with funding obtained internationally, leading to the decision by the local controlled primary school to apply for integrated status a couple of years later. That is a good example of people power, and perhaps of departmental misjudgement.

As a party, Alliance favours parental choice, whether it is expressed as a desire for Irish-language schooling or integrated schooling. However, the real contrast for us — and I would like the Minister’s views on this — is between the apparent ease of obtaining funding for the Irish-language sector, despite its minority appeal, and the integrated sector, where every poll has shown it has overwhelming support, but where parents frequently have to resort to sourcing

independent funding, despite satisfying the criteria laid down by the Department.

Clarification is also needed on the desirability of cross-sectoral solutions, and whether the Minister is comfortable with individual sectors continuing to make their own decisions, for example, those decisions that were recently announced by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, and the grammar schools that are now threatening to hold their own transfer tests.

The amendment calls for clarification, as does the motion. I appreciate the need for Ministers to take some time over difficult decisions, but there is growing unease among parents, school boards and the teaching professionals about the slow pace of progress. I hope that the Minister can give us that clarification in the near future.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Storey: The motion is not concerned with a political witch-hunt, as has been suggested by one member of the Education Committee. The motion is aimed at ensuring that the truth is told and that we have an accountable Minister of Education, who tells us exactly what is happening for the good of our education system.

The previous devolved Minister of Education, in his last act as Minister — just about the last act of that Assembly — took the ideological axe to our education system in what was nothing less than an act of educational vandalism.

4.00 pm

The current Minister displays all the symptoms of having contracted the same disease. No doubt she got her formative training in policy formulation and departmental responsibility and accountability amid the jungles of Central America, where she went to the assistance of other educators — those who were apprehended educating the narcoterrorists of FARC. However, we were chasing butterflies when that was brought to light. Her party leader clearly felt that on the back of that she was obviously highly qualified to be the Minister of Education and easily trusted to do what is best for all our children. Being as sympathetic to our hatchling Minister as possible — even though she has such wide experience among the Colombian undergrowth — I realise that her predecessor in the Department left her a mess, and that she has inherited several huge difficulties, including the transfer system.

We still have a Minister who does not know what she is doing about the transfer system. I concur with the Member for Lagan Valley Mr B McCrea regarding the stress, the worry, the anxiety and the fear, but does the Minister care? Has she compassion or concern? Yes — from the lips out, but certainly not from the heart. The Minister has already amassed a significant

number of closure announcements for primary and secondary schools in the controlled sector, as has already been referred to. However, her position on CCMS and Irish-medium schools suggests that the Department is following a different strategy.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: I do not have much time.

I want the Minister to come clean once and for all on the existing policy and to confirm that her Department is pursuing a policy of amalgamating Catholic maintained schools to protect their ethos, while enforcing systematic closure on the controlled sector if it does not conform to switching into the integrated sector. If that is so, it is a form of social and cultural engineering which highlights an inconsistency in the principles of equality and parity so often embraced and spoken of by the Minister.

The Minister announced the amalgamation of the two maintained primary schools, St Joseph's and St Patrick's, in my constituency of North Antrim. The Minister has written off a deficit of £300,000, but it is only money — what about it? The Minister of Finance and Personnel will probably get the blame for not giving her enough money, and she will pass the buck and the blame. The buck and the blame stop with the Minister. The decision was made despite the total opposition of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The Minister has decided to stick to the old republican motto, "Herself alone".

Minterburn Primary School in Caledon, South Tyrone, was closed recently —

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that Caledon is in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. However, I am sure that he does not know of another small school, Carnall Primary School, which has a capacity of 86 pupils. The Department of Education has put a cap on that figure. However, that school is under threat of closure from that Department. Where is the equality in that? The school cannot have more than 86 pupils, and yet it will be closed because it is a controlled primary school.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her intervention. She is absolutely right. I have a school in my constituency accumulating a deficit year on year, but the CCMS has taken no action on the future of that school. It is allowed to stay in existence because of the policies of the Minister. What is happening to the controlled sector? What is happening to our education system under this Minister? She has picked up the baton handed to her by the previous Minister of Education and is wielding it like a sword on the controlled sector. The facts show it — despite the Minister's mantra about equality. She seems to be applying the term liberally when dealing with the controlled sector. Her Department appears to be bowing to a different pressure

when dealing with the CCMS. I call on the Minister to address urgently the perception and the reality within the Protestant community that proves that it is wrong.

Even the Minister's own party does not accept what she is doing. Daithí McKay, the Sinn Féin Member for North Antrim, criticised the Ahoghill decision. He said that:

"there is no doubt that the amalgamation of those two schools had been handled very badly. It is a disgrace ... there is still a lack of clarity ... on the matter ... it is essential that parents are kept fully involved in any consultation".

The blame lies with the Minister. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

I remind Members who take an intervention, especially those with five minutes or less to speak, that they will get an extra minute added to their time. That has always been the protocol in the House.

Mrs O'Neill: I support the amendment. However, I wonder whether we would be having this debate if the decision that the Minister took during recess applied to the controlled sector.

There is an increase in demand for Irish-medium education and integrated education in spite of the fact that there has been an overall reduction in the school-age population. The Irish-medium education sector is in a healthy state, and Members should welcome that. We should also fully respect the right of parents to choose to have their children educated in that sector and the right of teachers to teach in the sector. There are almost eight times as many children in Irish-medium education as there were in 1991. Parents are exercising their right to request Irish-medium education for their children.

There is provision under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, when families request it and numbers are sufficient, for education to be made available in Irish. They are also protected —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: Not at the minute.

They are also protected by the commitment made in the Good Friday Agreement, which led to a duty being placed:

"On the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish medium education".

That was reiterated in the St Andrews Agreement, which the DUP signed up to.

The Irish language is the native language of this country. It has been a spoken language for nearly 2,000 years and is of great importance to the people in relation to their cultural identity and their roots. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: When the Member made the point that the Irish language is part of our shared cultural heritage, the Members opposite burst into guffaws and ridicule. I wish to make the point to those Members that there is an audience paying attention. Do we address the lowest common denominator of intolerance, bigotry and prejudice? Members should seriously and responsibly question whether their approach is helpful.

Mrs I Robinson: What about our culture, and recognising it?

Mr McLaughlin: Absolutely. Members should accept that we have all benefited from the different cultural traditions that exist in our society — the Scots, the English and the Huguenot, as well as the Gaelic. We should all celebrate diversity in the community. There is a regrettable tone of intolerance and bigotry in the comments that I have heard from across the Chamber. I wonder how that is seen by our community.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the member for his intervention.

The Irish language does not belong to one section of the community. It belongs to us all, and we should all take ownership of it and promote our shared heritage. The Members on the opposite side of the House must realise and accept that the Irish language is here to stay. It is growing in popularity, and whether the motion is agreed today is irrelevant. The Irish language will continue to grow — that is the reality. More and more parents are choosing Irish as an option for their children.

The unionist parties must stop fearing it and stop trying to score political points from it. The arguments are wearing thin. No-one will be forced to learn Irish. It will be entirely a personal and voluntary decision.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: Not at the minute.

The Irish language, as part of our heritage, poses no threat to anyone. Comments made yesterday and today, such as those accusing the Minister of Education of making decisions in a most sectarian and unfair manner, serve only to scaremonger. It is the same old rhetoric that has been heard from Sammy Wilson and his cohorts for too long. The comments are irresponsible on behalf of the Members who made them and only serve to demoralise their own community and foment division.

The approach being adopted by the Minister to clarify the way forward as regards the Bain Report and the sustainable schools policy is correct. A measured decision, based on the welfare of children, must be at the core. I support the amendment.

Miss McIlveen: In Northern Ireland, we are already faced with a higher proportion of small schools than in other areas of the United Kingdom. Although smaller class sizes undoubtedly have the advantage of greater

pupil engagement, there is the problem of different levels being taught together in some rural schools. Therefore, some schools face difficulties and cannot be supported because they are not cost-effective due to falling numbers and have an adverse effect on the education of pupils due to the combining of classes.

Unfortunately, in today's society we are faced with economic realities; we cannot afford to allow a Minister to indulge her prejudices and pet projects.

The Minister of Education appears to be suffering from some form of tunnel vision and can see only the needs of Irish-medium schools or, more accurately, what she perceives as the need for Irish-medium schools.

Mrs I Robinson: A Member referred earlier to the right of parental choice. There was a debacle in Londonderry; parents were denied the right to send their children to their chosen schools, because other pupils obtained places by using their grandparents' addresses. Now is an appropriate time to ask the Minister to confirm or refute the allegation that she is abusing the intake criteria by sending her children to school in Northern Ireland, despite living in the Republic of Ireland. Is she involved in the practice known as "grannyng"?

Miss McIlveen: There are 20 Irish-medium schools, which cater for 2,530 pupils. The Minister has announced that we should be "bold and brave" regarding Irish-medium education. What about the other 309,186 pupils in Northern Ireland's schools? The Minister is in denial about the reasons that the Irish-language unit had to close at St Patrick's Primary School, as announced on 15 August 2007. Purely and simply, there was not enough demand. However, in the same breath as announcing the closure, she told us that:

"we need to plan more strategically for the provision of Irish-Medium education"

telling us that it is a "growing sector".

Money should be spent more wisely. Supporting a multiplicity of education sectors incurs unnecessary cost. While we hear announcements of the closure or amalgamations of schools, we hear others about the opening of Irish-medium schools. The Minister tells us in syrupy words about her dreams of a shared future, but her actions tell us that she wants more division and segregation.

Mr Storey: Will the Member agree that the Minister is being partial in regard to that issue, because her Department has failed to provide any funding for another sector? I, as a parent, chose to send my children to an independent Christian school, but not one penny of Government money goes to that school, which has more pupils than the school that the Minister funded in the summer. Therefore, she is picky about the schools that she funds, and she is not even aware that a particular sector exists. I made a choice, as a parent,

and I pay for that choice, because I am conscious of the burden on Northern Ireland taxpayers.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention.

As we heard in a previous debate, there is often a need to reiterate a point, so I will not apologise for repeating this example. So far during her tenure, the Minister has announced a review of Irish-medium education, approved funding for three Irish-medium primary schools and, at the same time, has written off a deficit of nearly £300,000 in the amalgamation of St Joseph's Primary School and St Patrick's Primary School in Ahoghill. As there is protection for teachers, there will be a further £200,000 deficit. Yet, if we ignore the £500,000 loss, the number of pupils at the new school still does not meet the recommendations set out in the Bain Report. It appears that the Minister's policy is spend, spend, spend.

In response to a question from Mr Neeson yesterday, the Minister accepted that it was not in the best interests of pupils to have 20 or 30 pupils in a school. Yet, in response to the next question from Dr McCrea, she attempted to justify, using unsubstantiated, projected figures, opening an Irish-medium school with 12 pupils.

Is it not time that the Minister focused on the existing education structure and stopped cherry-picking from the Bain Report in an attempt to shore up her sectarian agenda? The cost of propagating that agenda cannot be justified when we consider the motion that came before the Assembly on 29 May this year regarding a revised literacy and numeracy strategy. Where are the press statements to address that pressing problem, which affects Northern Ireland as a whole?

During that debate, I called for the Minister to be strong and show effective leadership to her Department. However, all I have seen is dithering and her aspirations for cultural segregation. Her Department's sustainable schools policy says that over the years:

“there has been a lack of a consistent planning framework.

It appears that the Minister is following in the footsteps of her predecessors.

It is time for the Minister to show an even-handed approach to the challenges that face education in Northern Ireland. I support the motion, and I call on the Minister to provide the House with a comprehensive, reasoned and well-balanced policy to deal with the recommendations of the Bain Report and the sustainable schools policy. It is time for the Minister to be bold and brave, to set aside her personal agenda and work for all the people of Northern Ireland.

4.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member who proposed this important motion. I am speaking in a personal

capacity as a member of the Ulster Unionist Party and not as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I address my remarks to the section of the motion that refers to:

“decisions taken by the Minister of Education over the summer recess”.

I particularly want to scrutinise her decision to approve the development proposals for four Irish-medium schools. I want to try to gain an understanding of the rationale as to why those decisions continue to be made. There appear to be political, as opposed to educational, reasons for those decisions.

I have to confess that I have a limited understanding of the Irish language, in spite of the fact that I was brought up, and still live, in a nationalist/republican area. My great-grandfather, Jones Black, was a fluent Irish speaker. However, somewhere along the line, the family sorted that out — that tradition no longer exists.

I am not interested in the Irish language. Those who wish to pursue it have a perfect right to do so, which I accept. Some Members speak Irish fluently; Mr Dominic Bradley speaks fluently and eloquently — one presumes. However, there are others in the Chamber who speak what might be regarded as “prison Gaelic”. I am not sure that that generally benefits the language. The lesson is that people should stop using the language as a political tool. It is an entirely different matter if people choose to harness the language as an educational asset.

What is the rationale behind Gaelic being taught primarily in an exclusive setting — that is, Irish-medium schools in one sector? It strikes me that Irish is adequately dealt with, and taught, in the maintained sector. I have no doubt that there is increasing room in the maintained sector to improve facilities and give a better and more rounded education — not only in Irish but in various subjects — to children and parents who express that interest.

I am not convinced that teaching children Gaelic gives them a competitive advantage for the future. It does not produce better doctors, engineers or software developers for society. Over 25% of the world's population can communicate, to some extent, in English. English is the common language in almost every sphere — from science to air traffic control. Irish has a limited national or international appeal. Although there may be more native speakers of Chinese or Spanish, English is the language that people use across the world and across cultures.

The money that is being expended to provide Irish-medium education in an exclusive Irish setting — largely for political reasons — must be closely considered. It is unjustified, and it cannot be defended. I wish that we could move on to a more sensible

debate in which the rationale for those decisions could be examined objectively and reviewed sincerely.

Mr McCausland: I was interested by the comments made on the motion by both Paul Butler and Michelle O'Neill. I must pick up on those of Michelle O'Neill, who told us that the Irish language is no threat to anyone. Despite her extensive studies on this matter, she obviously has not read the official Sinn Féin party publication that tells us that every single word that is spoken in Irish is another bullet in the struggle for freedom. Sinn Féin was responsible for that publication — it bears the Sinn Féin badge and it has that party's imprimatur.

Some Members: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: I do not have time to give way — I assure Members that I have a lot to get through. I will give way some other time.

It would be helpful if Michelle O'Neill and other Sinn Féin Members would explain how something presented by her party in military terms is no threat to anyone. Her understanding of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages — and, I might also add, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child — is very different from my understanding of them. One of the core principles of those documents is equality. That is a point that I wish to stress; for me, it is a core issue in this debate.

Sinn Féin constantly presents itself as pursuing an equality agenda. "Equality" is one of those words that appears in almost every Sinn Féin speech and publication. Sinn Féin Members say that they demand it, but the truth is that Sinn Féin does not want, and cannot cope with, equality. What Sinn Féin Members really want is preferential treatment for their community, their culture and their pet projects. They want inequality in favour of themselves, and institutionalised discrimination in favour of their position. All their talk about equality is simply a sham and a fraud. The truth is that the decisions made by the Minister were shameful and sectarian.

I warmly welcome the proposal, made by Basil McCrea, that the Assembly debate the Irish-medium sector, which needs to be scrutinised, and, if it were scrutinised, a lot more might come out than is already known. It would be good to debate that at the earliest opportunity.

Members should take note of the following: the Belfast Education and Library Board, of which I am a member, is under pressure from the Minister's Department to review and rationalise controlled school provision in the city because of the number of empty school places. Belfast Education and Library Board is not unique in that; the CCMS is also implementing a programme of rationalisation, particularly in the west of the city. In Belfast, schools have an enrolment of 120 or more pupils, so that if one amalgamates two

Belfast schools, one creates a single school of 250 to 270 pupils. Those schools are being put under pressure to amalgamate, while the Minister creates a school of just 43 pupils in one case, and of just 12 in another.

That matter was discussed at a meeting of the education committee of the Belfast Education and Library Board last Thursday. No one from Sinn Féin bothered to turn up. All those present discussed the matter and there was complete unanimity on the matter. Even members of the SDLP who were present supported my proposal that we should ask the board to approach the Association of Education and Library Boards to seek a judicial review of what the Minister has done, so that she is scrutinised, not merely by this House, but by the British courts.

The Minister is a woman who has taken a great interest over the years in the court system, so she will welcome the opportunity to be taken to court on this matter. We need a judicial review of this decision, and I hope that my proposal is approved by the full Belfast Education and Library Board and by the Association of Education and Library Boards.

What the Minister has done shows that she does not view the situation in a fair and impartial way. It was done in a partisan way to further the sectarian agenda of Sinn Féin.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. We have heard from Members on issues regarding the opening and amalgamation of schools, the Bain Report, and sustainable schools. I will respond to as many of the points as possible, and explain the position on decisions taken in individual cases, as well as the overall position, as set out in the Bain Report and 'Schools for the Future: a Policy for Sustainable Schools', published by the direct rule Administration.

Before that, I will respond to Iris Robinson's question, although it was unfair. We are all politicians in this House, and we should not involve each others' children in the choices that we make. Given that Mrs Robinson has brought my children into the debate, I will explain my situation. I use my home address in north Louth for my two children, who go to school in the North of Ireland. I make no apology for that, because I believe that children should be able to go to their nearest school, no matter where they live in relation to the border. If Members are serious about changing the education system, and dealing with demographic decline we must examine how issues around the border are dealt with. I am aware that there is a judicial review around the issue of "grannyng" and I will await the court's ruling on that.

European legislation is in place regarding the many people, right across the island, particularly in the border

communities, who live in the South, and work and pay taxes in the North. What I ask — *[Interruption.]*

Please Iris, there is no need to be rude, I did not interrupt you. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order Members, the Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: We should not bring each other's children into our political debates.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should address their remarks through the Chair. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: The Independent Strategic Review of Education, or the Bain Report, examined issues of school funding, planning, collaboration and sharing. Published at the end of last year, the report contains 61 recommendations and focuses on the quality of education for children. It recommends that there should be an estate of fewer, but larger, schools, with greater collaboration and sharing, in and across school sectors, in order to address the needs of children in local areas.

I agree with the general thrust of the Bain Report, and the objective of providing modern schools that are fit for purpose and provide a high-quality education for all children. Nevertheless, many of the recommendations require further detailed work and consultation. It would not be possible to implement the report overnight.

Since taking up the post of Minister of Education, I have had many meetings with school representatives and interest groups across the education sector, who have raised aspects of the Bain Report. I know that the issues are important to the education sector and need to be dealt with fully and carefully. Implementation must be taken forward in consultation. It is essential that the Department of Education gets the detail correct because children's long-term educational interests are at the heart of such work.

The Bain Report recommended that provision should move to a system of schools that are educationally and financially viable in the long term, and planned on an area basis.

Cuideoidh seo le fadhbanna an ró-sholáthair a laghdú i dtréimhse athruithe móra sa líon daltaí agus lena chinntiú go bhfuil na scoileanna ag comhphobail atá de dhíth orthu.

Around half of the recommendations in the Bain Report relate directly to the improved planning of schools on an area basis. The report recommends that there should be a more strategic approach, with greater consistency and coherence in planning. There has been a general recognition across the education sector that an area-based planning approach should be introduced. That would have an important role in supporting our wider educational policies and raising the equality of education. The relation between schools and further

education provision will also be a key consideration in improved planning and collaboration.

4.30 pm

The need to provide a system of strong, viable schools is at the heart of area-based planning. The Bain Report recommended that a policy on sustainable schools be produced. To that end, my Department has been analysing the responses from the consultation that took place earlier in 2007.

The draft policy document on sustainable schools proposes the same enrolment thresholds as the Bain Report suggested: 105 for rural primary schools; 140 for urban primary schools; and 500 for post-primary schools that have pupils who are aged 11 to 16 years. Concerns have been raised about those levels; however, the Bain Report did not say that schools that are below those levels need to be rationalised automatically. Instead, schools that are in that position are to be reviewed to see whether they continue to provide quality education.

Enrolment levels are only one of a proposed set of six criteria by which to assess school viability. The proposed criteria also include: the educational experience of the children; the school's financial position; leadership and management of the school; the school's accessibility; and its links with the community. The core objective of the policy is high-quality education for children regardless of where they live. Often, concerns about a school's viability are raised only when enrolments have fallen irreversibly. The criteria and indicators in the policy are intended to provide a framework for early consideration and possible remedial action.

The Department received 119 responses to 'A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools'. The document and the responses raise complex questions about a school's viability. Overall, however, there is an interest in having a clearly set-out approach to viability. That will help to shape our education system for the future. The responses deserve the most careful consideration so that the policy can be clearly articulated for the future. I intend to introduce proposals towards the end of the year.

The motion refers to openings and amalgamation decisions. I want to turn to the processes that are involved, because it is obvious from many Members' contributions that they do not understand those processes. *[Interruption.]*

I did not interrupt Members during their contributions; I would appreciate it if they did not interrupt me.

There is a statutory requirement for a development proposal to be published when a school is being established, is closed or is undergoing a significant change that alters its character or size. Proposals can be initiated by the local education and library board,

the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools, the Council for Integrated Education, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, an individual school or any other interested parties. However, it is important to remember that I do not initiate the proposals.

The proposals that have been highlighted in the debate were initiated by parents' groups, in the case of the opening of the new Irish-medium schools, and by the CCMS, which acted on behalf of the trustees, in the case of the amalgamation of maintained schools. The closure of Minterburn Primary School has also been raised, and that closure was proposed by the Southern Education and Library Board.

Before a proposal is published, the relevant education and library board is required to consult with any school that it may affect. There is also a statutory duty on the proposer to consult with governors and teachers of any schools that are the subject of the proposal, as well as with parents. Following publication of the proposal, there is statutory period of two months during which representations can be made to the Department in support of or against a proposal. At the end of those two months, the Department evaluates all relevant information about the proposal.

The Department of Education considers demands for all forms of education, including Irish-medium and integrated education, within the general framework that is set out in the Education and Libraries Order 1986. That states that so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, children will be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.

Following a commitment that was made in the Belfast Agreement, the Education Order 1998 placed a duty on the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will not give way.

In addition, the British Government have signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which came into force in July 2001.

The charter provides that where families request, and where there is a sufficient number of potential pupils, education will be made available in Irish. The Bain Report identified a significant growth in recent years in the number of pupils being educated through the medium of Irish. There are currently over 3,000 pupils in Irish-medium education, compared to an earlier figure of fewer than 400. I have the Bain Report here. I had a meeting with George Bain last week. I urge people to read the Bain Report; it is obvious that some people have not. I quote:

“In view of the pattern of growth in the sector, the issues that need to be considered, and a radically changing planning context for

education, the Review recommends that DE should develop a comprehensive and coherent policy for IM education.”

That is exactly what my Department and I are doing. It is interesting that when we discuss the issue of Irish-medium education, the temperature in the House rises. We are in new arrangements. Mitchel McLaughlin made points that Members need to listen to. I do not want to score points. We should not be having divisive debates like this in the House. Michelle McIlveen talked about leadership; let us show leadership. I have seen it in the communities and in schools, including controlled schools. I am working — *[Interruption.]*

Please do not interrupt me.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. I ask the Minister to address her comments through the Chair.

Ms Ruane: My apologies. OK.

The educators are way ahead of the political parties in the unionist community. I say that from experience. I ask Members to put division behind them and move forward on the basis of equality. I take equality very seriously, as Members know. I have invited the Equality Coalition to have a discussion and to brief all my officials on all the issues relating to equality. I invite all the other Departments to follow my lead in that matter.

Last week, I discussed with George Bain his report and its conclusions on Irish-medium provision. As someone who has experienced bilingualism in his native Canada, George Bain was well aware of the issues that can arise. That is why he recommended that there should be a review of Irish-medium education. In considering the development proposals of the three — not four — Irish-medium schools, Gaelscoil Éanna, Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach and Gaelscoil na Daróige, I took careful account of the individual circumstances.

I took careful account of the views of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the body funded by the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. I considered that in each case there would be sufficient demand for Irish-medium primary-school provision in the respective areas. Members are playing with figures. They need to understand that in each of those schools, there are 12-15 pupils in primary 1, not the whole school. Members are not comparing like with like.

The granting of conditional approval entitles a school to recurrent funding only. The position is reviewed after three years to confirm whether viability is expected to be sustainable. In each of those schools, there is pre-school provision in the medium of Irish with, already, sufficient numbers for the next two years. A school's eligibility for capital funding is assessed at the end of that three-year period, and pupil intake levels are relevant to that assessment.

A successful amalgamation of schools should realise important benefits, including a reduction in the number of surplus places, a reduction in the pressure on teachers in their delivery of the curriculum, and better use of resources. Many positive amalgamations are happening.

The criteria for assessing proposals for new Irish-medium schools are no different from those for other sectors. The minimum intakes required to ensure a viable school over the long term are in line with the Bain Report's views on the viability of primary schools. It is inevitable that new schools will start small but are expected to grow. There has been undue and unfair focus on the three Irish-medium schools that I approved for funding. It is worth making the point that Irish is for all communities, not just one community. In light of the fact that there has been that undue focus, I should like to wish those schools well and assure them that we will not allow them to become political footballs. That would not be fair.

Demand for the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector is growing in an education sector in which overall numbers are falling. In every proposal, I will examine individual circumstances. In regard to proposals for closures or amalgamations —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mrs M Bradley: I want to refer to the important points that my colleague Dominic Bradley made. He mentioned first the duty on the Department to provide a policy to guide practice. He also told us that we need clear policies to ensure an even-handed approach towards all sectors, according to their needs. We need policy to bring clarity and transparency to the situation, and Dominic Bradley pointed out that so much in the reforms depends on a workable sustainable schools policy. The planning of the schools estate under area planning cannot be implemented without that policy. He mentioned that the Department plans to begin the movement towards reform through a programme of convergence of the education and library boards with the soon-to-be-established education and skills authority.

Moreover, Mr Bradley reminded us that we are setting out on a road and that none of us knows where we are going without the policy signposts that should be guiding us along the way. One of the main policy signposts is the sustainable schools policy. Again, so many of the RPA reforms depend on that policy. I agree that policy drives practice, and the fact that many policies, including 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', are not yet in place is not acceptable after 21 months of preparation.

The previous Minister accepted the Bain recommendations in full, and our current Minister has indicated that she accepts the Bain Report in principle, but clarification is needed as to which recommendations will now be subject to further discussion or change. In my

view, quite a few issues require clarification in an updated policy.

The Bain Report figures for minimum pupil numbers were 115 pupils for a primary school, 500 pupils for post-primary schools for 11- to 16-year-olds, and 100 pupils for sixth-form provision. However, those were not set as minimum thresholds for retention, but as review thresholds. I would like the Minister's view on that.

The Bain Report also refers to schools having composite classes with no more than two year groups per class. That equates to four teachers, and with the current average pupil:teacher ratio and local management of schools arrangements in primary schools, would allow primary schools to function with 80 pupils. What is the Minister's view of that? I do not know. Does she know? We have no way of knowing without the policy.

There is also a significant number of schools with 55 to 60 pupils and three teachers. Although those schools require additional support for the significant challenges that they face, in the main, they are financially and educationally viable, and an option for their retention should be available. Does the Minister agree?

The proposal to merge two small schools in Ahoghill also sits well below the Bain Report numbers, but the report also points out that sustainable schools policy must take account of the need of communities, whether they are rural communities or those that represent a single sector in an area in which that population is in the minority. There will always be the need to retain a few schools that sit outside any recommended figures, and the policy should accommodate those exceptions. Again, the issue is the urgent need for a sustainable schools policy to be adopted and operational.

Since the consultation on 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools' before the summer, no approved policy has as yet emerged. That policy vacuum means that proposals and subsequent decisions are being made, at best, on the basis of an outdated policy and will cause disagreement.

We need the clarification and consistent direction of guiding policy. For that reason, I call on all Members to support the amendment and to ensure that the sustainable schools policy is published without further delay.

Mr Donaldson: Let me say at the outset that the DUP rejects the SDLP amendment. Quite frankly, it does not hold the Minister to account on the decisions that have been taken over the summer. It is a fudge. It is the political equivalent of being mauled by a dead sheep, as we once famously heard in the House of Commons. What does the amendment do?

It simply asks the Minister to publish her intentions. The Minister must do that, but in the context — ignored by the SDLP — of the widespread concern in

the community about the nature of the decisions taken in the summer.

4.45 pm

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Donaldson: No, I will not give way. In response to — *[Interruption.]*

The Member had his chance earlier and he did not have much to say, so he will not add anything now.

In respect of Mr Butler's — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Donaldson: In response to the nonsense we heard from Paul Butler about witch hunts, I was not aware that there was a witch to be hunted; maybe he knows something that we do not. Michelle O'Neill and Paul Butler were at the Committee for Education when it decided to write to the Minister with concerns about her decisions, but neither of them raised an objection. They said absolutely nothing. There was consensus in the Committee, so what is going on this afternoon? Is there a Whip being applied, I wonder?

This is about democracy, and holding the Minister to account. That is what we are doing on this side of the Chamber — holding the Minister to account. It is not about witch hunts; it is simply about addressing some very real concerns. What are those concerns? As a Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Butler should know what they are. He knows that four small rural schools were closed in my constituency this summer: Hillhall Primary School; Lambeg Primary School; Charley Memorial Primary School; and Drumbo Primary School. Yet, in the same breath, the Minister took the decision to amalgamate two primary schools in Ahoghill. The combined enrolment of those two schools of 43 pupils is less than that of Hillhall Primary School, one of the four schools that the Minister closed this summer in my constituency. Four rural schools have been closed, and yet, the combined enrolment of those schools would come to almost 100 pupils. Why did they not have the option of amalgamation? It is because they were controlled schools.

The schools in Ahoghill that were amalgamated were maintained schools. With the greatest respect to the Minister, the message that people in my constituency get is that controlled schools are "fair game under Bain", whereas those in the maintained, Irish-medium or integrated sectors are a preserved and protected species. That is the message that is coming through loud and clear from the Minister's decisions.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order. Is it in order for a Member who was not in the Chamber for the full duration of the debate to make the winding-up speech?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. Mr Donaldson has the Floor.

Mr Donaldson: I have heard enough from the hon Member opposite to know a wind-up when I hear one.

Five years ago, the previous Sinn Féin Minister of Education, now the Deputy First Minister, grant-aided several Irish-medium schools, and predicted that they would all reach enrolments in excess of 105 pupils. Yet, of the 18 Irish-medium schools that exist today, half are nowhere near meeting the enrolment target of 105 pupils. In fact, 'Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing', published in December 2006, states that numbers in those schools range from just 18 pupils — *[Interruption.]*

Mr McElduff: A Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order. Is it in order for a Member to use a book in the fashion of an exhibit?

Mrs I Robinson: Are you serious?

Mr Speaker: Order. If the Member is quoting from a book, he is entitled to use it in the Chamber.

Mr Campbell: The truth is hitting home now all right.

Mr Speaker: Order — that goes for every side of the House. Mr Donaldson has the Floor.

Mr Donaldson: The report makes clear that some of those schools have as few as 18 pupils. If the then Minister of Education got enrolments so spectacularly wrong, what prospect is there that the current Minister has correctly estimated the enrolments of the three Irish-medium schools to which she gave approval earlier this summer?

The question is one of confidence in the Minister's decisions. I say to her sincerely that there are people that I represent in my constituency who do not see fairness in the decisions that she made during the summer. I am afraid that they see bias, and if that does not change, let me be clear from these Benches, there will neither be consensus in the House, nor cross-community support, for the kind of reforms that the Minister wants to introduce.

The Minister must demonstrate fairness and end bias, and then we will start to listen. Only then will there be the prospect of some consensus. However, as regards the big decisions that have to be taken, unless we get a level playing field for all sectors, including the controlled sector, the Minister will not achieve the kind of cross-community consensus that she needs in order to make progress in educational reform.

The DUP does not want children to be turned into political footballs. The party wants children to be treated equally and fairly, whether they are Protestant or Roman Catholic and whether they speak Irish, English or any other language. The DUP is asking for fairness, but the decisions taken this summer do not reflect fairness or impartiality, and that goes to the heart of the matter.

Mr McElduff: Does the Member accept —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 35; Noes 42.

AYES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley,
Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly,
Mr Butler, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan,
Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna,
Mr G Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness,
Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann,
Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McElduff,
Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh,
Mr McLaughlin, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd,
Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs M Bradley and Mr A Maginness.

NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan,
Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter,
Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson,
Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton,
Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister,
Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea,
Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey,
Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan,
Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley,
Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson,
Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon,
Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 30.

AYES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan,
Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter,
Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson,
Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mrs Foster,
Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy,
Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy,
Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea,
Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey,
Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan,
Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley,
Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson,
Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon,
Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley,
Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly,
Mr Butler, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher,
Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mr G Kelly,
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff,
Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh,
Mr McLaughlin, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd,
Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Anderson and Mr Doherty.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern some of the decisions taken by the Minister of Education over the summer recess on school openings and amalgamations; and calls upon the Minister to clarify her approach to the recommendations of the Bain Report and the Sustainable Schools Policy published by her Department.

Heart Defect Screening Service

Mr 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. 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 for the winding-up speech.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its sympathy to the families of Patrick Breen and Patrick Devlin, who died recently on the sports field from heart defects; sympathises with all families on the island of Ireland who have lost loved ones in this way; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward options for a comprehensive screening service; further calls on other Government Departments to co-operate in clarifying the costs of the development of such options, which should include schools and college services; and believes that such a service would benefit from co-operation and co-ordination through the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I express my sympathy and that of the House to the families of Patrick Breen and Patrick Devlin, who died recently.

I know that no amount of sympathy extended to those families, or any of the families and friends bereaved by that type of sudden death, can comfort them. However, the assurance that this House cares enough to do all in its power to establish a system of screening that might help others to avoid the suffering that they are going through may be of some consolation to them.

5.15 pm

Cormac McAnallen and John McCall were sportsmen who might have survived their conditions had they been detected early enough. That raises an important issue that we, as a legislative Assembly, must try to address. Young people who are not involved in sport also suffer from cardiac conditions, and, unfortunately, die from them. So our efforts to detect and treat those conditions must include all young people who may be at risk.

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

We must take steps to prevent further deaths from cardiac conditions, and that is why we are calling on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and other Ministers in the Executive to put forward options for a screening service to identify those at risk. The Minister's previous comments in the Chamber, when he undertook to ask officials to look into whether the screening of young athletes in Northern Ireland would be effective and appropriate, were welcome. I ask him to extend that investigation to all young people who may be at risk.

Before bringing this motion to the House today I spoke to sports organisations that are also concerned about cardiac conditions. I am very heartened by the forward thinking of, and proactive moves being taken by, such organisations as the GAA, the Irish Football Association and Ulster Rugby in engaging with issues like sudden adult death syndrome, through the charity Cardiac Risk in the Young, in an attempt to try to deal with the problem, and also taking their own measures.

It is important for us to reassure people that sport and physical exercise are major contributors to the health of young people, and we must support the sporting bodies in their efforts to involve as many young people as possible. Those organisations have developed responsible coaching programmes and approaches that are appropriate to the age and physical development of participants.

I pay tribute to the families of victims — families like the McAnallens and the McCalls — who have raised funds to provide vital equipment. I also wish to acknowledge my neighbour Kathleen Mooney, who lost her 18-year-old daughter, Mary, to a cardiac condition, and who has set up “Mary’s Fund” to help provide equipment like defibrillators to schools, youth clubs and sports organisations. I acknowledge the work of groups like the Cormac Trust in providing automated external defibrillators to communities in County Tyrone.

I do not believe that we should be leaving those initiatives solely to the families and sporting organisations. We, in this House, have a duty to investigate all the possibilities and to set up a system of screening that will complement, and possibly encompass, existing efforts and help to reassure all parents.

Comprehensive screening does not necessarily mean a widespread hospital-based screening programme for every young person in the country. It is possible to narrow the target group for screening by methods that are relatively inexpensive and already in use in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and England. The Gaelic Athletic Association, for example, through its medical welfare committee, recommends cardiac screening for all who participate in its games. The first stage is the completion of a questionnaire on the individual player's health and well-being. It uses a trigger system whereby anyone who has had a family member die before the age of 50 from a heart condition, or anyone who has ever felt dizzy or had chest pains during physical exercise, is referred to their GP for a more detailed screening.

SADS, a UK organisation that raises awareness about sudden arrhythmic death syndrome, believes that young people should be invited to a doctor's surgery at the ages of 11 and 15 to complete a questionnaire that gives information about their personal and medical

history, and their family's medical history. During that visit, the GP would examine the patient with a stethoscope to try to detect any heart murmur. That would be followed up with a questionnaire, to be completed with parental assistance, to establish whether a child is in an at-risk group or has suffered signs or symptoms consistent with a cardiac condition. Those are simple, but effective, ways to help to identify those who may benefit from a more comprehensive screening process and which may help us to use our resources to the best possible effect. We can learn and co-operate with others within these shores and beyond. We can share expertise and experience that could help us to shape a system that would help to ensure that we identify and treat those at risk before it is too late.

It was with that in mind that Carmel Hanna and I tabled the motion. The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and his colleagues should engage the necessary advice from cardiology experts in Northern Ireland, call on expertise south of the border and in other parts of the United Kingdom, and introduce workable proposals that would help to identify and treat young people with cardiac conditions through a screening programme. Gabhaim buíochas ó chroí leat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the second "families" and insert

"who have lost loved ones in this way; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Executive, to consult with their United Kingdom counterparts through the National Screening Committee, and bring forward fully costed, evidence-based proposals to reduce avoidable cardiac deaths in the young, including screening programmes where appropriate."

On behalf of my party colleagues, I express my sincere sympathies to the two families that have lost their precious sons. There can be few things more tragic than the sudden death of a young person, which is made all the more shocking in instances where the victim is seemingly active and healthy, and perhaps even a successful athlete.

The time and effort that many young people in the Province put into their sports is, to say the least, phenomenal. I was contacted yesterday by a representative from the Rathgael Gymnastics and Trampolining Club, which supports the finding of a means to reduce deaths from heart defects, but it admitted that it was mindful of the likely costs involved.

Young gymnasts at the Rathgael club commit many hours each week to training. For example, it currently has two 11-year-old girls who train 21 hours a week after school; two 13-year-old girls who train 17.25 hours a week; two 10-year-old girls who train 17.5 hours a week; and two nine-year-old girls who train 13.25 hours a week. The club also has a development squad, where girls as young as six years of age train for 13 hours a week.

Those children manage to fit in all that training while managing homework and all the other activities in which they are involved. They put in those hours in order to enhance the standards at which they compete, and several of those girls compete at international level. They assume that if they are putting in those training hours on behalf of their country, surely the least that they can expect in return is that the Northern Ireland Government resource preventative health services for them properly.

In many other sports in Northern Ireland, young people are also devoting long periods to training in the pursuit of excellence, often unseen in the early hours of the morning while others remain in their beds. Such is the commitment of our current ice-skating champions that they are in training at Dundonald Ice Bowl at approximately 6.37 am, before they start their school day.

High-profile stories are undoubtedly tragic. However, many other deaths also occur among those who have not excelled to the same high level of excellence.

We want to do all that we can to limit the needless loss of young life. The available resources must be carefully directed to ensure that we obtain the maximum benefit from them. That is why Members must follow the evidence of the experts and take heed of all of the research that has been conducted.

Various practices have been adopted in different countries. A report published in March 2006 in the Irish Republic, 'Reducing the Risk: A Strategic Approach', by the Task Force on Sudden Cardiac Deaths stated:

"The evidence is weak...Our understanding of the diseases underlying SCD in athletes comes from autopsy studies."

Sudden cardiac death rates are higher in those actively involved in sport. The deaths are mainly as a consequence of underlying disease, with abnormal heart rhythms occurring. Participants in high-dynamic sports appear to be those who are at the greatest risk. Many of the tests available are not sufficiently sensitive to identify those with the most serious conditions. To seek to act on limited results could result in excluding inappropriately huge numbers of healthy people from participating in sport.

The report by the Department of Health and Children in the Irish Republic last year concluded that:

"There is insufficient evidence to support the implementation of a mass population screening programme to identify risk of SCD."

Members must bear that in mind. The DUP amendment seeks to incorporate all means of preventing needless loss of life in a manner that ensures expert opinion is taken on board. It extends the possible options beyond screening and allows for other proposals.

It is essential that decisions, and the subsequent allocation of resources, are based on firm evidence.

The Dublin-based specialist Dr Gavin Blake admitted recently that screening tests may not be the solution to the deaths of young sports stars. The cardiologist expressed concern that tests were not guaranteed to identify heart problems. He said:

"I think as cardiologists, our concern is that screen tests are not perfect. We don't have a single test that can identify children that are at risk of sudden and unexpected problems when they are playing sport. It's as simple as that. That's our reluctance in embracing a widespread screening programme."

Understandably, the relatives of young victims want action, but it is the duty of Members to ensure that any decisions taken are the right ones. Where there is conflicting or inconclusive evidence, it is important to ensure that we have all the information that we require before making a final judgement. I support the amendment.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo agus ba mhaith liom a rá go mbeidh Sinn Féin ag tacú leis an rún. I welcome the debate, and I am pleased that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, is in the Chamber to listen to it. I support the motion because it is not absolutely prescriptive, and it refers to bringing forward options for a comprehensive screening service.

It is better not to be prescriptive about how to proceed. As Iris Robinson and Dominic Bradley said, we must hear from the experts, including medical experts. Families and parents of those who have died have also become experts and should be heard in this debate.

Of course, déanaim comhbhrón ó chroí leo, my sympathy goes to all of the families that have lost loved ones as a result of heart defects. I include those young people who have recently died while actively participating in sport. Such deaths tend to be high profile and provoke a lot of public concern and fear. They command public attention and touch every home. The deaths of Cormac McAnallen, the Tyrone Gaelic football captain, John McCall, the young rugby star, Patrick Devlin, Patrick Breen and the two young boys from County Westmeath in the last month have shocked people the length and breadth of Ireland.

5.30 pm

Those deaths have concentrated people's minds on the condition.

We must listen to the experts, and we must study not only the report of the Irish Government's task force on sudden cardiac death, but the recommendations of the American Heart Association's 1996 consensus panel report, 'Cardiovascular Preparticipation Screening of Competitive Athletes'. That report says that a justifiable and compelling case for the establishment of a comprehensive screening service for young athletes can be made on ethical, legal and medical grounds.

The Irish Government's task force points to a particular group that is a priority for risk assessment. That group comprises the first-degree relatives of those who have suffered sudden cardiac death under the age of 40: they may be at increased risk of having an inherited disorder such as that described.

Although there is concern for those who participate in sports and exercise, perhaps there should be some categorisation of or differentiation between moderate- and high-intensity sports, with the latter being the highest priority for risk assessment.

Like other Members, I have not yet heard a convincing case for mass screening. However, there is a role for risk assessment for those who exercise or participate in sport. A balance must be struck, however, because participation in sport and exercise are inherently good and should be encouraged. All major sporting organisations should undertake — and many do — pre-participation assessment for elite players. Such assessments could be extended and broadened.

I note, as did Dominic Bradley, the primary assessment phase of the GAA's player welfare scheme. Its questionnaire asks, for example, whether the participant has a heart condition, whether a doctor has ever advised them not to participate in sport, or whether they have ever fainted during or after exercise. If a person answers yes to any of the 11 questions, further medical screening is required, and a GP referral is made.

There are probably more defibrillators in County Tyrone than in any other county. Volunteers are trained to use them, and I commend everybody who raises awareness of, and funds for, that endeavour. Reducing the incidence of sudden cardiac death is an appropriate objective for a cross-departmental strategy, as the motion states. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In considering the motion and the amendment, it seems that there are two sides to the matter. On the one hand, there is strong sympathy and sentiment for the bereaved, but on the other, there are questions about the implementation of the screening that is being asked for.

I am sure that I speak for everyone in the House when I say that our hearts go out to all those who have lost a loved one, especially someone young, whether through sport or in some other way.

There are two ways to view sympathy. One is to focus on the tragedy that is effected by the loss of a child, while the other is to focus on support for those who are suddenly plunged into grief and loss.

Recently, I heard a member of a family that had lost a very young child speak about loss. They said that when someone experiences the shock of the loss of their child, or another loved one, they are often incapable of functioning normally in their own world.

They went on to say:

“there were a lot of dark days spent in silent tears and reflection.”

All Members, and I am sure I speak for everyone, extend our sympathy to all those who have lost a loved one, not least the families of Patrick Devlin and Patrick Breen. On the tide of such emotion, we ask ourselves: what can we do? Is there something that should be done? Is there something that the House can do? Is there something that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and his Department can do?

There are many questions that need to be asked. For example, at what age should a screening programme be commenced — is it in the cradle, at school, or later on? What level of screening should be undertaken — mere basic screening, or in-depth, intense screening? Do we have enough resources to undertake a rigorous screening programme, bearing in mind the comprehensive spending review and any pressures that it may bring? I am sure that the Minister will be able to tell us something about that. The cost of a comprehensive screening programme would be astronomical.

There is also an ethical issue. If problems occur, are there enough resources to provide treatment? Is it unethical of a Department to implement a screening process, and not have the resources to treat those who are discovered to have an ailment? What would be the knock-on effects in education, in sports, of the possible lack of physical exercise if a child were discovered to have such an ailment? What impact would such a discovery have on insurance premiums, on mortgages later in life, and on job situations? I could go on and on.

I believe that the sensible approach is to be guided by the Chief Medical Officer and his colleagues on the National Screening Committee. What is the point of the existence of that Committee, if we do not listen to its expert advice?

The amendment gives us a platform on which we can move forward sensibly, and not just ride on the tide of the emotion that we have in sympathy for those who have been so affected. I support the amendment.

Dr Farry: I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing this important issue before the Assembly. That said, the Alliance Party will be supporting the amendment, as we believe it represents a more realistic approach to dealing with this critical issue.

Obviously the death of a child — particularly the sudden death of a seemingly healthy, active child — is enormously difficult, and I am sure that every Member is committed to doing everything that we can to avoid a repeat of such situations.

It is worth noting that, in the case of Patrick Breen in Drumquin, the best medical practice was followed, with a doctor and defibrillator on the scene within five minutes, but it was obviously too late to save the boy.

We must ensure that, in the natural rush to avoid a repeat of that tragic occurrence, we do not end up taking steps that may, on reflection, turn out to be counterproductive. For example, we must be careful not to give the impression that sport is somehow an unusual or risky activity for young people to take part in. Indeed, we should be doing the opposite: trying to encourage people into as much activity as possible. In fact, many more young people will likely die as a consequence of inactivity than die because of shocking, but mercifully rare cardiac conditions.

Obesity and diabetes are great childhood health problems of our time, and any steps that can be taken must in no way jeopardise the fight against those big killers.

Fundamentally, we must take steps in line with best medical practice. Rather than prescribe what the clinical community should do, the Assembly should first listen to what experts in paediatric cardiology think is most appropriate.

I understand that, in some countries, such as Italy, there is a system of comprehensive child screening programmes. However, the vast majority of other developed countries have chosen not to set up such a system. We need to examine the medical literature on the experience of Italy and other countries in preventing sudden cardiac deaths among young children, instead of rushing to make snap judgements.

Furthermore, the availability of resources is a real issue. I refer not only to finance, but to Health Service resources in the broadest sense. However, it should be recognised that money that is spent on one area of healthcare inevitably means that less money is available to spend on others. We need to ensure that we spend our money in line with priorities to ensure the maximum return for the well-being of the population.

The inevitable outcome of any cost-benefit analysis along National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines will tend towards saving the life of a child, because a child has a long life ahead of him or her, and will make a greater contribution to society in the future than an older person.

As for human resources, paediatric cardiologists are not exactly thick on the ground in Northern Ireland. It takes many years to train doctors and consultants in that highly specialised field. Before imposing a new burden on the NHS, we need to ensure that it can cope with the demand, and must train new staff to meet that demand within a reasonable timeframe.

Important practical questions should be asked before a large-scale screening programme for a rare condition is introduced. There is a danger that the number of minor, non-threatening abnormalities that are detected will vastly exceed the number of dangerous abnormalities. That raises the spectre of children being

referred for invasive and potentially risky treatment that is entirely unnecessary, and, in some cases, people will end up labelled, with unwelcome consequences for their insurance requirements, as Dr Coulter has already described.

I cannot assess the various risks; that is why we must take evidence from experts before imposing new burdens on the health sector.

Although the Alliance Party supports the spirit of the motion and wants to ensure that there will be no tragic repetition of the events of last month, Members of the Assembly are not best qualified to make judgements about complex clinical issues. They should look to qualified medical advice and ensure that resources are used to achieve the maximum benefit for our young people and for the population as a whole.

The amendment represents the more realistic way forward, although I respect the sentiments that lie behind the original motion.

Mr Easton: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Like many others, I am aware of the increase in the number of young athletes — and some older sportsmen — who die on the sports field. They fall victim to a silent killer that gives no warning. It is often the case that the first symptom is the sudden collapse and death of the young person.

This is not a new phenomenon, but sadly it seems to be on the increase. The loss of a loved one is a tragedy for any family. Grief knows no boundaries, and our response and concern should not, in any way, be limited.

I am sympathetic to many elements of the motion that is before us, and I will support any action that will be taken by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to help reduce the number of such incidents. However, I believe that the amendment represents the more balanced way forward. Other Departments will have a part to play. Sport Northern Ireland, under the auspices of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), will work in close co-operation with other Departments and statutory bodies to share information and research that might help in some way. Our sports professionals have a significant contribution to make in this area.

However, we need to recognise the complexities of the problem and not rush to judgement in determining the most effective way forward. The problem is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Non-traumatic sudden death from diseases such as cardiovascular disease are, thankfully, very rare. Although the introduction of a screening process seems a compelling idea, we must be conscious of the need to develop a correct and affordable solution.

The low prevalence of those diseases means that we need to think carefully about what a screening process

can achieve. Research indicates that screening 200,000 competitive athletes will find one whose cardiovascular disorder may cause death in a specific situation. Tests can be inaccurate, and differences between normal and abnormal changes in the heart caused by training and exercise may be difficult to detect.

The option of alternative technology such as cardio-ultrasound screening, which may give equally good results, must also be considered. The opinions of experts are necessary to help us to find the best way forward. The process that will be developed to protect our young people and athletes must be well thought through, and must engage a wide range of people to make a contribution from their area of expertise or responsibility. Regular physical examinations by medical practitioners should be a vital part of such a programme.

The incidence of heart disease in families, and general family medical history, must also be considered. Coaches and parents should have awareness training and be sensitive to symptoms of chest pain and excessive, unexplained shortness of breath and be well trained in all aspects related to the physical conditioning of the young athletes in their care.

The GAA must be commended for its initiative to make available the best possible assistance in an emergency through the provision of medical equipment, as well as awareness and response training in GAA clubs across the Province. The governing bodies of all sports and associated clubs must take immediate responsibility to provide efficient training and the appropriate equipment at every sports location.

Members must task Departments and Government agencies to undertake a review of all the possibilities available to us. We need to deliver urgently a carefully considered and co-ordinated strategy with a range of options to deal with the problem as effectively as possible. Options must include school and college services and be characterised by a willing co-operation that puts young people at the centre of our thinking.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. Much of what I had intended to say has been covered by other Members. Sinn Féin supports the motion and is sympathetic to families who are bereaved by losing their children through sudden death. I am a parent and grandparent, and I imagine that the sudden death of a child who is apparently the picture of health must be terribly shocking.

5.45 pm

My understanding is that only those below the age of 35 with a family history of sudden cardiac death are entitled to free screening. Therefore groups such as Cardiac Risk in the Young (CRY) promote screening for young athletes across the board.

Several Members mentioned the efforts of the GAA, particularly in County Tyrone, following the sudden death of the GAA player Cormac McAnallen. The Tyrone-based campaign to provide defibrillators and training in most GAA clubs should be commended, as should the work of the Cormac Trust.

Heartstart UK works with the British Heart Foundation (BHF) to provide defibrillators and training at a reduced cost. That initiative is geared towards schools rather than sporting organisations, which is something that Members could consider.

Members must examine the tenets of the motion that suggest developing options for a comprehensive screening service. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is in the Chamber, must take the options given earlier in the debate to the Department and his team of advisors.

Other factors must also be considered, such as the possible causes of heart diseases. For example, there is evidence of greater incidence of heart disease among those living west of the Bann, and that poor health and poverty are interrelated. We must also be aware that hereditary problems play a role.

On Friday September 14 2007, 'The Irish News' printed a good, albeit lengthy, letter from a Dr White calling for a well-designed protocol for those at risk.

The Assembly must examine this issue and decide how it can respond to it. Every Member has mentioned the need for the promotion of exercise and has expressed concern for the well-being of children who are involved in sports and play. That must be reinforced at every opportunity.

In the past, the link between obesity and poverty has been discussed, as well as the need to promote activity, play and sport for better health. Barry McElduff and Alex Easton referred to the need for robust questionnaires and for greater awareness among sporting bodies and trainers. That must be encouraged. The argument for strategic location and training in the use of defibrillators in communities must be taken on board by the Department, particularly in rural areas where services are out of reach. The efforts of the Cormac Trust, Heartstart and other mainly voluntary organisations must also be considered by the Department. Voluntary activity alone is not a response.

I pay tribute to Dominic Bradley for proposing the motion. There needs to be a response at interdepartmental and Executive level. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Education must also be involved in discussions. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I support the amendment. I wish to extend my sincerest sympathy to the families that have recently been bereaved through sudden cardiac death.

It is particularly heart-rending when children are the victims of those conditions. I am sure that those are the feelings of all Members.

Recently, we have been touched by the heart-breaking stories that have been in the news about young people who have died from genetic heart diseases. Indeed, in my constituency, some of us have had first-hand experience of the death of a teenage girl from such a condition. We mourned with her family. Although they had been aware of her condition, they were unable to prevent her death. They worked hard in a successful campaign to bring a dedicated heart expert to the Province. That happened as a result of a young girl from Newtownards passing away in her sleep. Her family woke up one morning to find that she had passed away. She had seemed healthy and had been involved in sports. There had been no indication that she would die.

At the time of the loss of that young girl in my constituency, I lent my support not only to the attempt to secure a heart specialist for the Province, but to Cormac McAnallen's mother Bridget, who said that all children should be screened for heart problems. This has been an issue since then.

One in 500 people is believed to have a genetic heart disease. Although that figure cannot be substantiated, the fact that so many young people are dying compels us to take it on board. In 2004, the young Irish rugby player, John McCall, died of heart failure during a game in South Africa. At the time, there was uproar, but here we are, shocked that the same disease has cruelly struck again. In Italy, the syndrome has led to the obligatory screening of all sportsmen and sportswomen, which is the least that should be done in schools and colleges in Northern Ireland.

I am probably one of the few Leicester City Football Club supporters in Northern Ireland. In August 2007, the team played a match against Nottingham Forest Football Club, which had to be abandoned at half-time because one of Leicester's defenders had a heart attack in the dressing room. Interestingly, that player had been checked just 10 days before the game took place, and was declared fit. I am not sure how the situation will work out for him.

Those conditions give no warnings or signals: they simply strike. Prevention is always far better than cure. However, there is no cure for genetic heart conditions that kill before they are detected. If the Executive and the Health Department were to take the lead in the fight and start a screening programme for all children, they could save lives. The amendment is a realistic way to approach that, and I hope that Members support it. There are two options: people can go on dying at a rate of eight a week in the United Kingdom owing to a lack of information and awareness, or the Assembly

can take the issue on board and begin screening all children for heart problems — or, at the very least, those who take part in sports — as part of their general check-ups.

That is when members of the family try their hardest to find information about the condition, and then the rest of the family are screened. Would it not be better if all young people were screened for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, rather than families having to face a tragedy first? Is it not better to help people before it is too late?

Families who have experienced the awful tragedy of one of their young people dying of the condition thought that no information on the condition was available, particularly in Northern Ireland. They found that the only way to find information about the condition was to search the Internet. Some information found on the Internet may be false while other information may be accurate. However, there are medical staff who must answer questions on the condition and give guidance on how to deal with it.

In the course of my research, I discovered that one boy who was at risk from sudden death syndrome saw his doctor and, subsequently, was able to undergo an operation to deal with the condition. Therefore, having the condition does not necessarily mean that one's life is over; people with the condition can continue to live. There are ways of addressing the condition. The amendment, perhaps, looks towards our counterparts in the United Kingdom. That is where the evidence, and the information, will be found to deal with the condition.

Currently, people in the Province are learning of the condition through the media. As with most news, it will become old and forgotten until tragedy strikes again, and we are shaken to realise that we have done nothing to address the problem since the last time we were shocked. That is why a system is needed in the Province that works with the people of Northern Ireland to provide care for those suffering from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Moreover, money must be invested in raising awareness of the condition and in giving support to those families who have suffered, and are suffering, because of it. It is the Assembly's responsibility to ensure that that happens. We must act now before we face another tragedy because of our lack of information on the condition. I support the amendment.

Mr Ross: It is, of course, a tragedy when any young person dies and is robbed of a future. It is particularly distressing, as other Members have said, when someone who was considered fit and healthy dies suddenly, having had no apparent health problems and no history of illness. There is much media interest in the topic, with some high-profile athletes in Northern Ireland having died from sudden heart problems. The sad and

recent deaths of two young boys are fresh in our minds. It is a very emotive issue, particularly for those involved.

However, we need more solid information on sudden death in children, recognising that, at present, many post mortem examinations are not carried out by those with expertise in that specific area. The amendment tabled by Mrs Robinson articulates that view.

One related issue, which was raised by many Members during the debate — Barry McElduff referred to it — is the call for more defibrillators. We must be sensible when considering the issue. I have heard some Members calling for defibrillators to be installed in every club, school and public toilet in the country. We cannot forget the practical difficulties that that would entail. Setting aside the cost, if that equipment were available in all those places, who would use it? Members have referred to those who have volunteered to do so, and I pay tribute to them. I know from my own experience in sports clubs to which I belong, that not too many members would volunteer to be trained in the use of the equipment, because alongside the training is the massive burden of responsibility. The individual who is called to use the equipment may end up in court if the person dies.

There is an onus on the clubs that have the equipment to use it, even if no one there has been trained in its use. The club may be vulnerable to legal action and, of course, there is the danger of equipment being misused by people who are not fully trained in its use in emergencies. We must be mindful of that when considering the issue.

I do not wish to detract in any way from the seriousness of the issue. However, we must be careful not to create mass hysteria about young people playing sport. Dr Farry mentioned that in his speech. There is the danger that we create a fear among children and particularly among parents, who will be afraid to allow their children to participate in sport. Sport is a good thing. Sport can be beneficial to a child's general health with regard to fitness and to social development. Sport and recreational activity is vital as we fight the increase in obesity which is prevalent among the young.

That is not to say that we should do nothing — quite the contrary. We must be realistic and measured in how we respond to the problem of sudden death syndrome and look at a wide range of options. The Reverend Dr Coulter made two excellent points — and not just because I was going to make them as well. He mentioned the age at which young people should be screened for the condition. Usually, children under the age of 14 will not be screened because ECG testing on prepubescent children is inconclusive.

He also told us that if a heart defect is detected, there is an onus to take action to remedy it. He also said that such a diagnosis affects that person's ability

to get mortgages, life insurance and so on. That is an important point that must not be forgotten.

6 00 pm

Jim Shannon told us that screening is compulsory in Italy. Indeed, in the University of Ulster at Jordanstown in my constituency of East Antrim, an excellent CRY clinic is run once a week. It is supported nationally by Steve Redgrave and Ian Botham and, locally, by Gary Longwell and Pat Jennings. I have learnt from my correspondence with CRY that, over the past year, 2,000 to 3,000 people across the UK have been screened and that that number is increasing every year. I believe that the intention is to create more such facilities in Northern Ireland, particularly in Londonderry. Mobile screening units that can go to clubs and other venues on request are also available. That is useful, as CRY provides that service to elite athletes or those who have been referred by their GPs for some of the symptoms that we heard about at the start of the debate. However, as we have heard already, those proposals are not perfect.

It is important that we do not create panic among parents and children who enjoy playing sport, but that we investigate those who are most at risk and those who are involved in elite sports at a young age.

I, therefore, support the amendment and hope that it will lead to a fully costed and evidence-based case for helping to reduce avoidable cardiac deaths among young people.

Dr Deeny: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me. I was not sure whether I would be called to speak, but I am delighted that I have been because sudden cardiac death is a very important and topical issue. I am also delighted that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is present, and I hope that he will give us a commitment that something will be done.

I read the motion and the amendment, and, like other motions and amendments, they confuse me because they both say more or less the same thing, only worded a little differently. I will refer to both later.

I am a GP in a county that has been hit particularly hard by sudden cardiac death, although it can happen anywhere and in any county and is no respecter of age or gender. Last week, one of my partners in practice told me that parents are already approaching GPs to get their children checked for defects. Another GP in my area told me a similar story. The matter is very much in the public's mind, and something must be done.

As I said, sudden cardiac death has no respect for age. We know about the death of the two very young Patricks, Patrick Breen and Patrick Devlin, and of the fit young adults Cormac McAnallen and John McCall, whom Members have already mentioned. It just shows you. It must be pointed out that such deaths also affect

females. Furthermore, it can happen to people who are not involved in sport at all — I was watching much of the debate in my room and heard a Member mention that. Those points should not be forgotten.

The major problem seems to be cardiomyopathy, although there are other diseases as well. As a GP, I know about defibrillators, and my local club in Tyrone has one. Yes, they will help, but let us face it: sudden cardiac death is due to an arrhythmia, which is a rhythm disturbance brought about by a heart defect. The person using a defibrillator has three to five minutes to get the heart going again; otherwise the individual will be dead or brain-dead — although there is not really much difference. Defibrillators are certainly helpful, but they are not the complete answer.

I ask the Minister to consider taking action to deal with this matter. Something must be done, and both the motion and the amendment agree on that. Jim Shannon said that prevention is better than cure, and that is true. Certain tests are cheap: electrocardiograms, which are tracings of the heart, are very cheap to carry out, and they can perhaps pick up on people at risk. Then we can move on to tests such as echocardiograms, which are much more expensive.

After the tragic events in Tyrone, my son, a fit young man of 19, who is taller than I am, was alarmed while he was playing a game of football to see someone on the sideline holding a defibrillator. I share other Members' concerns about that. That is why I am not happy with the word "comprehensive" in the motion, because it suggests that everybody should be screened. That is where we cause undue alarm and anxiety, which, believe me, also has consequences for people's health. We do not want children who participate in sports to see people carrying defibrillators, because that will cause alarm.

This is an important matter that has attracted publicity, because, for the most part, it concerns young lives. A child of 10 or 15 years of age can expect to live to 70 years of age or longer. I mean no disrespect, but to resuscitate the heart of people in their 80s may only give them three or four more years of life.

I want to pay tribute to Cardiac Risk in the Young, the Cormac Trust and the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, which now provides facilities in which patients can be checked. However, problems can sometimes arise with the procedures, making diagnosis unobtainable until the patient is older. There are false positive results and false negative results; these conditions are not simple, and neither are the treatments.

Members have mentioned the use of defibrillators and the fact that children might in future avoid becoming involved in sports. I read Dr White's article in 'The Irish News' last week, to which Ms Ní Chuilín referred earlier. If what he says is true — I have no reason to doubt him — 2% of Italian athletes are told at a young

age to avoid becoming involved in sport. My sons would not do that, no matter which doctor had advised them. A solution must be found, and we must work on this issue. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a commitment to examine the matter seriously. I support the amendment.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): It is unfortunate that this issue has been brought to the Floor of the House as a result of the tragic deaths of two children. I want to add my condolences to the families of Patrick Devlin and Patrick Breen during this terrible time. Every young death is a tragedy, but when that death occurs in an apparently fit and healthy young person, the devastation is much greater, because it is unexpected and comes without any kind of warning.

Those deaths have not occurred in isolation. Two young players from County Westmeath died earlier this month. Zeeshan Muhammed died while playing football in his schoolyard in Athlone, and Tony Parker died just before he was due to take part in a physical education class in his school in Moate. Members have also recalled the tragic loss of the young lives of John McCall, who died on a rugby tour in South Africa, and Cormac McAnallen.

In this day and age, we have come to associate death with increasing old age, and to have young people struck down before their potential is fulfilled, without their families having the time to adjust and say goodbye, is very difficult to deal with. The fear that another family member might have inherited the same — possibly fatal — condition causes high levels of stress for the grieving family, which is difficult to imagine.

Heart disease is the most common cause of unexpected sudden death in all age groups. In people over 40 years of age, heart disease is usually due to coronary artery disease, which is the narrowing or blockage of the blood vessels that supply the heart muscle. However, in young people, the majority of sudden deaths are due to congenital or inherited disorders of the heart muscle and irregular heart rhythms. Estimates from studies in other countries suggest that there are probably about five sudden unexpected cardiac deaths from different causes in young people in Northern Ireland every year.

It is important to note that, although most sudden deaths of young people occur as a result of underlying heart problems, those are not single conditions, and there are many different causes. More than 20 different conditions have been identified as causes of sudden cardiac death in young people. However, a few groups of conditions are responsible for most sudden deaths, and the largest group are the cardiomyopathies, which are abnormalities of the heart muscle and are usually inherited. The other major group of disorders affect the

electrical condition in the heart and can trigger abnormal heart rhythm. Those disorders are believed to occur in one in 5,000 people. Congenital heart defects are another important group.

One of the cardiomyopathies — hypertrophic cardiomyopathy — is estimated to affect one in 500 people in the UK. It is the most common cause of sudden death in young athletes, accounting for up to 40% of such deaths, according to one study in the US. The majority of sufferers of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy have no symptoms prior to sudden death. A few sufferers may have a family history of a sudden or unexpected death, and some may have signs or symptoms of cardiac disease, such as chest pain, palpitations or blackouts. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is a hereditary disease associated with at least 150 genetic mutations.

Sadly, there is no cure for cardiomyopathy. However, several treatments, including medicines, pacemakers, implantable defibrillators and surgery may have a role in improving symptoms or in preventing complications. Patients with cardiomyopathy and other heart diseases are usually referred to a consultant cardiologist, a number of whom have a specialist interest in the subject, and other inherited cardiac conditions. In those families where the genetic abnormality has been identified, it may be possible to do genetic tests for that specific mutation. Specialist services in that field are provided by a consultant cardiologist and the regional genetic centre in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. In addition to clinical tests and treatment, counselling, advice and information are provided for children and adults who suffer from inherited heart disease.

In one major way, Northern Ireland has contributed significantly to advances in cardiology because the portable defibrillator was invented by Professor Frank Pantridge, who was a cardiologist in the Royal Victoria Hospital. Until recently, defibrillation required considerable skill and training, and was largely restricted to medical and nursing staff. However, the recent introduction of the automated external defibrillator has meant that the average layperson, following a brief period of training, should be easily able to perform defibrillation. It is estimated that over 1,000 volunteers are skilled in that area.

My Department is also working with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and other key stakeholders to develop and implement a first-responder strategy for Northern Ireland. Appropriately trained local volunteers, using automated defibrillators, together with associated skills, can provide life-saving first aid, particularly in remote rural areas, until an accident and emergency ambulance can reach the scene.

I am aware that there have been calls for a screening programme, and I have heard those calls today. However, it must be considered whether the available evidence

indicates that screening is always the right course of action. If it is not, we must consider what we must do to protect our children from such a devastating condition. It is a complex issue.

There is no specific test or one single solution to identifying all those at risk of the various causes of sudden cardiac death. In those who have a regular heart rhythm, the ECG may be normal when the person is at rest, and the characteristic changes may be present only after the administration of a specific drug. In others, it may require repeated ECGs and exercise monitoring before the diagnosis can be made.

Even if there were a successful screening test, it would be difficult to define at what age to begin screening. There is no optimum age at which to screen, so some people could die before they were screened and others after they were screened, if their conditions were not detected. Studies have shown that there is little evidence that starting treatment before the onset of symptoms makes a difference to the course of the disease. In fact, the majority of people with those underlying conditions do not have any symptoms for all or most of their lives, and will go on to have a normal lifespan. It is only in a small minority of cases that the condition leads to unexpected death, often in early adulthood. It is difficult to predict who will die suddenly and who will have a normal lifespan.

There are also concerns about the possible negative aspects of screening, including enforced changes in lifestyle, consequences for employment prospects, and securing insurance in the future. There are also psychological consequences of telling a young adult and his or her family that they have a condition that might kill them without warning, and for which there is no effective treatment or preventative measure.

6.15 pm

The UK National Screening Committee (NSC) advises Government and the four UK Health Departments on all aspects of screening. To inform its proposals and advice, the NSC draws on the latest research evidence and the skills of a group of experts. For 10 years, the former Chief Medical Officer in Northern Ireland, Dr Henrietta Campbell, chaired that group, and a senior medical officer from the Department currently sits on the NSC.

Members of the NSC assess proposed new population screening programmes against a set of internationally recognised criteria. They ask questions about the tests, treatment options and the effectiveness and acceptability of the screening programme. By assessing programmes in that way, their intention is to do more good than harm to the population.

Since the NSC was established, it has made several recommendations on screening policy that have been implemented in Northern Ireland. They include diabetic

retinopathy screening, which I launched recently, and the hearing screening of all newborn babies. It has also recommended screening for bowel cancer. Providing the Department's bid under the comprehensive spending review is successful, I hope to introduce that in 2009, and it is expected to save 70 lives a year.

The NSC has previously considered the research evidence on screening for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and has advised that the current evidence does not support the introduction of a screening programme. That advice is due for imminent review in 2007-08. I have asked a departmental official to accelerate the process as far as is possible, and the Chief Medical Officer has already raised the issue with the chair of the NSC.

There has been some research on, and much discussion about, the risk assessment for those involved in sport and exercise. The evidence for screening is not strong, and there are varying practices in different countries. In Italy, pre-participation screening programmes using an ECG exist for competitive athletes who compete at national and international level. In 1998, American research estimated that 200,000 competitive athletes would need to be screened potentially to identify one athlete who would die as a result of taking part in competition.

I must stress, however, the importance of raising awareness of the complex condition. The careful provision of information can do much to educate the public. I emphasise wholeheartedly that if young people are experiencing concerning symptoms, such as unusual breathlessness, palpitations, dizziness or fainting, it is important that they seek advice from their GP. However, the Department does not want to cause undue anxiety or panic among parents and families by suggesting that the problem is more common than it really is.

The vital contribution that voluntary organisations have made in bringing the issue to the fore must be recognised. As has been mentioned, a heart charity, Cardiac Risk in the Young has established a clinic in the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. CRY provided the equipment, but the university provides the facilities and the staff. I add my warm tribute to the dedicated work of the Cormac Trust, CRY and other voluntary organisations that have done so much to raise awareness of this issue.

In Northern Ireland, a service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being is being developed. I have asked that sudden cardiac death is addressed in that framework, which is due to be published in April 2008. It is vital that any service that affects the lives of young people is based on sound evidence. It is worth taking time to get the service right, and it is essential to examine best practice elsewhere.

I have also asked the Chief Medical Officer to lead a workshop for health experts in cardiology, clinical psychology, genetics and research academics in the field, officials from the relevant Departments, public health bodies, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and voluntary organisations. The workshop's remit is to explore thoroughly what further steps are available and to inform future policy development in Northern Ireland.

The correct policy must be found: in doing so the Assembly will pay a proper tribute to those children who lost their lives at such a young age and in such a terrible way.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for being in the House for the debate. There have been more debates in the Chamber about health than about any other subject. In supporting the amendment, I extend my sympathy to all families who have lost young people on or off the sports field. However, it would be remiss of me not to single out the Breen family who are present today. They are relatively close neighbours and are natives of my own village of Drumquin in west Tyrone. When the community there heard that such a young lad had died on the sports field, it not only brought a sense of disbelief to the locality and devastation to the family, it raised the question in everyone's thoughts — could anything have been done to prevent the tragedy?

I have no doubt that all families that have found themselves in that position have pondered the same question. However, there is no clear medical evidence as to the root cause of sudden cardiac death amongst athletes. A study carried out in the USA on the causes of sudden cardiac death in high-school students, college athletes and military recruits found that a wide variety of conditions were responsible, and the study was unable to establish a common underlying cause for those sport-related deaths. That has resulted in different conclusions being drawn and has led to the development of varying practices in different countries.

We have tabled the amendment to widen the scope for the Minister and the Executive to consult with their UK counterparts through the UK National Screening Committee (NSC), and to bring forward a fully costed, evidence-based proposal to help reduce such avoidable cardiac deaths, which includes the introduction of screening programmes where appropriate. It is important that an evidence-based strategy is put in place to tackle this all-important issue.

A report by the Task Force on Sudden Cardiac Death revealed that there is insufficient evidence to support the implementation of a mass population screening programme, but there is, however, a role for risk assessment in respect of those involved in exercise or sport. Given that heart conditions are often hereditary, it is vital that families with a history of this condition

are identified and assessed at an early stage and sent for screening if necessary.

It is also important that the sudden deaths of sport participants do not discourage our young people from taking part in sport. It is widely accepted that regular exercise reduces the risk of developing or dying from cardiac heart disease, obesity and other associated conditions. Even in childhood, there is substantial evidence to prove that regular physical activity positively affects body composition, reduces the risk of cardiac heart disease and provides immediate health benefits. A balanced approach must be taken, through the publicity and provision of information on the health benefits of regular exercise.

On listening to the debate, I sense that there is unity in the House regarding the way forward. Several Members mentioned the opinions of experts, and there is consensus that the Assembly must listen to experts and move forward on their advice. Indeed, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety referred to current resources, the need to use them wisely and the need to provide an evidence-based way forward that incorporates all means of preventing avoidable deaths. Reference was also made to cross-departmental strategies that must be taken on board.

Jim Shannon mentioned having a system that works, which is obviously needed, and Alastair Ross mentioned the importance of sport.

All those factors will form part of the way forward. I appeal to all Members to support the amendment, as it is the way to proceed on the issue.

Mrs Hanna: The motion has provided the House with the opportunity to have a sensitive debate on sudden cardiac death. The death of a young, healthy person is very distressing, and we have every sympathy for the parents and families of those who have suffered such a loss.

Understandably, such a scenario throws up many questions, particularly about why the death occurred and how it could have been avoided. Members have highlighted the many concerns of families, worried parents and sports' bodies. There is considerable agreement on appropriate screening, especially for those who are most at risk. Many Members have talked about having a range of screening, including risk assessment, with the health warning that it is not perfect, given the possibility of false negatives and positives. However, screening can certainly be a way forward, particularly for those who are at high risk.

The Assembly must, of course, listen to cardiologists, who are the experts in the field, while continuing to encourage participation in sport. Information, guidance and screening are needed, which is what the public are calling for. The SDLP motion

asked for a range of options, including a comprehensive screening service. "Comprehensive" is used in the broadest sense of the word in order to create, and to allow the exploration of, the widest range of options.

Iris Robinson, who proposed the amendment, spoke of the sudden death of many young gymnasts. She mentioned the fact that those people are healthy and that they expect support when it is needed. She also said that resources need to be directed carefully and that an evidence-based service is needed.

Barry McElduff rightly said that the motion is not prescriptive, that we need to hear from the experts — the cardiologists — and that we must learn from other bodies, such as the American Heart Association and the Irish Government's task force on the issue.

The Rev Coulter mentioned the importance of having sympathy, sentiment and support for those who grieve. He also mentioned the many questions that the issue raises on ethics, legal implications and insurance. All those are important points to consider.

Stephen Farry spoke of the importance of physical activity, on which, like so many aspects of this issue, all Members agree. He also said that we should continue to promote exercise and the best medical practice.

Alex Easton said that there was a compelling argument for screening. However, he said that it needs to be costed and must be part of a co-ordinated strategy.

Carál Ní Chuilín emphasised the need for screening in schools, which the motion also requested. Jim Shannon talked about genetic heart disease, the need for specialist facilities and to raise awareness, and the search for answers. He called for the immediate introduction of obligatory screening.

Alastair Ross talked about the costing of defibrillators, his own experience in sports' clubs and the burden of the training in and use of such equipment. He praised the work of organisations such as Cardiac Risk in the Young, and he mentioned the good work that mobile units carry out.

Kieran Deeny said that something must be done and that his patients are asking many questions. Although he raised his concern about the use of defibrillators, the motion is not about that — it is exclusively about screening. Many sports' clubs already have defibrillators, and getting them involved a great deal of community and charity work.

6.30 pm

The Health Minister — who, as usual, is welcome and is always present at health-related debates — gave an informative and helpful explanation of the conditions required for screening, its pros and cons, and statistics relating to it. He said that a review is imminent, and that is welcome and timely. He also mentioned the

service framework, and said that it will include sudden cardiac death. He further said that the Chief Medical Officer will lead a workshop with cardiologists.

Tom Buchanan expressed his sympathy and said that there is insufficient evidence to support screening, but he mentioned the role of risk assessments, the need to listen to experts, and the sense of unity in the House regarding the way forward.

Dominic and I carefully considered the wording of the motion. We are asking the Minister to bring forward a range of options. As I have already said, that should be a comprehensive range of options and a comprehensive screening service. What we are looking for is the widest range of options. Many Members who supported the amendment quoted from the motion, so I do not believe that there is any difference between the spirit of the motion and that of the amendment.

When we call for a wide range of options, we are looking for the simplest screening procedure for those in high-risk categories to be brought into schools. When we say "comprehensive", we do not mean "universal". We want the full range of options to be looked at, and the Minister has said that it will be. That is very important.

As I have said, I do not believe that there is much difference between the spirit of the motion and that of the amendment, and the SDLP wants to avoid unnecessary tension, because this is a sensitive issue. To that end, we will not oppose the amendment, because we all want to find the best way forward for these unfortunate young people and their grieving families.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I ask you to investigate a situation that arose in the House earlier today? This morning, I was three minutes late for a ministerial statement and was, therefore, denied the right to speak. I accept that as the rule of the House. However, later in the afternoon, a Member who was not present for the debate was allowed to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to raise his point of order after we have finished with the motion. We are in the middle of the process. It is certainly a matter that can be raised with the Speaker.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its sympathy to the families of Patrick Breen and Patrick Devlin, who died recently on the sports field from heart defects; sympathises with all families who have lost loved ones in this way; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Executive, to consult with their United Kingdom counterparts through the National Screening Committee, and bring forward fully costed, evidence-based

proposals to reduce avoidable cardiac deaths in the young, including screening programmes where appropriate.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for interrupting the business at an inappropriate time.

This morning, I was, rightly, denied speaking rights because I was three minutes late for a ministerial statement. However, this afternoon, several Members were not present for most of the debate, but were permitted to contribute to it. One in particular was allowed to make a winding-up speech. Other Members participating in the debate this evening have openly told you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that they had not been present for most of it and had been listening to it elsewhere. Will you investigate this matter and provide a ruling?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am happy to refer that to the Speaker and to get a reply to you, Mr Bradley.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker*]

ADJOURNMENT

Maximising Tourism Potential in the Strangford Constituency

Mr Hamilton: It is widely accepted and acknowledged on all sides of the House that our economy is in urgent need of transformation. The structural weaknesses in our economy have been well rehearsed in the Chamber in the past and need no elaboration today.

Regardless of the doubts of some Members, I think we must encourage every aspect of the private sector to expand and take its rightful place in the driving seat of Northern Ireland's economy. One obvious area in which the private sector can fulfil that responsibility is tourism.

By any barometer, tourism is a growth area in Northern Ireland, and in the Strangford constituency. The latest available base-year figures show that total tourism income represents 3.5% of the gross value added (GVA) in Northern Ireland, is worth £783 million to the economy and employs 28,700 full-time equivalent jobs. ASM Howarth recently published a survey in 2006 on the Northern Ireland hotel industry, which showed that local hotels enjoyed an occupancy rate of close to 70%. That was a record high and represented an increase of 3% on the previous year.

In my own patch, tourism is a critical component of the local economy. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) estimated that in 2005 tourists spent £16 million in the Ards Borough Council area, which takes up the largest part of Strangford. An economic impact study is being carried out by the Armagh and Down Regional Tourism Partnership and includes the entire Strangford constituency. I understand that the early findings indicate that many hundreds of millions are being spent in the economy through tourism, when day trippers and those staying with relatives are included in the figures.

However, despite the important position tourism already has in our economy, we are not maximising our full potential, and that is widely accepted. The NITB stated that if Northern Ireland had matched the Republic of Ireland's external visitor trends since 1969, tourism would be worth an extra £270 million in income, and would generate an additional 11,000 jobs.

It is worthwhile remembering why tourism in Northern Ireland represents only 2% of our gross domestic product (GDP) compared to 9% in the Republic and 11% in Wales. It is not because we have suddenly discovered

the whole concept of tourism, or that people suddenly want to come here, it is because for more than 35 years this place was subjected to civil strife. When innocent civilians were the victims of random terrorist violence, it is no wonder that outsiders stayed away.

Hopefully, those days are long gone, and their demise will present Northern Ireland with an excellent opportunity to capitalise on political stability and bring a fresh focus from abroad, which will perhaps attract new tourists. We have all been encouraged by the reaction to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, with record numbers visiting the event and experiencing something of Northern Ireland.

Although the subject of the debate might suggest otherwise, I am not parochial about the issue. We must maximise the tourism potential of the whole of Northern Ireland in the hope that a rising tide will lift all boats. I want to see the tourism sector across Northern Ireland overcome fundamental problems such as the lack of suitable skills, and acknowledge issues such as the lack of a distinct Northern Ireland brand, and the associated fall-off in visitor numbers from Great Britain, while those from the rest of the world are on the rise.

We also need to anticipate other problems such as the need for a national conference centre to compete with the one in the pipeline for Dublin. To achieve those aims we must make the most of all our tourist attractions in each and every part of our Province. In short, places such as Strangford should receive their fair share of support so that they can contribute to the growth of tourism overall.

I am glad when there are adjournment debates on the Strangford constituency, because looking at the Members in the House at the moment shows the DUP domination there, and that is always good to see.

I am sure that Members, particularly those from Strangford, will forgive me for indulging briefly in a little promotion of the area that I consider myself lucky to live in and represent. We all believe that our constituencies are the most beautiful, but in the case of Strangford it is very much true. The sheer volume and diversity of our tourism attractions is probably unparalleled in Northern Ireland. At the heart of our offering to tourists is Strangford Lough, which was voted the fourth best view in the United Kingdom in a show seen by millions across the country. The fact that people in Northern Ireland were unable to vote, because of the screening of a rugby match, is testament to how good the view is, given that it came in at fourth place despite those problems. Strangford's shores are surrounded by excellent places of interest for every type of tourist — Mount Stewart, Scrabo Tower, Nendrum, Delamont, the Somme Heritage Centre, Exploris, and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Centre at Castle Espie, which already draw hundreds of

thousands of tourists from all over the world year in, year out. I hope I have not offended anyone by leaving something out of the list.

Strangford is home to a great many events and festivals, with sports and outdoor activities such as golf, fishing and sailing, which can be enjoyed in some of the best surroundings in Northern Ireland, and our hospitality is second to none. Our proximity to Belfast, so often a hindrance in other aspects of economic development, is a positive advantage in the realm of tourism. The product is there; is it simply a matter of exploiting it.

I will outline a few specific areas where there is scope for significant improvement in Strangford's tourism potential. No discussion of tourism can be allowed to pass without dwelling on the lough from which our constituency takes its name. The biggest inlet in the British Isles is home to an exceptional variety of more than 2,000 marine species, the largest breeding population of common seals in Ireland and many migrating birds from all over the world. Indeed, its rich, diverse, abundant, and sometimes unique, bird, marine and animal population is recognised in its status as Northern Ireland's first marine nature reserve, and sets us apart not only in a British or European context but also in a global perspective. It may not be a world heritage site, but it is world-renowned.

There is a widely held view that Strangford Lough has been under-marketed compared to other attractions in Northern Ireland, such as the Giant's Causeway and the Fermanagh lakes. If we are to maximise Northern Ireland's undoubted tourism potential, it could be argued that such a target will ever be achieved only by highlighting and developing new jewels in the crown, instead of concentrating solely on the well-established ones. I do not mean that in purely monetary terms: Strangford must be accepted as an asset.

I have long felt that the best way to show such an acceptance and to capitalise on Strangford Lough's potential would be to establish it as one of the Tourist Board's signature projects. Strangford Lough was omitted from the first slate of signature projects, and although we have no argument against those projects that were included, surely Strangford Lough, with its many unique designations and broad tourism offerings around its shores, could be considered, after 2009, as a new signature project. In the past, I have even suggested that Strangford Lough could be included in a wider loughs signature project, which could include Fermanagh's lakes or Lough Neagh. Strangford Lough should be in Northern Ireland's portfolio of top-class tourism attractions — however it is done — and I hope that the Tourist Board will consider the case of Strangford Lough for future signature project status.

Strangford Lough could also provide Northern Ireland with an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the increasing interest in ecotourism — and by that I do not mean three Irish guys running around the Colombian jungle — I mean the form of tourism that is already worth an estimated \$3.6 trillion in economic activity globally.

I have already spoken of the many environmental designations that Strangford Lough enjoys, yet more could be achieved. Ards Borough Council, of which I am a member, has taken a lead in its limited way through Exploris — the Northern Ireland Aquarium — and an annual ecotourism conference. However, the council is operating in a policy vacuum with little or no leadership at a higher level. With the anticipated growth in this sector, and the fact that ecotourists usually spend more than other tourists, Strangford Lough is ripe for a flagship ecotourism project such as the Ards and Down Salmonid Enhancement Association (ADSEA) scheme, in which some of my party colleagues are interested.

6.45 pm

I have already mentioned the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's signature projects, and just as important as securing such a status for Strangford Lough is the continued assurance that the Strangford constituency is tied in with existing, more generic, projects. The Strangford constituency is already intimately involved in the St Patrick's/Christian Heritage tourism signature project, but perhaps the greatest potential in Strangford lies in what we all suspect may be the signature project with the greatest potential of all — the Titanic project. My hometown of Comber has a huge connection with Titanic, as it is the hometown of the ship's designer, Thomas Andrews. The local council is engaged in developing a walking tour around the town, taking in many Titanic-related sites. Comber may be only a tiny part of the Titanic tale, but it is a part nonetheless, and it is important that the development of the Titanic signature project include Comber and its deeper insight into the story of that ship.

Strangford is a hotbed of Ulster-Scots culture and heritage. In fact, since it is the home of the Ulster-Scots Academy, we almost consider ourselves as the Ulster-Scots capital. The reawakening of the Ulster-Scots tradition is worthy in its own right, but it also presents us with tremendous tourism opportunities. For far too long the impression of Northern Ireland given to the outside world has been one dominated by everything from Irish dancing and Irish music to leprechauns and shillelaghs — everything but what is distinctive and different about Northern Ireland. It is little wonder that that problem perpetuates, given that the marketing of Northern Ireland to the world — including the rest of the United Kingdom — is in the hands of Tourism Ireland.

I acknowledge that they have done a great job in selling the whole of Ireland to the world, and visitor numbers from places such as North America and the Far East are on the rise. However, numbers of visitors from Great Britain are falling and have been heading downwards for the past two years. We insult the intelligence of our fellow countrymen in the rest of the UK by not marketing Northern Ireland as it is. People in Scotland and Wales know the difference between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland; they know the difference Belfast and Dublin, and do not need to be sold some type of concocted nonsense.

I agree with Tom McGrath, Chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, who told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that the Northern Ireland tourism product is diluted when marketed as part of the island of Ireland:

“because it does not stand out”.

The Ulster-Scots heritage and culture could be utilised to increase visitor numbers from Scotland and, indeed, North America, as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has shown. Developing the potential of Ulster-Scots is essential in order to develop Northern Ireland tourism and, because of its rich vein of Ulster-Scots tradition, the Strangford constituency would surely benefit from such an initiative.

An accepted weakness of the tourism product in Strangford is in hotels and conference facilities. Despite its obvious attractions and great potential, Strangford is not blessed with as many hotels as it should be. In common with other parts of Northern Ireland, Strangford suffers from a restriction in Invest NI's 'Support for Tourism Businesses 2004-2007' policy, which states that:

“In the Belfast area, (defined for this purpose as a radius of 10 miles from Belfast City Centre) no applications for financial assistance for new hotel developments, including extensions and upgrades etc to existing properties will be accepted by Invest NI.”

Although I understand the sense behind such a restriction, and of ceasing financial support for hotel developments in Belfast that are likely to be a success, regardless of support from the public purse, the 10-mile radius rule denies new or existing hotel developments from availing of initial capital support in key towns such as Newtownards, which is a gateway to Strangford. I urge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to examine that policy, with a view to assisting hotel developments in Strangford and elsewhere.

I also wish to make a case for not only securing current levels of funding, but consideration of future growth in resources for the Armagh and Down Tourism Partnership. The regional tourism partnerships (RTPs), including the Armagh and Down Tourism Partnership, were created in 2006 and identified in, 'A Strategic Framework for Action 2004-2007', as the

way forward for the delivery of regional priorities. That important task requires appropriate levels of funding. The RTPs have lost various elements of EU funding and are now increasingly dependent on their share of £500,000 worth of core support from NITB, in addition to what they can elicit from the private sector.

I have already outlined the impact of the Armagh and Down Tourism Partnership in my area. Its input into communications, marketing, product development and visitor servicing is valuable, and it does a good job. I agree with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which concluded that RTPs should be properly funded to enable them to carry out their functions of identifying and pursuing local regional tourism priorities

There are wider issues — many that are not unique to Strangford — that require attention. Those issues are not specifically within the remit of DETI; however, Members have been encouraged by the Minister's comments about co-ordinating economic development in general. Tourism fits into that category, particularly in general areas such as skills development, infrastructure and planning, and, specifically, the ADSEA project, which I mentioned earlier, and possible National Parks status at a later date for Strangford.

Strangford is as good a snapshot as any of what is needed to maximise the potential of tourism in Northern Ireland. Strangford, in common with the rest of the country, has a tourism product to be proud of. It requires not only assistance, but encouragement, so that the Strangford constituency, with its wealth of tourism riches, can play its part in building the better, prosperous, Northern Ireland that all Members hope for.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful to Simon for not only securing the debate, but for the commercial for our constituency. I am glad to speak in advance of Jim Shannon, otherwise, I imagine, there would be nothing left to say. However, having heard Simon for the past 20 minutes, I am not sure there is anything to say anyway. Nevertheless, I will have a bash at it.

I am delighted to see the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following a hard day at the office in front of the Committee, which I listened in to for a while in the Senate Chamber.

I wish we had a Giant's Causeway to invest in and a visitor attraction such as that to argue over, as people are doing in another part of Northern Ireland.

Strangford is politically unique, because it has no republican or nationalist representation in this House. Sometimes I wonder whether it suffers because of that. I cannot put my finger on the reason, but — and sometimes people say this to me — because it is a predominantly unionist constituency the word "tourism" does not seem to fit. I hope that that is not the case, and it would be grossly unfair if it were. Perhaps the

Minister will consider investigating the matter. Community relations in Strangford are first class, and its MLAs represent the whole constituency and all its constituents.

The Assembly, in conjunction with its partners in the tourism industry, can help Northern Ireland emerge as an internationally competitive tourist destination. I have sourced an article about the ASM Horwarth hotel industry survey in 'Business First', volume 3, issue 4. I hope that nobody else has sourced this and that I am not accused of anything. The performance of Northern Ireland hotels in 2006 showed that:

"The average bedroom occupancy rate was 68.7 per cent... an increase of three percentage points when compared with 2005.

The average letting rate of a bedroom in 2006 was £63.20, an increase of 11 percent over 2005.

Food and beverage sales increased by 13 per cent over 2005.

Total sales increased by an average of 15.8 per cent compared to 2005."

A key point is that Northern Ireland hotel profitability is now "on a par with Dublin".

That should be more than encouraging for potential investors. I am extremely confident about the future of tourism in our country. However, against the backdrop of growth, we must ensure that there is an effort to maximise the tourist potential in the Strangford constituency.

The tourism potential will only be realised through investment in marketing, product development and physical tourism facilities, such as infrastructure and accommodation. We need quality facilities and accommodation that will contribute to the sustainability of an industry when we are asking for growth.

We need hotels to complement the excellent bed-and-breakfast facilities, which are of the highest standard. Sometimes, I think that they are almost too good and that the short distance from Belfast to many of our towns and villages may be discouraging hotel development. Therefore, we must commend, as Simon Hamilton said, an in-depth look at promoting more hotels in our area.

Strangford should not be seen in isolation. I mentioned the proximity of Belfast, but perhaps we should consider Strangford as the hub of, or gateway to, the whole of the region, extending to the Republic and — with a natural Ulster-Scots tradition — to Scotland in particular.

Mention has been made of the Strangford Lough environment, which is of international and national importance for its bird and marine life. Although that should be protected, it is important to avoid the perception that conservation interests are inhibiting the economic development of the area. That is a key area

for the potential development of at least one hotel without disruption to conservation interests.

In the past it has seemed to those of us in Strangford that the tide was out as far as tourism potential in and around Strangford Lough was concerned.

There are still many challenges. However, this debate will encourage the Assembly, the district councils, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and other partners in the tourism industry, to ensure that the tide is coming in for us.

There are small villages in pockets around Strangford. Promotion and marketing of tourism in that area is primarily the responsibility of Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, and a small element in Castlereagh Borough Council. Ards Borough Council and Down District Council both operate a range of tourist facilities, including picnic, caravan and amenity sites. In fact, there is tremendous potential for the development of caravan sites.

Along with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Forest Service, and the Department of the Environment, through the Environment and Heritage Service, there is a togetherness in managing historic and special wildlife sites. Some of those have been mentioned, but there are also the archaeological remains of the Nendrum monastery near Whiterock.

The National Trust owns and manages properties of nature and historical interest. Outside Northern Ireland, Mount Stewart always gets high ratings as a place to visit, and there is Rowallane House and Gardens in the Saintfield area.

I want the councils to do more for tourism, as opposed to visitor numbers. There needs to be a differentiation between real tourists and visitors. Many people visit Strangford — they perhaps only come from Lisburn, east Belfast or wherever — and they are more than welcome; however, it is real tourists who will help and contribute to our economy.

The village of Comber is growing into a town, and is famed for its wide variety of antique and interior shops. It is a good place to eat now; I am glad that a new coffee-shop culture has developed there. It is, as was mentioned, the birthplace of Thomas Andrews, the man who designed the Titanic. It seems strange that Comber has not really claimed him as a famous son. I understand why the Titanic Quarter is being built where it is, but perhaps, one day, someone will provide a bus to take people from the Titanic Quarter to Comber.

Portaferry — no doubt Kieran will say something about this — is a beautiful town at the tip of the Ards Peninsula. It is an area popular with locals, and it attracts foreign tourists because of its outstanding beauty and other visitor attractions, such as the aquarium that Simon Hamilton mentioned.

Newtownards is a main town with a main shopping centre. It is in an area of astonishing beauty and diversity, which has evolved through the natural forces of the environment of wind, of water and ice, as well as through the activity of humans. It is worrying to see subsidence on some of the coastline there.

Mr McCarthy: No one is interested.

Mr McNarry: They should be.

Portaferry has a successful hotel — The Narrows. There is no doubt that it shocked and annoyed everyone — not only the relatively new owners, but people all around — that it was subject to wanton vandalism. Louts simply came along and smashed windows. I am sure that all Members present have issued some kind of public statement on that. It is very discouraging for any hotel owners, or for anyone who owns a business, to be subjected to that, and — worse still — not really to know what is behind it.

While the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is present, I want to raise the matter of the general malaise of anti-social behaviour. I wonder what consideration he would give, from a tourist perspective, to the detrimental impact that anti-social behaviour undoubtedly has on tourism.

Will the Minister consider discussing with the Chief Constable the impact of antisocial behaviour on the tourist industry? I mean that sincerely. All Members who represent Strangford have talked with the local police commander about that problem — some of us as recently as last week. When tourists see antisocial behaviour on such a scale as I have seen in Strangford, it switches them off.

Antisocial behaviour has a serious detrimental effect on tourism and — not only that — it can lead to a bad story being carried back. Such damage cannot be undone. There is a connection between those two aspects; and tourism will benefit immensely if we can outlaw antisocial behaviour from our streets. That would, of course, benefit us all; but antisocial activity has a particularly dire effect on tourism. Nothing sends people packing from a town or from an amenity more effectively than a display of vandalism or thuggery.

Will the Minister also consider the importance of tourist-driven, as opposed to visitor-driven, support for events? I will not identify particular events, but it would be useful for a signal to be sent out that the Department might support events with a local Strangford flavour. Events of a high standard could, if given the attention and the necessary support, become winning tourist attractions in a short time.

A lot goes on in the constituency, much of it indigenous and small; but there is a nucleus of events that might bring forward an entrepreneurial spirit or a new capital-risk venture scheme. I hope that people

might be prepared to host events in the Strangford constituency, which could be identified with, and would capture, the flavour of the place.

7.00 pm

I would welcome a signal from the Minister that such events would be supported. I know that his response will be that if he is given the right event, he will consider it. However, I want to be able to report back to some people who might seriously consider putting on such events in the constituency.

Mr McCarthy: I was nearly falling asleep.

I will be as quick as I can, because there are other things to be done. I do not disagree with anything I have heard so far. One or two things have been missed out, but I will not repeat what any Member has said.

The proposer of the motion is most supportive of increased tourism, but I question his attitude to the disposal of coastal land within the Ards Borough Council area. If Mr Hamilton wishes to encourage tourists and see our tourist industry thrive, he must know that we have to provide facilities such as basic car parks and local play areas along Strangford Lough and the Irish Sea coast. Mr Hamilton and other DUP members of Ards Borough Council voted to dispose of such areas and sell the land that visitors and tourists want to come to, park their cars and enjoy what is there.

Recently, Mr Hamilton and others agreed to the disposal of a coastal car park outside Ballywalter for the construction of a waste-water treatment works, which would be a monstrosity on our coastline. Mr Hamilton must get his priorities right. If he wants to bring more tourists to the constituency he must reassess his attitude to the disposal of coastal land.

There is a tremendous opportunity throughout Northern Ireland to capitalise on the natural assets — a beautiful landscape and a wonderful heritage. There is particular evidence of those attributes in the Strangford constituency, and great potential for a successful and sustainable tourist industry.

As was pointed out earlier, Strangford Lough is the centrepiece of the constituency and is recognised throughout the world as an area of outstanding natural beauty. That designation alone is sufficient to attract visitors from across the globe. To ensure that the best possible tourism potential is derived from Strangford Lough, it is essential that the lough and its coastline are respected, protected and enhanced.

Strangford Lough offers much to encourage visitors, not least a wide variety of active bird life. I am fortunate enough to live by the edge of the lough, and I can assure Members that the many species of birds provide wonderful sights and sounds for those who visit. Surely more effort could be made to encourage birdwatchers

to spend some time in Northern Ireland and along the Strangford Lough coast?

I am delighted to see that the Minister with responsibility for tourism, Mr Dodds, is in the Chamber this evening. I will draw his attention to the fact that in Portaferry, at the tip of Strangford Lough, we have a wonderful tourist attraction in Exploris. Since its inception a number of years ago, it has been run and managed by Ards Borough Council, of which I and other Members present in the Chamber are members.

I would like the Minister to consider ways in which his Department could contribute, financially or otherwise, to the future expansion and sustainability of this magnificent tourist destination. Exploris, which is a replica of what goes on underneath the surface of Strangford Lough, is almost as important to Northern Ireland as the Giant's Causeway. People may disagree, but that is my opinion. I ask the Minister to consider the input that his Department could have to the Exploris experiment. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will become more involved.

In the Strangford constituency we have many more tourist attractions that could blossom if sufficient effort was directed towards them by the Department. For example, there is a rich Christian heritage in the constituency, and many relics of the past, such as Nendrum, Castlehill, Greyabbey, Movilla and many more, all of which could make a significant contribution to tourism if brought together.

A number of historical events took place in the constituency. In particular, if Members know their history they may be aware of the activities of the Presbyterian United Irishmen around 1798. The story features Betsy Gray at the Six Road Ends, and the part played by the town hall in Newtownards. Mrs Robinson is looking startled — she may not know what that entails.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Not only do I know the history, but I have spoken about it two or three times.

Mr McCarthy: I apologise for my mistake — the Member certainly looked startled. At least she knows about the town hall's history.

Saintfield, Ballynahinch, etc, should be of great interest to visitors and tourists. Indeed, if they were put together on some type of heritage trail, it would be an excellent attraction not only for our constituency, but for North Down, South Down and right across the area. There are many more features that could encourage tourists into our constituency, such as sport, agriculture, walking, cycling and horse riding; all of which must be examined and exploited to further the tourism industry.

In conclusion, I must mention Scrabo Tower and its beautiful parkland, and Mount Stewart, with its

wonderful house and gardens. Ballyquintin Farm, which is right at the tip of the Ards Peninsula, has tourism potential that must be explored and exploited. I ask the Minister, his Department, local councils and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to work together to produce a plan to encourage more visitors to visit our shores and, in particular, the Strangford constituency.

Mrs I Robinson: Kieran mentioned Strangford Lough. If he wants more coastal space, he might consider bulldozing his own house, because it is five feet from the lough shore. That would create some space.

I congratulate my party colleague for securing the Adjournment debate. When I delivered my maiden speech in another place, I was privileged to detail the breathtaking beauty of the constituency that I represent, both as MP and MLA, alongside my three party colleagues. I still feel the same sense of pride as I drive through that part of the Province, to and from advice centres in Portavogie, Killyleagh and Saintfield.

We have yet to grasp the role that tourism must play in the development of Northern Ireland's economy. To be fair, we are still finding our feet after emerging from 40 years of terror and violence that ensured that tourism was essentially suffocated. At the same time, the legislative Assembly is still in its infancy. The concept of devolved Government in Northern Ireland is still bedding in. Although we can be excused for being a little behind in practical terms, I am concerned that we do not yet understand what must be done in order to maximise our tourism potential; nor do I believe that the matter is simply one of blind investment in tourism. Rather, it is crucial to the future success of tourism that a co-ordinated and strategic approach is adopted in order to facilitate its expansion: only at that point must the funding that is needed to achieve those goals be identified.

There is no point complaining that there are no hotels between Bangor and Portaferry on the Ards Peninsula, because such businesses are consumer led — they are not viable without demand. Until the area's natural and historical assets are maximised, there will remain insufficient demand.

Northern Ireland is a blank canvas, compared to the state of affairs in other parts of the United Kingdom. Strangford is a case in point. There are several issues that contribute to that, such as the decline of traditional industries in the area, the job losses that have resulted, and the need for new investment. In recent years, we have witnessed the collapse of the textile industry, which has all but disappeared; the closure of TK-ECC in Dundonald, and the decline in fortunes of the fishing and farming sectors. As a result, around 2,500 people have lost their jobs. At the same time, however, there has been little meaningful inward investment.

People ask themselves where the peace dividend is in all of that. With the end of the Troubles, and the prospect of a peaceful future, we were promised huge advances and investment in tourism as overseas visitors returned to our shores.

That has not yet materialised. In the meantime, the Strangford Lough area — an area of outstanding natural beauty — remains completely relevant as a tourist resource. The lough is unique in that it is the largest sea lough in the British Isles, covering approximately 150 square kilometres and separated from the Irish Sea by the Ards Peninsula. Its visual beauty is unquestionable. In the recent ITV competition, 'Britain's Favourite View', Eddie Irvine described it as:

"Swept constantly by Atlantic weather, every single day is different. For trees, and oceans and hills and greenery, it is hard to beat."

Scrabo Tower dominates the area and gazes out at the glorious panorama of Strangford Lough, its islands, the Mountains of Mourne and the whole of north Down. Almost completely landlocked, Strangford Lough is rich with the marine and plant life that revel in the islands, foreshore, salt marshes and wetlands. The lough is a conservation area, and its abundant wildlife is recognised internationally for its importance. Animals commonly found in the lough include seals, basking sharks and brent geese. Three quarters of the world population of brent geese winter in the lough.

Away from the lough itself, we have the beauty of the beaches on the Irish Sea side of the Ards Peninsula. In recent correspondence, the permanent secretary of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure stated that his Department recognised that our greatest assets are our unspoilt landscapes, seascapes and the importance of our coastline and beaches. He stated that beaches attract a diverse range of visitors and activity-users as well as providing a natural visual amenity, and that it is important that all visitors have confidence that our waters and beaches are clean and safe.

There are at least 12 wonderful beaches on the Ards Peninsula, which in itself should form a central plank of the area's tourism strategy. Unfortunately, the water quality at many of those beaches leaves a lot to be desired because of the pumping of sewage, in some cases untreated, into local bathing waters. The Department for Regional Development, which is responsible for waste water and sewage treatment, recently admitted that there is some way to go to reach the compliance levels that prevail in England. That should have been a no-brainer. Matters should never have been allowed to reach the point, where, in the twenty-first century, we still allow raw sewage to be pumped into our bathing waters.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No, I will not give way.

Across the Strangford area, we also have a heritage and a history that remain all but hidden. The following was written of Sir Hugh Montgomery, who was central in the Scottish settlement of the area after 1606:

“Thus the country where Montgomery had settled was unhappy and devastated, but he laid balm upon the wounds, and in a few years he had founded economically sound industries and turned large portions of Ulster into a prosperous country.”

The history and heritage of the area is essentially an account of how the Scots influenced local life on economic, social and cultural levels. The area's built heritage reflects that, whether it be the old cross in Newtownards — the only market cross still in existence outside of Edinburgh — or the almost fairytale castle in Killyleagh, the ancestral home of the Hamiltons, whose family, along with that of Sir Hugh Montgomery, settled lands from Killyleagh to Bangor and from Dundonald to Cloughy.

The Ulster Scots have etched their own identity on the entire area. The story of Strangford is, therefore, the story of the Scots who arrived on a barren, depopulated, wasted land and who were responsible for the establishment and growth of most of the local settlements in the area, not least Newtownards. Sir Hugh Montgomery, Sir James Hamilton and all those who followed them to the area left a rich and powerful inheritance: a people whose first loyalty was to truth and fairness; whose support could never be taken for granted; who would fight for their freedom and liberty; who were committed to improving themselves and where they lived; and who brought a diverse array of cultural expression through music, literature and language, which resonates to this very day.

However, that remains nothing more than tourist potential, a vein of tourist gold that has yet to be mined. At a time when US tourists are becoming tired of the old “plastic Paddy” image that they have been fed for so long, and as interest in Scots-Irish heritage increases, we have an unprecedented wealth of Ulster-Scots history and heritage on our doorstep that is simply waiting to be exploited.

I find it frustrating that in the likes of Scotland, tourist attractions and areas of interest are provided for on a comprehensive scale, utilising all their available resources to attract and entertain visitors in a co-ordinated and joined-up fashion. There is an absolute wealth of attractions and history in Strangford, yet we have not even got off the mark in fulfilling the area's potential.

Although we have a number of excellent attractions such as Mount Stewart, Scrabo Tower and Castle Espie, without a strategic approach to tourism we will never maximise the area's appeal. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure estimates that, at present, tourism is worth £500 million a year to the Northern Ireland economy. If addressed properly, that could double.

Miss McIlveen: I commend my hon Friend Mr Hamilton for the positive and enthusiastic manner in which he has demonstrated the tourism potential not only of my own Strangford constituency, but of the whole of Northern Ireland, and for the way in which he has set it in an economic context. I agree wholeheartedly with all that he has said.

7.15 pm

Northern Ireland is now rapidly catching up on so many fronts after decades of terrorism and political instability, and the tourism deficit presents us all with major challenges and opportunities. In order to maximise potential, we need to ensure that the structures are right and that all the key players are singing from the same hymn sheet. As things stand, our tourism industry is hindered rather than helped by the seemingly numerous bodies and organisations involved, some of them politically motivated products of the Belfast Agreement.

As a result, therefore, the message is not always as clear as it might be — a point that was made by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in its report on tourism in Northern Ireland, published last year. The tourism industry is a vital cog in our economic wheel, and it deserves efficient, effective and dynamic strategic leadership. As things stand, I do not think that it is getting that, and I urge the Minister to address that as soon as possible.

Northern Ireland is a small place. My colleague has quite rightly drawn attention to the many and varied attractions of the Strangford area. He has also set these firmly within a broader Northern Ireland context. The signature projects — focusing as they do on the main historic and other main attractions across the Province — are clearly the key to attracting out-of-state visitors. We need to be sure that, once those visitors are here, the infrastructure is in place to encourage and direct them to other attractions, such as those in my constituency.

I am not sure that the tourist attractions of the Strangford region receive the publicity that they deserve in overseas marketing. I also feel that support from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for the local tourist industry in Strangford and beyond is essential if the regional tourism partnership for the area is to operate effectively.

Another area that is important if we are to make progress in tourism is that of good-quality accommodation. We are happy to see day visitors, as others have mentioned, but we are even happier if they decide to stay for a few days to fully enjoy the many attractions in Strangford. We must ensure that they are comfortable during such a stay. I would be interested to know whether the Minister is satisfied that enough is being done to support the development of the accommodation sector in my constituency.

One of my main concerns — and my colleague referred to this — is that Tourism Ireland, rather than the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, is responsible for marketing Northern Ireland in Great Britain. That is patently absurd. It is little wonder that visitor numbers from Great Britain are falling. It is not rocket science to work out that the marketing of Northern Ireland in, say, China or California requires a very different approach to that taken among our fellow citizens across the Irish Sea. Northern Ireland must be marketed in Great Britain as an integral part of the United Kingdom, and far more emphasis must be placed on our British history, traditions and culture. That will not be done while Tourism Ireland remains in charge of marketing in Great Britain. I encourage the Minister to strengthen and enhance the role of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and to give it back the responsibility for the promotion of Northern Ireland in Great Britain.

At the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington at the end of June, I was reminded of the closeness of the historical, religious and family ties between Northern Ireland and the so-called southern states of the United States of America, such as Virginia, Tennessee and the Carolinas. There is a vast and largely untapped tourist potential there. Again, I ask the Minister to do all he can to ensure that Tourism Ireland markets Northern Ireland positively and properly in those states. This means that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, sorry.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I congratulate the hon Member Simon Hamilton for securing this adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue, especially at a time when tourism continues to flourish. The Hansard report of this debate will serve as a wonderful tourist advertisement for Strangford. It will save the Northern Ireland Tourist Board from having to publish any new pamphlets, because Members have waxed lyrical and eloquent about the attractions of a very beautiful part of the world. As has been said, the Strangford constituency is blessed with natural beauty and plays a central role in making Northern Ireland the attractive destination that it is.

Several Members mentioned that Strangford Lough featured in the final of the prime time TV show 'Britain's Favourite View'. It was piped at the post, but the fact that it was voted among the top four views in the United Kingdom was a tremendous achievement. It underscored the potential of the area and will serve to advertise Northern Ireland, particularly Strangford Lough, to a very wide audience. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and VisitBritain joined forces for that series to promote the diversity of landscapes across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore,

I hope that people will be inspired to come and enjoy trips to Strangford Lough and the surrounding area.

Other important tourist attractions have been mentioned, including Castle Ward, which is one of Europe's most unique houses; the famous gardens at Mount Stewart; and Exploris, Northern Ireland's public aquarium and seal sanctuary. In 2006, more than 300,000 people visited those attractions, two of which are in the Strangford constituency. The Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland continue to work together to organise press trips to those attractions, thus ensuring that the area remains on the radar of local and international journalists and obtains positive coverage across the world. The house and gardens at Mount Stewart, near Greyabbey, have featured prominently in Tourism Ireland's global-destination marketing campaign. I understand that Tourism Ireland has also undertaken an initiative in the market in Great Britain to encourage visitors to come here with their cars.

I have listened carefully to what some Members — particularly Ms McIlveen — said about Tourism Ireland. I am absolutely determined that Northern Ireland's image be promoted as effectively as possible, so that we can secure the best possible value for money from our investment in tourism. My Department will actively examine that. As Members have pointed out, the division of those promotions has been subject to the institutional legacies of previous arrangements. I am determined to address the dip in the number of tourists and visitors who come to Northern Ireland from Great Britain.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has said, rightly, that Strangford is the jewel in the crown, and some Members have raised issues that must be addressed. Does the Minister agree that the Ulster-Scots culture should be exploited and, indeed, enhanced? Every year, 250,000 visitors come from Scotland, and Ulster-Scots trails could be enhanced to entice visitors to Strangford. As well as the beauty of Strangford Lough, the culture and history of the place are attractions.

Country sports could also be exploited. Last year, American tourists spent £50,000 in the Ards Borough Council area during the two-day Ballywalter game fair. The potential of that event should be exploited, along with the attractions of the Battletown Gallery and the Eden Pottery Centre.

Mr Dodds: I congratulate the hon Member for managing to compress a speech into an intervention. However, it is fair that all Members who wished to speak have been able to contribute to the debate, even though we are constrained by time. The points that the hon Member has raised, such as Ulster-Scots culture, are important.

Some Members have mentioned the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which I attended, as did Michelle

McIlveen and others. We have seen the tremendous benefits of our participation in that event. It attracted over 1,500,000 visitors, and the tremendous programme of events at the festival focused on food, music, crafts and landscapes. The Ulster-Scots connection, particularly to the southern states of America, was very noticeable. The Strangford constituency featured prominently at that event, with an entire evening devoted to Ballywalter Park, with Lord and Lady Dunleath taking guests on a virtual tour of their home.

Northern Ireland's participation in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and the Strangford aspect of that event, will have a hugely positive impact on tourism here. Members have mentioned the five signature projects, one of which is the Christian Heritage/St Patrick project, and they have rightly pointed to the importance of the Christian heritage in the Strangford constituency and surrounding area.

7.30 pm

The main focus of that tourism signature project will be to increase visitor numbers and spending in Northern Ireland through the development and promotion of key Christian heritage sites.

One of the priorities is to develop the St Patrick and Christian heritage trail, which stretches from Armagh to Bangor. The trail passes through Downpatrick and links major Christian heritage sights along the way, including Inch Abbey and Saul, before travelling along the Ards Peninsula where it follows Strangford Lough, incorporating the impressive Cistercian abbey at Greyabbey on its way north. Signage for the trail will feature strongly throughout the constituency, with 15 signs in Newtownards, six in the Greyabbey area and 11 around Portaferry. That signature project has also attracted media familiarisation trips from across Europe and the United States.

The need to ensure that good accommodation is available and that there are good skills in the accommodation sector has been mentioned. There is excellent accommodation and hospitality in the Strangford constituency. Balloo House in Killinchy won the award for hospitality at the recent Northern Ireland tourism awards. The Portaferry Hotel and the Narrows offer excellent accommodation and cuisine, including a wide selection of local seafood. I sound like an advertisement for Strangford but it is right to put those things on record.

Hotels have been mentioned, and it is interesting and good to note that work has started on the Strangford Arms Hotel in Newtownards, with refurbishment work to be carried out, which will result in improved accessibility and the creation of an additional 20 en suite bedrooms. I note the point that Mr Hamilton made about grant assistance for hotels in the greater Belfast area. I will investigate that point, and I am

happy to take the points that he and others have made about that.

Mrs I Robinson: It would be remiss to forget that in the Castlereagh hills we have the La Mon House Hotel, which is currently expanding; several million pounds is being spent to provide additional bedrooms, a spa and a swimming pool.

Mr Dodds: Yes, that is an excellent point. The major boom in the provision of hotel bedrooms in the greater Belfast area is to be welcomed.

The need to ensure that events are organised that will draw in people was mentioned, and that is essential. Recently, I was at Royal County Down Golf Club, which hosted the Walker Cup between Great Britain and Ireland and the USA. Although that event did not happen in Strangford, it brought many people into the general locality, and Strangford will have benefited from the worldwide attention. I know from speaking to people there that they enjoyed their visit and saw all the attractions and the local area. There are also excellent courses in the Strangford constituency, such as Scrabo and Kirkistown Castle.

Last week we had the sixth festival of the Peninsula, which was organised by Ards Borough Council, who I am happy to congratulate in having presented once again a splendid variety of all that celebrates the folklore, music and literature of the area, which I am sure attracted a good number of visitors. There are many good things happening in Strangford. I congratulate Members for speaking so eloquently and well of their constituency.

I will pick up on a number of points that were raised by Members, although I will not have time to deal with all of them. The Tourist Board operates a tourism development scheme, which can support the development and expansion of tourist attractions such as Exploris. The council is, of course, free to explore that possibility.

The Tourist Board also has a victims-of-crime policy to ensure that tourists who are subjected to crime or antisocial behaviour are looked after and enjoy the rest of their stay in Northern Ireland. The antisocial behaviour agenda is wide: it not only covers tourism, but the general quality of life of the people of Northern Ireland. The Armagh and Down tourism partnership is currently undertaking a marine and coastal strategy for the area, which is almost complete and will include marine tourism opportunities for Strangford Lough. Any tourism initiative based in Strangford Lough will, of course, have to take careful account of the Lough's ecological and scientific importance.

Well done to everyone involved in promoting tourism in Strangford. I congratulate all the efforts that have been made, and I wish you well for the future.

Adjourned at 7.34 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 28 June 2007

TAXIS BILL (NIA 4/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Daithi McKay
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Bill Laverty	} Department of the Environment
Mrs Adele Watters	

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): Welcome, Mrs Adele Watters and Mr Bill Laverty, and thank you for attending today, for what, I think, is your fourth time.

Mrs Adele Watters (Department of the Environment): Yes, indeed it is.

The Chairperson: I also thank you for the concise way that the documentation has been presented to the Committee. It is very readable, which is useful when distilling the legislation into the pros and cons of what is to be achieved.

Mrs Watters: I thank the Chairperson and members for the opportunity to address the Committee as it starts its detailed scrutiny of the Taxis Bill. I proposed that we brief the Committee on the main provisions of the legislation, so a summary of the provisions has been provided for members.

However, before I outline the provisions and answer questions that members may have, it would be useful to mention a few key points that the Department had in mind when drafting instructions to the Office of Legislative Counsel in preparation for the Bill. Some of those points will pick up on themes that were mentioned by Alan Rehfish in his briefing earlier and will help members to understand why the legislation has been drafted in this way.

The first point concerns linkages in the licensing system and the licensing framework; the second concerns uniformity, but with flexibility; the third relates to the need for forward-looking legislation; the fourth relates to the range of sanctions that are available in the Bill, and the fifth and final point relates to fees. I will cover all of those quickly.

First, with regard to linkages in the licensing system, I will recap some of our previous briefings on the main problems in the taxi industry. One of those problems is the extent of illegal taxiing that is taking place — and a lot of it happens through taxi depots that engage unlicensed vehicles and drivers. Another problem is that there are too few accessible taxis, and there is also a lack of accountability for service standards, which, in practice, often results in poor customer service. The Department believes that the one key measure that will allow it to make substantial headway in addressing those problems is the introduction of operator licensing, and that is why powers to introduce operator licensing are a key aspect of the Bill.

Furthermore, the legislative framework recognises that to achieve the objectives of fewer instances of illegal taxiing, more accessible taxis and better customer standards, it is vital to establish taxi operators as legal entities and link them legally to the drivers that they engage and, separately, to the vehicles that they use.

It is also worth pointing out that the legislation contains no legal linkage, as such, between a taxi driver and the taxi vehicle that he or she drives. Although many taxis are owner-driven, that is not necessarily the case. The Department has no difficulty with the idea that someone — maybe a car dealer or taxi dealer — can own a taxi but allow it to be driven by someone else, or even by two people alternately. It is important to get those linkages in place, because the Bill does not comprise a series of completely unrelated parts. The provisions interlink like pieces of a jigsaw.

The Department is seeking to achieve uniformity across the licensing system. The Bill provides for a one-tier licensing system across Northern Ireland; the same basic requirements for operators, regardless of the size of their operations; the same basic rules for drivers, regardless of the types of taxis that they drive; and the same basic requirements for vehicles, at least for those providing normal, non-specialist accessible and non-accessible services.

It is also important that the legislation enables the Department to provide flexibility where needed — through measures that can be applied differently, according to circumstances and cases, or by way of exemptions. For example, clause 18 requires all taxis to have taximeters, but it also gives the Department the

power to make regulations establishing exemptions to that rule.

Another example of the legislation's flexibility is that it gives the Department the power to require all operators to provide a certain percentage of accessible vehicles. However, the conditions, and, therefore, the percentage of accessible vehicles required could differ depending on the size of a taxi operator's fleet. For example, the figure could be 10% for a large fleet but 100% for an operator who has only one vehicle.

Clause 54 provides further flexibility. It permits the Department, where it deems it appropriate, to apply regulations made under the Bill to a specific area or areas rather than to Northern Ireland as a whole. The Bill has been developed on the premise of providing a one-tier system. However, it contains a great deal of flexibility to allow the Department to vary those basic rules. For example, clause 54 enables the Department to retain the two-tier system in Belfast, if it considers that to be appropriate.

The Bill must be forward looking. The Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, under which taxis are currently regulated, is over 25 years old. The Taxis Bill may not have to last quite as long as that before, in due course, it is also replaced. However, we should anticipate that it will provide the licensing framework for the next 10 to 15 years. The Bill must be capable of anticipating developments that are on the horizon but whose impact is not fully known and for which the Department is not necessarily thinking actively about the development of policies.

The Department has included in the Bill matters on which it does not necessarily intend to act. They include: restrictions on age; the ability to regulate for taxi marshals; and provision for in-car security equipment, such as CCTV, which is not used in Northern Ireland but is installed in some taxis in GB. The Department at least wants the powers to regulate that. The increase in the number of applications for taxi-driver licences from people from the rest of the EU is also an issue, and the legislation must be flexible to enable the Department to deal with it.

A range of sanctions must be put in place. To an effective regulator, prosecution should be, if not quite the last resort, certainly not its first resort. Enormous importance should be attached to education, persuasion, warning letters, the potential for civil penalties and enforcement notices. Next should come criminal penalties, and the final stage should be the suspension and revocation of licences. That is why the Bill contains a broad range of sanctions. It is important that all those are available to the regulators, who must use them effectively to target the main areas of risk.

A fundamental tenet of licensing systems, such as taxi licensing, is that they should, as far as possible, be

run on a full cost-recovery basis. The cost of the licensing service should be met through the income generated from fees. Typically, the powers to charge fees must appear in primary legislation and must be specific. Without a clear primary power to charge a fee, regulations on fees cannot be made. A prime example of that, which has caused difficulty for the Department, relates to the introduction of taxi plates in 2004.

Although the Department took the policy decision to introduce taxi licence plates, it does not have the power to charge a fee for issuing them. Therefore, the costs of producing and issuing the plates had to be rolled into that for the PSV test. Ideally, the Department should be able to charge for all items that need to be produced as part of the licensing system.

In addition, the Department needs to be able to charge for the services that it provides, including the work involved in processing applications that may end up being rejected. At the moment, if the Department processes a driver's application, which, for some reason, is rejected, the fee has to be returned to the unsuccessful applicant. There is no opportunity for the Department to state that because it has completed its work, it will hold on to the fee.

The fees issue is not all one-way traffic. The Department is conscious that it does not have the powers to refund or remit fees in cases where, for example, a person has booked a PSV test — the fee for which includes the cost of the taxi licence plates — but finds that he or she cannot attend the appointment. The fee would be lost, and the applicant would have to pay a second fee for a subsequent test. In effect, drivers can pay twice for one set of plates, which means that quite a significant amount of money is involved.

Many people in the taxi industry say that the Department is mostly interested in fees. Therefore, the Department must ensure that every aspect of the fees issue is covered in the legislation.

The Committee will be glad to know that I will not be going through all the briefing material that has been provided. The Bill comprises six parts, with 58 clauses and three schedules. It is a significant piece of legislation.

Part 1 deals with the regulation of taxi operators. It introduces the requirement for a taxi operator to apply for, and obtain, a taxi operator's licence, and imposes duties on licensed operators. It also introduces requirements and duties relating to the operation of taxi services at separate fares.

Part 2 of the Bill deals with the regulation of vehicles used to provide taxi services. It includes more flexible and extensive powers for the Department to set appropriate suitability requirements for vehicles, as regards their type, size and design. Part 2 also gives the Department powers to set the maximum rates and fares

that can be charged for the hire of a taxi, and to require all taxis to have taximeters and receipt printers.

Part 3 of the Bill deals with the regulation of taxi drivers. In particular, it amends existing legislation by reducing the period of a taxi-driver licence from five years to three years, bringing it into line with taxi-driver repute checks, which are repeated every three years.

Part 4 of the Bill contains general provisions for the licences that can be applied for, and includes provisions relating to fees, applications, suspensions, revocations, curtailments and appeals.

Part 5 of the Bill makes provision for enforcement. It gives the police and the Department powers to stop, search and seize vehicles believed to be taxiing illegally, and to inspect premises, under warrant, where there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that a person is operating an unlicensed taxi service.

Part 6 provides for a number of general issues relating to the operation of the Bill, including sharing information, payment of grants and the provision of training.

The Bill contains three schedules. Schedules 2 and 3 deal with minor and consequential amendments, and repeals. Schedule 1 will probably be of most interest, as it lists the offences and penalties that will be included under the Bill. The most serious licensing offences — all of which, on conviction, will attract a maximum fine of £5,000 — include: driving a taxi without a taxi-driver licence; operating a taxi service without an operator's licence; a taxi operator's using unlicensed vehicles or drivers; and using a taxi, or permitting a taxi to be used, without a taxi licence.

That completes a quick overview aimed at familiarising members with some of the detail of the Bill. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I am sure that many questions will emerge when the Committee's consultation begins. Do members wish to ask any questions either on Adele Watters's briefing or on the information that Alan Rehfishch from Research and Library Services provided earlier?

Mr Weir: Alan Rehfishch mentioned the financial elements of the legislation. Although the Bill is enabling legislation, one of the aims of the taxi-licensing system is full cost recovery. How will the cost of enforcing the legislation — such as the checking of licences — be worked out? Are there costings for that, and how will those costs be met?

Mrs Watters: Currently, £20 of the PSV licence fee goes towards funding enforcement. Further funding for enforcement comes directly from the Department.

Mr Bill Lavery (Department of the Environment): The Driver and Vehicle Agency's

enforcement team comprises 21 officers. Of those 21, four officers deal with taxi-related matters. The full enforcement team deals with road freight, bus licensing and taxi licensing and, as Adele said, funding for its work comes mainly from the Department.

Mr Weir: Presumably, the intention is to expand that team? A much stronger framework, with regulations and a fee structure, will require much greater enforcement.

Mrs Watters: Yes, it will. However, some of that enforcement will be supported by the IT systems that are already in place. We will have much more and better information on who is licensed, whose licences have been renewed, and what is going on in general. Consequently, we will be able to make better use of that information.

Current taxi legislation is drafted in such a way that the Department has powers and sanctions to deal with those in the taxi industry who are regulated. Most legislative power is directed at the prosecution of offenders, which is very resource intensive. The intention is that the new legislation will provide a range of sanctions that could be used before the prosecution stage is reached, which would mean that enforcement officers would not necessarily need to be out on the roads.

Mr Weir: It was mentioned that the more serious offences would, ultimately, attract a maximum fine of £5,000. Is there any provision for the revocation of licences in the event of prosecutions for serious offences? For example, if a taxi operator were to employ unlicensed cash-in-hand drivers, will the legislation provide for the ultimate sanction of revoking that operator's licence? My thinking behind that is that in the bar trade, if a publican is responsible for a number of serious breaches, his or her liquor licence can be revoked. Will the Taxis Bill provide for similar sanctions for taxi operators?

Mr Lavery: Yes. The legislation provides powers to suspend, revoke or curtail an operator's licence. Curtailing an operator's licence would reduce the number of vehicles that his or her company could operate. Repeated convictions could affect an operator's reputation and fitness to hold a licence, and, therefore, could justify the revocation of his or her operator's licence.

Mr Armstrong: If a driver is unable to keep a PSV test appointment, he or she must still pay for a licence. How much does it cost the Department to supply a licence?

Mrs Watters: Is the question whether the component costs of a PSV test can be separated out?

Mr Armstrong: Yes. If a driver is unable to keep a PSV test appointment, he or she cannot claim the

licence cost back. Is there a separate cost for the supply of a licence?

Mr Lavery: The Driver and Vehicle Agency, which is responsible for the testing of vehicles, calculates the cost of the test.

Mr Armstrong: Yes. There is a cost for the PSV test. However, the Department charges applicants for supplying licences, even if they were unable to attend their PSV test appointments. In other words, are there separate costs for PSV tests and for supplying licences?

Mr Lavery: Is that a reference to the administrative cost of issuing licences?

Mrs Watters: There is a separate administrative cost.

Mr Lavery: The PSV test fee comprises several components: the cost of the taxi licence plates; the cost of administration; and the cost of the test.

Mr Armstrong: Is it correct to say that the Driver and Vehicle Agency does not refund the licence part of the application fee if a driver is unable to keep a test appointment?

Mrs Watters: The Department does not currently have the power to make such a refund.

Mr Armstrong: Should that issue not be examined?

Mrs Watters: In cases such as that, the Department wants the legislation to give the Driver and Vehicle Agency the power to refund the licence part of the fee. That is right and fair, and we should be able to do that.

Mr Armstrong: Will the Department look into that matter?

Mrs Watters: Absolutely.

Mr Boylan: In the debate on the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill on 26 June 2007, my party broadly supported a one-tier system for taxi licensing. The Department's position appears to be that a one-tier system should apply across the board, and the taxi industry has voiced some concerns about that. Will you clarify that situation?

Mrs Watters: The Bill paves the way for a move to a one-tier system across Northern Ireland. However, when the Bill was sent out for consultation, we considered the impact that responses in favour of retaining the two-tier system in Belfast would have on the legislation. Consequently, clause 54 of the Taxis Bill gives the Department the flexibility to apply certain rules and regulations to different areas of Northern Ireland.

Although the Department's clear intention is that there should be a one-tier system, the Bill does not close the door entirely on the idea of a two-tier system. It is not that we are in two minds about that — we support the idea of a one-tier system, but we are also saying that that is not the end of the matter.

Mr Boylan: There are many taxi operators in rural areas where a one-tier system would not be suitable. It would be unfair, for example, to demand that all taxi firms should have disabled-accessible vehicles.

Mrs Watters: That is not the intention of the legislation.

Mr Boylan: There are other concerns about a one-tier system, but I wanted clarification on that specific point.

Mrs Watters: No one wants a fully disabled-accessible taxi fleet — not even people with disabilities.

Mr McKay: If a one-tier system is introduced in Belfast, where all taxis licensed as Belfast public hire are already wheelchair accessible, only those taxis will provide disabled access, with the rest not having to meet that requirement. Would that system be compatible with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995? Will an equality impact assessment be carried out?

Mrs Watters: An equality impact assessment has been carried out. It concluded that if the number of accessible taxis could be increased, and the availability of accessible taxis improved throughout Northern Ireland, a one-tier system would be acceptable. If there were accessible taxis that, for example, did not work out of depots with dispatch facilities and, therefore, could not be booked by telephone, it would restrict disabled people's ability to avail of them.

The Department believes that the Taxis Bill will have a positive impact on disabled people. It has worked closely with the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) to establish whether the Bill conflicts with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Imtac is sponsored by the Department for Regional Development and is the main adviser to Government in Northern Ireland on accessibility and transport for people with disabilities. Certainly, it takes the view that there is no conflict between the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Taxis Bill's ability to regulate for accessible taxis.

Mr Lavery: I should point out that the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has been a major consideration throughout the taxi review. By virtue of existing regulations, taxis that are licensed for public hire in Belfast must be accessible. There is a shortcoming in the number of accessible taxis in rural areas. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 gives UK territorial Departments powers to prescribe accessibility for taxis that are available for immediate — in other words, public — hire. The Department has been conscious of that from the start.

Mr McKay: Has consideration been given to an increase in the number of taxi ranks, particularly in Belfast?

Mrs Watters: Practical responsibility for the provision of taxi ranks is a traffic-management issue, which is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development. However, through its work with the taxi industry and colleagues in the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment is aware that moves are already afoot to increase the number of taxi ranks in Belfast. The sub-regional transport plan has, I understand, been published. It refers to consideration of the provision of taxi ranks in towns and cities outside Belfast. That is a pressing issue. There are several towns of considerable size where ranks are not provided.

Mr I McCrea: During the Committee's earlier briefing, Mr Rehfish mentioned the cost implications of taximeters. There is also the issue of taxi divers and operators who want to bring their vehicles up to disabled-accessible standards. That has major cost implications — perhaps thousands of pounds, rather than a few hundred.

Part 6 of the Bill refers to "Payment of grants". Could any specific issues arise from that? Obviously, it is up to the Department of Finance and Personnel to produce any extra money that is required. Does the Department envisage that grants would be made available to improve accessibility or, indeed, for the introduction of taximeters, given that fitting them would lead drivers and operators to incur costs?

Mrs Watters: The Department believes that to obtain completeness, and for the Bill to be forward-looking, it would have been remiss to exclude the provision of a grant-making power. Therefore, the legal provision is being included in the Taxis Bill. However, no money is available, and there are no proposals to introduce grants.

With the Taxis Bill, the Department has made it clear that it wants to raise the standard of provision for consumers. It is inevitable that that will involve some costs: there will be one-off costs relating to taximeters and receipt printers, and more significant costs from vehicle purchasing. The Department has not indicated what the vehicle specification for accessible taxis will be. It is a complex area, and we are conscious of not being overly prescriptive about accessible taxis. Much has been said about accessible taxis costing between £30,000 and £35,000, but those would be top-of-the-range purpose-built taxis. It is important that there is a range of accessible taxis and a range of prices.

The Chairperson: I am conscious that the potential costs to the industry, compared to the incomes of taxi drivers and operators, have become a feature of the debate on the Bill. I would like to see a breakdown of the different tariffs that have been proposed and I would like to be able to compare them with existing tariffs.

Costs associated with taximeters and accessible vehicles have been mentioned, although no vehicle specifications have been recommended. I presume that the associated costs have been considered. The Committee would find such figures useful during its deliberations, as this issue will inevitably arise. Projected costs must have been calculated at some point.

Mrs Watters: Some costs are easier to calculate than others, and I am referring to compliance costs. Figures for taximeters and receipt printers would be relatively easy to produce. However, the cost of accessible vehicles, or the potential cost of adapting vehicles to make them accessible, would be more complicated, and the Department would not have details on those items.

The Chairperson: It seems to me that the Department is not laying down any specifications as regards accessible vehicles. Does the Department anticipate introducing specifications through, for example, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995?

Provision for specifications has been left very loose. There are two ways that that could be resolved. First, the Department could make it easier for taxi drivers to buy accessible vehicles that will meet the required specifications. Secondly, in the future, another agency could say that those specifications are not up to standard and could introduce new provisions for higher specifications.

Mr Lavery: The Bill gives the Department the power to prescribe the accessibility requirements for taxis, as does the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Department envisages that the Taxis Bill will enable it to prescribe accessibility requirements for Northern Ireland. We will take notice of any regulations that may be made in GB under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

The Chairperson: Are you satisfied that the Bill's provisions for vehicle specifications are entirely compatible with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and any other regulatory requirements?

Mrs Watters: If the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires that regulations be made, the Department for Transport is responsible for them for England and Wales and the Scottish Executive are responsible for them for Scotland.

Mr Lavery: The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 gives the UK territorial Governments powers to make regulations.

Mrs Watters: The Department for Transport does not make UK-wide taxi-accessibility regulations.

The Chairperson: I am trying to ascertain which regulations apply here, other than the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Are you sure that the

flexibility that the Bill contains on vehicle specifications meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and any other statutory requirements?

Mrs Watters: We are.

Mr Boylan: I had a question about designated areas, but it was covered in the reply to Daithí McKay.

Mrs Watters: Designated areas are a slightly different concept in the legislation. Taxi ranks or stands might be situated in designated areas, and disabled access to taxis in those areas might be required. The term “designated areas” is designed to bring together several matters. We have in mind key instances in which taxis should be accessible to disabled people who wish to make connections with other forms of transport, such as at airports, train stations or ferry terminals. A great deal of money has been spent to ensure that ferries, trains and other forms of public transport are accessible to people with disabilities; however, if those people cannot manage that final leg home, they may not set out on the big journey at all.

The Chairperson: Can you provide the Committee with a list of any associated costs that may be incurred by the Department of the Environment or the taxi industry?

Mrs Watters: When we become aware of costs, we will provide them to the Committee. Do you also require information about income that will be generated by fees? It will be for the Driver and Vehicle Agency to collate such information, but we will press for it.

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McKay: Taxi drivers have reported that, following a PSV test, it can take the Department up to 10 days to issue a taxi vehicle licence — in other words, the taxi licence plates. That results in the loss of work and money. Have you considered providing drivers with some form of disc to cover those 10 days and to prevent their being out of pocket during that period?

Mr Lavery: The taxi review team is conscious that the time between the PSV test’s taking place and the issuing of taxi licence plates has been a major area of complaint from taxi drivers. We will aim to streamline those procedures when we review taxi vehicle regulations. There will probably be a resultant cost, but the solution to the problem is for taxi licence plates to be issued at the point of testing.

Previously, a disc was used to identify a licensed taxi. However, the disc was indiscernible to the travelling public. That was one of the reasons for the introduction of the taxi-plating system. I appreciate that the delay between the time of the test and the issuing of plates is a problem.

Mr McKay: When will the review of taxi vehicle regulations take place?

Mr Lavery: The Taxis Bill will give the Department enabling powers to make new taxi vehicle regulations. The current PSV requirements will be reviewed and enhanced. I would like to believe that the review will take place sooner rather than later, possibly within 18 months of the new Bill’s being enacted.

The Chairperson: On a final note, could the Committee have sight of the early draft of the regulations flowing from the Bill?

Mrs Watters: The Department does not have any early drafts of regulations.

The Chairperson: Could they be made available to the Committee when the Department has them?

Mrs Watters: Of course, but it will be some time before early drafts of regulations are available. The Department’s main focus is on the primary legislation, but, as the policy is being developed in those regulatory areas, we are happy to work with the Committee. The Department does not envisage that the Committee will first hear about those regulations when it sees the secondary legislation.

The Chairperson: I thank the departmental representatives for their time; does any other Committee member want to add anything?

Mr Boylan: After these discussions, taking a taxi has a whole new meaning for me. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Thank you for your time today.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Thursday 28 June 2007

HEALTH (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL (NIA 2/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister

Witnesses:

Mr Raymond Anderson	}	Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland
Mr Raymond Blaney		
Dr Kate McClelland		
Ms Stella Cunningham	}	Southern Health and Social Services Council
Ms Maggie Reilly		
Mr John Farrell	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mr Robert Kirkwood		

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): The departmental officials attending today's Committee meeting are Mr John Farrell, an assistant director of the primary and community care directorate, and Mr Robert Kirkwood, from the departmental Bill team. They are on hand to offer advice.

I welcome the representatives of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, who are here to give evidence. Mr Raymond Anderson is president of the society, and Mr Raymond Blaney is its director. Dr Kate McClelland is a member of the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (CHRE) and is a representative of the Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union (PGEU). I would not like to try to say that mouthful if I had a drink on me.

I ask you to deal specifically with the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, and the clauses in the Bill that you would like to see amended, if any. You have 10 minutes to make your presentation, and then we will have approximately 30 minutes for a question and answer session.

Mr Raymond Blaney (Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland): Thank you for saving me from making the introductions, especially for the Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union. The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland is grateful for the opportunity to make a presentation and give evidence to the Committee today.

The society is the regulatory and professional body for pharmacists and pharmacies in Northern Ireland. We currently host a register of 1,898 pharmacists and 529 pharmacies.

Although pharmacists are not numerous in Northern Ireland, the discipline is not small in reputation. Queen's University is regarded worldwide as one of the top universities for pharmacy education. Its degree course has been provided since 1929, which makes it one of the oldest courses in the United Kingdom.

Almac Group Ltd, which was established in 2001 and is based in Craigavon, bought over Galen Holdings plc in 2004. It is now a \$600 million company, employing almost 2,000 people across the US and Europe. Almac offers an unparalleled range of pharmaceutical services on a global scale.

Northern Pharmacies Ltd was established in response to the need to provide pharmacy services in areas that did not generate natural business opportunities. Established in 1968 to serve Craigavon, it now has three further pharmacies in Greyabbey, Poyntzpass and Cullyhanna, and its turnover in 2006 was about £2.6 million. Profits are either reinvested into the organisation or it divests itself of them through its charitable organisation, which helps to promote pharmacy practice and education, supporting the advancement of the profession.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland has existed since 1925, and, over that period, it has established itself firmly as the lead regulatory body for the profession. Public safety is never compromised when considering the regulation of the profession. It demonstrates its commitment to the public by operating an independent statutory committee structure and an independent inspectorate. It is the only nation-specific healthcare regulator and the only regulatory body to have an independent inspectorate regime.

The society, like the profession, is undergoing a period of change. The legislation under which it was established, The Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, is no longer appropriate for the profession and the practices that we regulate today. The recent

publication of the Government White Paper, 'Trust, Assurance and Safety — The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century', is the culmination of the work of Foster and Donaldson in response to the Shipman, Kennedy, Kerr/Haslam, Ayling and Neale Inquiries. All recognised the need for regulatory bodies to have the necessary and appropriate structures in place to adapt to modern healthcare practices to ensure the confident delivery of patient safety.

Although the recommendation is, ultimately, that the regulatory and professional representation rules must be split, the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland acknowledges that this is an ideological position rather than one evidenced in fact. The Harold Shipman case occurred despite the separated functions, and Dame Janet Smith's report praised the independent inspectorate system while acknowledging that the system was only sustainable in a region of the size of Northern Ireland.

The current legislation restricts the society's role in defining the structure and make-up of the society's council; namely, by excluding lay representation. It defines the register of pharmacists as only practising pharmacists, not allowing for those who are non-practising or retired. The range of sanctions that is available to the council is also restricted, because it can only recommend striking off or retaining pharmacists on the register. Remaining outwith our legislated remit are the rehabilitation of professionals and support; the interim measures of supervision and support; continuing professional development; and registration of technicians.

The Pharmacists and Pharmacy Technicians Order 2007 has enabled the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB) to advance its powers. It has provided a legislated arrangement that, arguably, provides greater patient protection in Great Britain than we enjoy in Northern Ireland. For example, if the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland made a direction to remove a pharmacist from the register, that person would still be entitled to practise for up to a further three months, allowing them the right to appeal the statutory committee's decision. However, in Great Britain, if appropriate, the individual may be instructed that he or she may not practise during that period. The 2007 Order does not remove their right of appeal.

The regulatory environment is changing, and the society is ready for the challenge. It has begun the process of reforming its organisation, has participated fully in Lord Carter's working group and continues to work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Health in Great Britain to establish the most effective regulatory solution for Northern Ireland.

The society has set up its own working groups to focus on the areas of governance, legislation, functions, registration and education in Northern Ireland. A one-size-fits-all solution to UK-wide healthcare regulation would not necessarily be the most appropriate route to go down. It is important to take into consideration the differences between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in order to ensure that a Londoncentric position is not foisted on Northern Ireland's patients. It is essential that those differences are recognised and, where appropriate, protected.

Northern Ireland is the only UK nation with an EU land border. The relationship with the Republic is important from a regulatory and employment perspective. Without a clear and agreed regime in place for cross-border treatment and drug control, the Province could be more exposed than any other UK nation. Northern Ireland's pharmacies have a footfall of 123,000 patients daily. Nearly 29 million prescriptions were dispensed in 2006. Through initiatives such as the minor ailment scheme, the management of prescribed medicines and chronic conditions, and the support offered to guide patients towards healthier lifestyle choices — smoking-cessation clinics, and so on — community pharmacy is becoming increasingly focal.

Northern Ireland has a ratio of 61:39 independent to multiple pharmacies compared with the GB ratio of 52:48. The nature of the pharmacy as part of the community is an essential factor that makes Northern Ireland's pharmacies so successful across all sectors: specialist; hospital; academia; industry; and community. Pharmacists tend to offer the last opportunity in the dispensing chain to correct an error or to hear about patients' concerns. Often, it is during a one-to-one conversation between a patient and his or her pharmacist that a side effect is discussed or a worry is shared that can significantly impact on the patient's treatment. That is not to say that errors do not occur; however, in considering risk management, the society has expressed its concerns about the proposal to allow remote pharmacy supervision.

In the society's opinion, the question is about the need to balance the desire to provide greater clinical care in the community with the need to manage the risk of increased exposure to dispensing errors. Those issues can be mitigated to a degree by improving and raising standards and processes in pharmacies. In order to implement that, the society is working closely with the Department, to which it has submitted a business plan for the introduction of standards measurement across community pharmacy, the concept of which the society intends to roll out to hospitals.

A further step would be to ensure that all pharmacies have two pharmacists in the practice, that a co-operative arrangement be introduced among

local pharmacies or simply that a locum be employed to cover the time when clinical practice means that a pharmacist will be off the premises.

The profession welcomes the fact that the Government have requested an increasing breadth of services from it in order to ease the pressure on the Health Service. However, that must be done in a considered and supportive way that will not compromise patients' safety. The society believes fundamentally that the introduction of the "absent pharmacist" could be abused in such a manner that it would not achieve the intended aims; rather, patients could suffer as a result.

The Department undertook a survey in 2006 on public attitudes to health and social services in Northern Ireland. The results for pharmacies spoke volumes: 99% of patients were satisfied with pharmacy services; 96% were satisfied with the general attitude of pharmacists; and 18% of service users called for better access to services. The ambition must be to continue to achieve that level of satisfaction and to consider how the needs of the 18% of patients who require greater access can be better satisfied. Would that be achieved by the introduction of remote supervision? It may appeal to the larger corporate organisations that wish to centralise their superintendent- or responsible-pharmacist role across the UK. However, would that satisfy corporate efficiency goals or effective patient-treatment objectives?

As for increasing a health and social services boards' remit for sanctions, we understand the premise for that, but we do not consider it necessary for a board to go beyond the remit of its employer disciplinary systems.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland holds a central register of pharmacists, and a statutory committee process is in place. It is important for patients and professionals that the Government support the regulatory bodies that statutorily provide a service rather than look elsewhere to bolster regulatory practice.

We urge the Committee to consider the legislative powers that are granted to the society as a primary objective, and to support the tasking of the boards to work with the society to reflect its standards in their disciplinary procedures. That approach would ensure clarity for patients and professionals alike rather than duplicate what is already established or potentially create a situation in which two professional disciplinary systems that are neither compatible nor consistent are in place.

A health and social services board could, for example, instruct that a person be suspended or removed from its list. The statutory committee could determine that an issue does not warrant removal from the register but may agree that a person should be suspended. However, our powers do not allow for that. Therefore a pharmacist

who is considered unemployable by a board could be retained on the society's register. As a result, that person would have extremely restricted employment opportunities. That dilemma is not far-fetched, and has been experienced by other healthcare regulators. That is not helpful to the profession, the patients or the public purse.

In order to address regulatory processes, we must deal with the issues that the professional regulatory body has been raising. Another layer of regulation must not be introduced. When the regulatory issue arose in Great Britain, the Better Regulation Task Force advised that another layer of regulation should not be adopted. We ask the Committee to consider what is best for patient care: a strong regulatory body with appropriate legislative powers, or an additional layer of regulation that could add confusion.

The society, which has been in existence for more than 80 years, recognises the demand for reform and broadly welcomes the changes that are recommended in the White Paper. We have a difference of opinion about the implementation of a solution across the UK, and ask for the Committee's support to ensure that everything possible has been done to provide the best solution for patient safety and care in Northern Ireland.

Devolution provides us with the opportunity to make our own determinations, and to focus on and address local issues. As the specific regulator for pharmacy in Northern Ireland, the society requests that the Committee recommend that legislative limitations and inadequacies be addressed as a priority in order to provide the optimal regulatory provision in Northern Ireland.

Representatives of the Department — Mr David Bingham, Dr Norman Morrow and Ms Joyce Cairns — are assisting with that process. We urge the Committee to request that addressing legislative limitations and inadequacies be made a priority so that we can be confident that the best solution is in place for patients and the profession.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr Blaney. How many pharmacists have lost their livelihoods since the society was established?

Mr Blaney: On average, there are two or three statutory committee hearings in Northern Ireland per annum. I estimate that an average of 75% of pharmacists who are called before the committee remain on the register. I do not have accurate figures with me.

The Chairperson: How do you respond to the accusation — I am playing devil's advocate — that the society is looking after its own fiefdom, and does not want others involved in overseeing the workings of pharmacists?

Mr Blaney: There are two responses to that. First, I am the director of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, but I am not a pharmacist. The society is demonstrating that it wants to change.

In dealing with current legal limitations, we try to think outside the box to encourage the involvement of lay members.

Secondly, a regulator cannot operate effectively without there being a connection with the professional body that it is attempting regulate. If there is no such connection, regulation from afar will not necessarily be effective or relevant.

Our primary objective is not to protect the profession but to ensure patient safety. That is done by representing the profession, promoting better standards, and ensuring that the requisite support exists to allow the optimal delivery of services that members want for patients. Pharmacists do not enter the profession without adhering to those core principles. If they did not hold to those principles, they would probably end up before the statutory committee.

Dr Deeny: Thank you, Raymonds and Kate. We had three Brians before us last week, and now we have two Raymonds.

As a health professional, I have an interest in this matter. Moreover, my father was an old-time pharmacist who worked closely with the community in Downpatrick for years.

Earlier this week, I read in a GPs' magazine that health professionals seem to spend more time in seminars, learning how to administer the Health Service, than working with patients, so I take your point that new measures may simply be another layer of bureaucracy to ensure safety. With that in mind, but conscious that patient safety is paramount and that balanced decisions are required because one is dealing with someone's livelihood and reputation, you mentioned that you could strike members off or retain them. That seems to be a case of one extreme or the other. What options can you suggest to achieve a balance?

Furthermore, having worked as a GP in primary care for well over 20 years, and with pharmacy in my blood, I ask what the future holds for pharmacists. The Chairperson mentioned that new hospital wards resemble those in the US. Whether our hospitals wards are copying the US model, I do not know. I have been to the US a few times, and I like the way that pharmacists take responsibility for advice that can be dealt with at their level, rather than having to organise appointments with GPs or trips to hospitals. Do you see such practices as part of the future? If the concept of administration of risk is imposed on Northern Ireland as part of a UK-wide extra layer of bureaucracy, will the community care that I witnessed while growing up be lost, and will community

pharmacies continue to play a proactive role alongside GPs and primary healthcare professionals?

Mr Raymond Anderson (Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland): To the comments that Raymond Blaney and the Chairperson have made, I would add that the independent inspectorate separates —

The Chairperson: We are having difficulty hearing you, Mr Anderson. Will you speak up a wee bit?

Mr Anderson: There is an independent inspectorate that does not sit within the purview of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. If pharmacists engage in malpractice, the inspectorate, which is based in the DHSSPS, will carry out an inspection. The profession is separate from that process, and it is the inspectorate that would bring any cases before our statutory committee. Inspections and the regulatory function of the society are separate, and the existence of the independent inspectorate should dispel any sense that we protect ourselves. During the Shipman Inquiry, the inspectorate was acclaimed by Dame Janet Smith as a good system for regulating professionals.

In response to Dr Deeny's question, my answer is that the society is aware that the sanctions available to it are limited. The organisation is in discussion with the Department about that. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain has introduced the section 60 Order — The Pharmacists and Pharmacy Technicians Order 2007 — which is known as such because it was made in exercise of the powers conferred by section 60 of the Health Act 1999, and has increased its range of sanctions. Those sanctions can include suspension, but they may also involve retraining, supervised training, revalidation or time off the register in which pharmacists must prove their fitness to be placed back on it. Those sanctions are not available to us yet, but we want to see them introduced.

However, when considering whether we should adopt the UK-wide regulation process, it must be remembered that we have a land border with another EU country. That may lead to the movement of drugs, pharmacists and prescriptions across the border daily. Pharmacists here are not allowed to dispense any prescriptions that have not been prescribed by a general practitioner who is on the General Medical Council (GMC) list. The EU has taken a case to the Cabinet Office and to the UK Government. That case is being challenged in the European Court of Justice (ECJ). If the policy were to be changed, it would open up the movement of prescriptions across the border between North and South. Pharmacists could be faced with regulating and managing that daily, as could patients who move from the South to the North. Ways must be found to regulate that so that patients are not inconvenienced. That daily movement of prescriptions is not as important a consideration for England,

Scotland and Wales who do not have a land border with another EU country.

Mr Blaney: Our society is not regarded as a supportive professional regulatory body, because the sanctions available to it only allow the polar-opposite positions of either removing pharmacists from the register or allowing them to remain on it. Pharmacists will not turn to the regulator to ask for help if the only options open to them are to be struck off or reprimanded. The society's role must change from one of negative regulation to one of positive regulation. It is important to consider how the range of sanctions is constructed, but we must also introduce a supporting framework to advance the profession.

Mr Gallagher: Raymond Anderson made the point about the problems that pharmacists who work close to the border face. I come from a border area, so I understand that regulations are needed that better reflect the fact that pharmacists work in areas close to the border and that their customers can come from either side of that border. Will you tell us again about your particular concerns about that?

Mr Anderson: An out-of-hours centre has been established in Castleblaney. That centre covers part of south Armagh. Prescriptions written in that area cannot be dispensed in the North of Ireland, because a general practitioner who is registered in the United Kingdom has not written them. The Cabinet Office is considering changes to the legislation, but if that legislative change goes through, prescriptions could be taken across the border and dispensed in pharmacies in the other jurisdiction. A pharmacist would then have to determine whether it was a legitimate prescription and, if the prescription was for schedule 2, 3 and 4 controlled drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and associated regulations, it would increase the chances of a pharmacist's deciding not to dispense the prescription because he or she was not sure whether the prescription was legal. Handwriting on prescriptions can easily be forged, and computers can also be used to forge prescriptions.

It can be hard to verify whether a prescription has been written by a GP or whether it is fraudulent. If we allow prescriptions to move across the border and be dispensed in both jurisdictions, pharmacists will have to be very vigilant about whether they are legitimate. That is one concern, although the movement of controlled drugs and the potential for controlled drug prescriptions to be dispensed across the border could pose a problem too.

Mr Gallagher: I hope that there will be a development of the out-of-hours GP services in border areas, although, as you are probably aware, a pilot scheme has been set up. Are you satisfied that those concerns will arise from the pilot studies that are under way?

Dr McClelland (Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland): The UK delegation is trying to get the Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union (PGEU) to change its name to the pharmacy group of the European Union, which would be so much easier; unfortunately, however, the German and French translations just do not go there. I am a member of the UK delegation, which, more often than not, forgets that the UK has a land border with another European country. The pilot schemes will show the way, one hopes, but let us start with pilot schemes. Let us take it slowly across the border.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain work closely together in Europe. The Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland has gone through huge regulatory changes, and it is now allowed all the derogations. All the problems with opening pharmacies and ownership have been swept away by the Southern Government, and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland is waiting to see what happens there. Article 63 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 and proposed new article 63AA of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill refer to an application being "necessary and desirable". Europe could sweep that away. The UK delegation would like to keep it in, but our Southern Irish friends have let it go.

However, because we are a group of small islands off Europe, we must learn to work across the border to provide for patients; healthcare in Malta, Luxemburg and other small countries crosses borders, and they have full patient mobility where their Governments fund it. Does that help?

Mr Gallagher: Yes. Thank you.

Mrs Hanna: You mentioned community pharmacies and told us that the breadth of services is a plus. Does the proposed legislation put that at risk? You also said that you do not like the pharmacy supervision proposals. Why is that? You said that one size does not fit all, which I accept. I am not saying that the proposals are good or otherwise, but could they be balanced in a way that would be acceptable? Should pharmaceutical professionals be included? Is the present system sufficiently independent?

Mr Anderson: I will address the first part of the question, which related to the risk to pharmacies and remote supervision. Regarding the latter, we are aware that some larger organisations are undertaking trials in which a pharmacist sits in a remote office and looks at a bank of screens. Therefore when patients go into a pharmacy, the pharmacist may not be there; instead, patients would use touch screens to take part in videoconferences with a pharmacist.

Mrs Hanna: Is that remote supervision?

Mr Anderson: Yes. Such a system could jeopardise the sustainability of pharmacies. It could downscale a pharmacy or remove the skills of the pharmacist from the pharmacy. If patients did not like remote supervision, they could go to a pharmacy where that service is not provided. However, patients might find that there is no longer a facility for them to go to a pharmacy with a minor ailment, or to discuss issues with the pharmacist relating to medicines or their side effects, or with matters that affect the family. Remote supervision risks losing personal contact.

Mr Blaney: If a patient has been taking the same medication for several months or has been given a repeat prescription, a pharmacist may intervene and ask why a treatment has not been successful; with remote supervision, that personal intervention may be lost.

Our fundamental questions about pharmacy supervision are whether the miscellaneous provisions realise the corporate goal of reducing costs for organisations, whether they upset existing one-to-one care, and whether they will improve patient care. That is a good example of our society not looking at professional ambition but at patient safety and treatment.

We are eager to ensure that a proper support network is in place and that expectations do not become so great that they dilute the community aspect of pharmacists' services.

Pharmacists welcome the clinical aspects of pharmacy — getting out into the community and working in GPs' surgeries. They welcome the minor ailment scheme, independent prescribing and opportunities to utilise the professional skills that they have been trained to provide.

We do not want to see a replication of the situation as regards GPs and nurses where, having been starved of an opportunity for so long, any opportunity would be grasped without ensuring that changes will not undermine quality of service. Consideration must be given to how the introduction of additional services and requirements can be supported.

As regards the White Paper, we have been fortunate. The Foster report recommended that the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland merge with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB). However, at that time, we were assured by Minister Burnham and Minister Goggins that no London-centric decision would be made and that Northern Ireland would have the opportunity to consider the future of its pharmacy regulation.

We set up working parties, but we have not taken a position on the matter yet because we wish to look at the opportunities that a UK-wide college for pharmacy could provide. However, we are concerned about the dilution of the regulatory function in Northern Ireland.

At present, we have sovereignty and legislative responsibility and, considering the matter from the perspective of the Northern Ireland patient, we must think long and hard before we cede that responsibility.

The society could be made more open, transparent and inclusive to patients, perhaps through lay representation. However, the legislation does not provide for that. The legislation has been in operation for more than 30 years, so we would push for a re-examination of the fundamental legislative framework that the regulatory body, which is empowered to provide sanctions and to regulate the profession, works to. If that could be changed, the Bill would enable the boards to reflect the requirements of the professional regulatory body.

Dr McClelland: The Council for Health Care Regulatory Excellence in London oversees all the regulators. However, at its inception in 2004–05, it saw no place for the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland.

That attitude softened following Dame Janet Smith's report. The view then was that, because of Northern Ireland's small population, its land border with another country and because it worked in a different way from the rest of the UK, pharmacy in Northern Ireland was one of the best regulated of the healthcare professions. However, the system was thought too resource-intensive to be duplicated. The chairperson of the Council for Health Care Regulatory Excellence asked me whether I thought that our local system for pharmacy regulation and inspection could be applied across the United Kingdom. I had to answer in the negative, because I thought it too resource-intensive.

If the present system is considered too resource-intensive, we must ask ourselves whether the Bill, with its provisions to set up another register and inspection regime in the health boards and the duplication that that would involve, would not be even more resource-intensive.

Mr Anderson: We have a high-quality system in which the inspectorate is separate from the organisation, and that is why it received acclaim from Dame Janet Smith. Dame Janet also considered the possibility of rolling out that system across the UK but felt that it was too resource-intensive. We must ask ourselves whether that is a good reason to throw away our system and change to one that might not be as effective or efficient.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your fine presentation; you have given the Committee food for thought. You will receive a copy of the report of our proceedings. The Committee would appreciate copies of any speaking notes that were used.

I welcome Ms Maggie Reilly, the Chief Officer of the Western Health and Social Services Council

and Ms Stella Cunningham, the Chief Officer of the Southern Health and Social Services Council. Please address specific provisions in the Bill and tell the Committee which clauses, if any, you would like to see amended.

Your presentation should last 10 minutes, and then it will be open to Committee members to ask questions. You are most welcome, and I look forward to hearing your presentation.

Ms Maggie Reilly (Western Health and Social Services Council): Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone. Many of you will be aware of the existence of the four health councils — one in each health board area — which were established in 1991. They are often called watchdog bodies for patients as they serve as a voice for them. Therefore the four health councils welcome the opportunity that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has given us to present our views on the provisions of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Our presentation is based on the views of council members across Northern Ireland and on our analysis of the concerns of the public and service users about the Bill. In particular, we will mention some of the issues that were raised directly with us as we supported people who were making complaints in the Health Service.

The Committee's invitation gives recognition to the health councils' role and we thank you for that. We intend to provide a much fuller response to all the Bill's provisions and amendments later. Ms Stella Cunningham will provide you with our views on general dental services, and I will follow that with our comments on the provisions regarding disqualification by the tribunal, after which you will want to ask questions.

Ms Stella Cunningham (Southern Health and Social Services Council): The four health councils are pleased to offer comments on the clauses in the Bill that deal with dental services. Dental services are a core part of National Health Service provision and are fundamental to the general health of our population. This is a matter that the health councils have inquired into regularly since our establishment in 1991. You have been provided with recent research by the southern council into patient experiences of general dental services, and you have also been supplied with a joint statement from the four councils highlighting what we believe to be the crucial issues from the patient's perspective.

I want to make three points this afternoon. Patients' aspirations are changing and dental work is increasingly seen as a fashion accessory; however, Northern Ireland still has the worst dental health record

in the UK, and we live with the political decision not to fluoridate the water supply.

First, we support the provisions of clause 2 for proposed new article 60A: access to NHS dentistry is at a critical point in Northern Ireland. If the new dental contract is not speedily resolved, the NHS will continue to leak dentists until the only option will be private treatment, and that could disadvantage vulnerable groups. In the southern area we conducted a survey of 68 dental practices in October 2006. At that time, 43% of practices in the southern area were registering NHS patients. When we updated the survey in May 2007, only 12 practices, or 21%, were still registering NHS patients. This means that it is virtually impossible to register with a dentist as an NHS patient in Newry and South Down, while in an area such as Dungannon there is extremely limited choice. That situation is replicated throughout Northern Ireland.

In the northern area only 27 practices, or 32%, now accept new NHS patients. There are no practices open in Carrickfergus, Cookstown or Magherafelt. Alongside the situation in Dungannon, we see that there is practically no capacity in the whole of the mid-Ulster area. In the western area there is no statutory out-of-hours dental provision; it has been left to dentists to provide that service. There is now no access to NHS dentists in Fermanagh or Omagh.

The health councils believe that there is a moral issue at stake: the public purse contributes to the training of dentists but does not gain full advantage from that contribution. Access to services also depends on where a patient lives.

Secondly, the health and social services councils welcome proposed new article 61, which the Bill will insert into the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, as it will allow health and social services boards to make such arrangements as they see fit to provide dental services, whether by employing salaried dentists or by making local arrangements with primary dental care practitioners. Such arrangements should be based on local need and should aim at ensuring maximum choice for service users in a way that does not lead to NHS provision being perceived as a second-class service.

There will not be a one-size-fits-all solution. The Northern Health and Social Services Board has sought to employ salaried dentists; the Southern Health and Social Services Board's preferred option is to enter into contracts with high-street dentists for specific NHS slots. Whatever local arrangements may be made, they must be sustainable in the long term and provide boards with the ability to influence the location of practices to ensure equity of provision.

Finally, on proposed new article 61A and proposed new schedule 15A that clause 2(2) and clause 4(3)

respectively will insert into the 1972 Order, the health and social services councils believe that the new contract should review dental charges. The present system is cumbersome for dentists, confusing for patients and does not reward health promotion activity. A simpler tariff of charges limited to basic dental care, including health promotion, could separate services that are required for good general dental health from cosmetic treatments. A charging system that allowed patients to retain their NHS entitlement, while paying for enhanced treatments that are not available on the NHS, would retain the principle behind an NHS dental service and meet the expectations of today's service users. We also suggest that a further group — people aged 65 and over — be added to the list at paragraph 1(1) of proposed new schedule 15A.

We welcome the fact that the Bill allows a new dental contract to be negotiated. We urge that the opportunity to secure quality accessible dental services for all sections of our community should not be lost.

Ms Reilly: On the issue of disqualification by tribunal, the four health and social services councils welcome and strongly endorse schedule 1(5)

“After paragraph 1 (7), insert—

‘(7A) The third condition for disqualification is that the person concerned is unsuitable (by virtue of professional or personal conduct) to be included, or to continue to be included in the list.’”

That ground is well recognised by the professional regulatory bodies and is in keeping with the principles of good clinical and social-care governance and of public accountability. We fully concur with the extension of the category of professions to include all practitioners who are on, or have applied to be included on, the board's list so that all such practitioners will be subject to the tribunal's jurisdiction.

It is self-evident that if a disqualification judgement is made against a practitioner, the sanction should be upheld in all board areas of Northern Ireland. Arrangements should be put in place to ensure that any sanctions that a tribunal in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland or Wales makes are appropriately communicated across the system to ensure that a disqualified practitioner may not practise in any of those regions. Therefore there is merit in having a UK-wide list that is open to all boards and Health Service commissioners. With the move towards greater co-operation and shared care for patients using the health service in the Republic of Ireland, and given some of the border-area arrangements, we hope that further arrangements will be put in place to ensure that such sanctions are communicated, recognised and enacted in both jurisdictions.

There should be a formal interface and integration between the function of the tribunal and that of the professional regulatory bodies on matters of alleged

serious misconduct. That seems to have been missed in the Bill. We fully support the provision to allow boards to suspend temporarily a practitioner on referral to a tribunal, as that will create greater safety for patients.

In our experience, when a matter of conduct is referred to a body such as the General Medical Council and the case is judged to warrant a full investigation, boards do not have the power to suspend the practitioner temporarily. We want reassurance that the Bill will reflect the need for boards to be able to use temporary suspension for matters of serious misconduct, whether such cases are referred to the professional regulatory body or to the tribunal. The Bill makes no reference to referrals to the professional regulatory body. In cases of potentially serious misconduct, it seems logical to offer the same level of safety when a practitioner is referred to the regulatory body as when the matter is referred to the tribunal.

However, we caution against prolonged precautionary suspension as the practitioner has a right to have his case heard in a timely manner.

There may also be issues about a board's ability to fund and find temporary replacements for suspended practitioners, and that may affect patients. However, neither of those considerations should influence a decision to make a precautionary suspension.

Finally, we want to ensure that provisions to extend the powers and functions of the tribunal are open and transparent so that the public and patients can have full confidence in its workings and decisions.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your submission. Will the arrangements under the Bill be sustainable in the longer term?

Ms Reilly: Do you mean sustainable in general or in specific areas?

The Chairperson: In general terms.

Ms Reilly: Ensuring that all the provisions of the Bill are enacted will involve a cost. The Bill has been prepared with the present model of four health and social services boards in mind. However, a single health and social services authority, under the RPA, will presumably replace those boards. Therefore to ensure sustainability, account must be taken of imminent changes.

As regards patient safety, it depends what is meant by sustainability. Patient safety is most important, and the Bill reinforces it. The other issue for us is access to services. Therefore sustainability will ultimately depend on how much is invested.

Ms Cunningham: Since we do not have a sustainable dental service, we need the Bill to drive forward and build one.

Mrs Hanna: As regards driving forward dental services and improving access to them, we accept the points that you make. Will the Bill achieve those aims?

Ms Cunningham: It will enable the development of a new general dental services contract. The other important point is the role of the boards, which, as Ms Reilly said, will be replaced at some stage. The boards control the development of doctors' practices and pharmacies; however, dental surgeries are outside that control. Dental provision is a cornerstone of healthcare, and it should be treated in the same way as the provision of GP services. It is essential that boards have some control over the development of dental practices.

Mrs Hanna: Therefore a broad spread of services should be covered.

Ms Cunningham: Yes.

Mrs Hanna: Will dental provision be covered or is an act of faith involved?

Ms Cunningham: It is increasingly the case that more dental practitioners operate in the private sector than in the NHS sector, so there will always be some tension. However, giving boards a clearer role in deciding on the location of practices can only strengthen their hand.

Ms Reilly: To reinforce that point, it is important to note that this is the start of a process that will enable a contract to be hammered out between dentists and a board that will have some responsibility for commissioning dental services.

Mrs Hanna: Therefore it is the detail that is needed.

Ms Reilly: Yes, but the Bill is necessary to start the ball rolling and to give it some impetus.

Mr Buchanan: Why are dental practices closing or no longer taking on NHS patients? Dentists say that the NHS does not pay enough to cover a patient's treatment and so they cannot carry out the necessary work to the required standards. That is why they are opting out of the NHS.

Ms Cunningham: We agree with that absolutely. There can only be sustainable NHS dental services if dentists feel valued and are recompensed as part of that. The current funding system is complex and is administratively heavy on dentists. They are not being rewarded for their health-promotion work, which most dentists do as a matter of course, even though they cannot charge for it. Anomalies in the charging system must be sorted out.

Another factor is the change in the way in which dentistry is viewed — affluent sections of society increasingly use the service as a kind of cosmetic-enhancement process. As people who speak from the patient's point of view in the context of the NHS, we believe that what is required is a dental service that

can meet all sections of our community's health needs. We must ensure, through the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, that dentists are rewarded for operating in the less affluent and more peripheral areas. Everyone needs access to good, general-health dentistry.

Dr Deeny: I agree. Maggie, you said that different areas have limited access to health services and dental services. As a GP, I am aware that there have been access problems in the south-west of Northern Ireland at weekends.

We have just learnt that Mr Shaun Woodward is to be the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He said previously that the review of public administration (RPA) could result in the four health and social services councils being amalgamated into one body, which is to be called the patient client council (PCC). I do not like the word "client"; I prefer "patient".

As this is the first time that the health and social services councils have given evidence to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for my benefit and that of the Committee, will you clarify the role that they play? How much clout do the councils have? I know that they are supposed to be the patients' representative or spokesperson. There are many issues and problems across Northern Ireland; I hear about them every day. Do the public know enough about the councils, or about the proposed PCC?

Yesterday, in Omagh, a mother gave birth to twins in a hospital that has no maternity backup whatsoever. That is totally unacceptable, yet that sort of problem occurs all the time. What can be done if patients approach the councils with concerns about services that are completely inadequate and unacceptable? Could the public be made more aware of the councils' role?

It is good that the councils can lobby a Committee such as this, but will they, in future, be able to address patients' serious concerns about healthcare and health provision across Northern Ireland? Will a new single body have more power and clout?

Ms Reilly: The health and social services councils were established in 1990. When they started, they were only ever meant to be a committee of local people nominated to a council to debate and discuss healthcare issues, to raise them through their committee, to write letters to the appropriate bodies, and to lobby in that form.

As they developed, they did not have the appropriate funding to match that development. Furthermore, as the public became more aware that there was an independent body, speaking on their behalf, they began to go to the health and social services councils to ask them to intervene on their behalf, whether that was to support them in making complaints, to lobby on their behalf, or to advocate on

behalf of individuals. Therefore part of our remit is to monitor the quality of the services that are provided and the general public's access to those services.

Our role is not to be a proxy patient, because we think that it is incumbent on the Health Service to speak directly to patients about services or changes to services. However, we will speak in the public interest, in the more general interest of patients or clients, or on behalf of any service users.

One of the most important functions that we perform is to support the public when they want to make complaints. Every health body has a complaints system, but sometimes it is inaccessible to members of the public. We support and help the public to understand their rights, and what they should reasonably expect from the system. The councils are available to ensure that the public have full access and receive full answers, and to monitor their progress right through to independent review.

We agree that it was a problem that we have never had the resources to make the public aware of the complaints system. It is a catch-22: when we make the public aware of the system, we do not have the capacity to deal with the resulting influx of enquiries.

Therefore we welcome Shaun Woodward's vision of a new PCC, which he outlined when he was Minister with responsibility for health. He said that a new council would have better resources and be much more powerful. However, the power will probably lie in the new council's level of influence — to whom it has the right to speak directly; whom it can pressure to make changes; its right to be listened to; and how its recommendations are acted on — as opposed to having statutory powers to act there and then. Such power rightly belongs to the regulatory bodies, such as the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

The Chairperson: I see that there are no further questions. That was a short session. I thank you, Maggie and Stella, for your interesting presentation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Thursday 5 July 2007

HEALTH (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL (NIA 2/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Rev Dr Robert Coulter
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr John Botteley	}	Theatrical Management Association
Mr Nick Livingston	}	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Mr Robert Kirkwood	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Dr Brian Gaffney	}	Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition
Mr Gerry McElwee	}	
Mr Seán Martin	}	

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): We now come to the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. I refer members to the folder circulated at the Committee meeting of 21 June 2007, which contains the papers relating to the Bill. Members are reminded to bring the folder to each meeting of the Committee Stage of the Bill.

I refer members to the following correspondence on the smoking issue: from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health; from Northern Ireland Cancer Registry; a letter from the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation; and, finally, a letter dated 28 June 2007 from the Northern Ireland Chief Environmental

Health Officers Group. Copies of the letters are in members' packs. An information pack from the Health Promotion Agency has also been tabled for members' information.

During the Committee Stage of the Bill, officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr John Farrell and Mr Robert Kirkwood, will be present to provide clarification or to answer questions. Today's evidence session will consider the provision in the Bill to allow performers to smoke if the artistic merit of a performance requires it. During the Second Stage of the Bill, the Minister signalled his intention to withdraw that exemption to the smoking ban at the Consideration Stage of the Bill.

At present, however, clause 15 remains part of the Bill.

The two sets of witnesses in attendance today wish to put the cases for and against the exemption. The sessions will be short, with each organisation allocated about half an hour. The first set of witnesses is from the Theatrical Management Association (TMA) and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The Health Committee welcomes Mr John Botteley, who is the Theatre Director at the Grand Opera House and a member of the TMA; and Mr Nick Livingston from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Witnesses, you can decide whether one or both of you will give the presentation, for which you will have 10 minutes. After that, there will be about 20 minutes of questions.

Mr John Botteley (Theatrical Management Association): Thank you, Chairperson. I will begin the presentation; Mr Livingston will speak on behalf of the Arts Council. I am a member of the council of the Theatrical Management Association.

The TMA represents a large proportion of the theatres and theatrical production companies in the UK. In Northern Ireland, the Grand Opera House and the Lyric Theatre in Belfast; McNaughton Productions Ltd in County Antrim; the Market Place and Arts Centre in Armagh; the Millennium Forum in Derry; and the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine are all members of the TMA. It also represents the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA), which has 22 affiliate groups in Northern Ireland and which represents 4,000 amateur participants.

Mr Nick Livingston (Arts Council of Northern Ireland): In February 2007, the Arts Council responded to the consultation on smoke-free premises and vehicles and to proposed regulations to be made under powers in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Arts Council welcomed the proposed exemption for actors who participate in a performance when the artistic integrity of the piece determines that smoking should be part of a performance.

The council supports the position taken by Equity and the Society of London Theatre. The exemption should be applied not only in England, but also in Northern Ireland when sections of the work to be performed require it. The Arts Council wants to persuade the Government of its view and notes that the regulations apply only to performers and not to the place of performance or premises, and only when justified by the plot. Exemptions are in place in England and in the Irish Republic, where actors have the option to use herbal cigarettes.

The Arts Council is not opposed to the introduction of the smoking ban in workplaces and enclosed spaces, nor does it dispute the evidence that has been provided to the Committee by the Chief Medical Officer that smoking claims the lives of about 2,300 people each year in Northern Ireland — a truly shocking statistic. The Arts Council does, however, consider the exemption to be about more than merely trying to achieve a lifelike effect on stage when an author has written a stage direction that a character should smoke in a scene.

Smoking during scenes of certain plays, such as the modern classic ‘Saturday Night and Sunday Morning’, assists the author to establish the character. The character’s smoking is part of the play and the characterisation and contributes to the quality of the experience that the audience enjoys. Smoking is, therefore, an integral part of that play. Can we imagine, for example, Winston Churchill without his trademark cigar or Joanna Lumley as her character Patsy in ‘Absolutely Fabulous’ without her cigarettes? It is difficult to imagine how that effect would be achieved convincingly in any other way.

The Arts Council is not opposed to the greater freedom of the general public to enjoy smoke-free areas. The general smoking ban is not the issue; the issues is the unique circumstances of theatre, film and television, where smoking is required to establish character, period, historical accuracy or setting when there is no alternative. Interpreting smoking as using “any lit substance” would also rule out the use of herbal cigarettes. Scenes would, therefore, lose the power to convince. Smoking happens in real life, and if the stage is to reflect real life in all its diversity, theatre practitioners must be able to use the tools of their craft to make effective use of props and to sustain the power of the scene.

If a blanket ban on smoking in all public places were imposed, smoking would be one of the few human behaviours that could not be portrayed on stage, film or television, and that would be extraordinary. We accept, for example, that an actor can take a drink on stage; however, he is not consuming alcohol but a substitute, such as apple juice, Ribena or burnt sugar. Real blood is not shed on stage in a production that

contains violent scenes; a substitute is used. Therefore smoking would become one of the few human behaviours that could not be simulated on stage.

In his evidence to the Committee on 14 June, the Chief Medical Officer referred to the dangerous effect that an exemption would have on actors and performers; but that is difficult, if not impossible, to establish. The risk to theatregoers from short-term exposure to smoke in brief scenes is incalculably small.

Is there any real evidence that attending a theatrical performance at which a few plumes of smoke drift forward from the stage amounts to passive smoking? Is there a material health risk to the audience? Is there any known evidence of risk from smoking herbal cigarettes? Theatres are huge spaces, and smoke quickly dissipates into the fly tower and backstage. The inconvenience and disruption to the public who are sitting in the auditorium is small.

We are concerned about the intrusion on artists’ liberty. Furthermore, an issue of artistic quality arises. Northern Ireland is renowned throughout the world for the quality of its contemporary theatre, with playwrights such as Graham Reid and Brian Friel having brought great distinction to Northern Ireland. The public has a right to know that what it witnesses on stage is being represented as the author wrote it. Were we to compromise that, our reputation as a centre of theatrical excellence and distinction might be short-lived. To ban smoking on stage would be a cruel judgement on those who care about and work in theatre, and whose endeavours have succeeded in creating artistic integrity of a calibre that is valued and acknowledged internationally.

The TMA believes that a blanket ban on smoking in public places will reduce the choice available to audiences in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland depends on touring product from the rest of the United Kingdom, and it is difficult to see how scenes could be adapted or rewritten to accommodate our audiences. Our argument that herbal cigarettes — for which there are no known health risks — proposes a reasonable alternative. Theatres are wide-open spaces in which the smoke quickly dissipates, causing little inconvenience to the public.

Mr Botteley: The public areas in the Grand Opera House have been virtually smoke-free for the past 10 years. Since it reopened in October last year, the theatre — front of house and backstage — has had a total smoking ban in place, with the exception of a couple of occasions when actors smoked on stage.

I support the legislation. An artist friend of mine died of lung cancer as a result of exposure to smoky venues. The entertainer Roy Castle, whom the Chairperson mentioned, died of a smoking-related

disease, which he attributed to working in arts venues. Therefore I am aware of the situation.

The TMA does not want to return to those times. However, we do seek an exemption for the very occasional occurrence when smoking is important to a production. Theatre portrays society warts and all; it portrays fiction, fact and fantasy. We are concerned that, without the exemption, we would have to censor productions, without there being any resultant health benefit.

Theatre portrays the best and the worst of people. The longest-running play in the history of theatre, 'The Mousetrap', by Agatha Christie, is still performing in London after 55 years. Its central theme is murder, but, of course, no actual murder takes place. In the theatre, we use artifice. At Second Stage, the Minister cited 'Julius Caesar'. He is right to say that no real blood is shed in productions; however, as an alternative, actors can use what resembles real blood in order to convince audiences.

The problem is that although there are realistic alternatives to blood and shootings, we cannot find a realistic alternative to smoking. The Grand Opera House production of 'Chicago', which was staged last week, featured a dance sequence that is a stylised portrayal of 1920s America — a time when many men smoked. In order to comply with the new legislation, all the dancers in that scene had unlit cigarettes. It looked completely unconvincing and, frankly, ludicrous.

There is an argument that smoking on stage encourages others to smoke. However, a recent production of 'Trainspotting' at the Grand Opera House was described by one customer as the best argument against drug taking that he had ever seen. Smoking was integral to the plot, and had a smoking ban been in place, that play could not have been staged in Northern Ireland.

In addition, the law can restrict what is seen on television or on film. On the first day of the ban in England, Dot Cotton of 'EastEnders' was portrayed lighting up as usual in the Queen Vic pub, only to be told to put out her cigarette. That is an example of how drama can reflect what happens in people's lives. It is interesting to note that that scene could not have been filmed in Northern Ireland.

In the portrayal of historical characters, smoking partly defines who those characters are — Mr Livingstone referred to Winston Churchill. In 'The Rat Pack – Live from Las Vegas', Dean Martin always has a characteristic cigarette in one hand and a glass of bourbon in the other. The Grand Opera House had two sell-out weeks of that production in January 2007; had the smoking ban been in place, that show could not have been produced in Northern Ireland because the characterisation could not have been made without the bourbon and the cigarette.

It can be argued that alcohol is just as damaging to health as smoking. As Mr Livingstone said, alcohol can be simulated on stage whereas smoking cannot. The fact that the legislation differs in various jurisdictions poses a serious problem for productions staged in the Grand Opera House. An actor can smoke a cigarette on stage in England or a herbal alternative in the South of Ireland, but they cannot do so in Northern Ireland. Most of the productions staged in the Grand Opera House come from England or the South of Ireland; we would either have to change those well-rehearsed productions — which is inconceivable — or do without them.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended a West End production of 'The Hound of the Baskervilles', which I was considering bringing to Northern Ireland. The production features Sherlock Holmes lighting his pipe. That is an important part of the show, but the ban means that I cannot bring that production to Northern Ireland. Surely some herbal tobacco smoke from Sherlock Holmes's pipe would not affect anyone's health.

In conclusion, the Theatrical Management Association and the National Operatic and Dramatic Association ask for an exemption from the ban on smoking on stage where it is essential to the plot or to historical accuracy, and in associated rehearsals. At the very least, as a compromise we ask that the law allow the use of non-tobacco products. In that way, tobacco smoke could be simulated in the same way that murder is simulated without the use of real blood. We believe that there is no risk to health in allowing the very occasional portrayal of smoking in the wide-open space of a theatre stage or, for that matter, a film studio.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Mr Livingstone and Mr Botteley. I shall now open up the discussion so that members can ask questions. I visited Disney-MGM Studios in America with my grandchildren where we enjoyed seeing simulations of battles scenes from the 'Star Wars' trilogy and the magnificent props from the film studios. I find it difficult to accept that no one in the theatrical world, which you are representing today, can find a realistic alternative to smoking on stage.

Mr Botteley, you said that the legislation in the Republic of Ireland allowed some flexibility in these matters. What did you mean by that?

Mr Botteley: Actors can smoke herbal cigarettes on theatre stages in the Republic of Ireland. The legislative definition of smoking in the South refers to tobacco; herbal cigarettes can, therefore, be smoked on stage in that jurisdiction. It is my understanding that no health risks are associated with the smoking of herbal cigarettes or the passive smoking of such products.

That is the alternative that we seek. I agree that Disney-MGM Studios use alternatives. However,

Dean Martin's having a cigarette in his hand is central to the way in which his character is defined, but a burning cigarette is not permitted in Northern Ireland. It is permitted in England, and in the Republic herbal cigarettes can be smoked on stage.

The Chairperson: What happens when touring productions go to Wales and Scotland?

Mr Livingston: No exemption was granted in Wales and Scotland, so those productions would be in the same position as in Northern Ireland. The difference is that Northern Ireland has an established reputation for excellence in the theatre, and it would be unfortunate if that reputation were diminished because of the general ban on smoking. Touring productions may not come to Northern Ireland because rehearsals would be expensive; scenes would have to be prepared differently and different stage directions given.

Mr Botteley: Wales and Scotland have the same limited choice that we in Northern Ireland argue against. Certain productions would not be seen because producers would not want to re-rehearse a scene for one visit to Northern Ireland. Productions in Scotland and Wales are similarly limited.

The Chairperson: You did not address the issue of the use of convincing props.

Mr Botteley: It is against the law to use a lit cigarette, and no convincing alternative has been found. In certain scenes, it is important that actors bring a burning cigarette to their lips. In 'Chicago', unlit cigarettes were used, and they looked ridiculous. In the Lyric Theatre's production of 'Dancing at Lughnasa', Brian Friel had to rewrite a scene because of the smoking ban, which is fine, provided the author is available to do that. That play is about a young girl in the 1920s and 1930s, whose rebelliousness and emancipation are characterised by the fact that she smokes. That is a powerful image. When I saw the play last week, the actor had to open a packet of Woodbines, take out a cigarette, put it to her lips and then put it back on the table without smoking the cigarette. Most of the audience were preoccupied by her not smoking the cigarette because of the smoking ban rather than engaging with the plot of the play.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: You said that you believed that herbal cigarettes would not be harmful to audiences because of the wide-open space in a theatre. What scientific evidence do you have for that?

Mr Botteley: I cannot cite any scientific evidence to support that. The area above the stage in the Grand Opera House is twice the size of the stage, and the auditorium is massive. However, there is no scientific evidence that our proposed substitute — herbal cigarettes — damages health. I cannot believe that one cigarette in a huge space — 50 to 60 times the size of the Senate Chamber — would cause any health-related

disease. The smoke would go up into the ether, and it would be difficult for anyone to inhale it.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Can I take it that that part of your evidence is purely an assumption?

Mr Botteley: Yes, it is an assumption.

Mrs Hanna: I fondly support the arts, including the Grand Opera House, the Lyric Theatre and other venues; however, I do not believe that the absence of a lit cigarette will affect acting ability. You have referred to the excellent standards of acting in Northern Ireland. Do you not think that good actors can simulate smoking with an unlit cigarette? I have seen 'Dancing at Lughnasa' at the Abbey Theatre and at other venues, and I would not have been distracted if the cigarette had not been lit.

Mr Botteley: I understand where you are coming from. The problem is that there is no ban in England; therefore plays, as rehearsed there, will not be able to come here. If there were a blanket ban throughout the United Kingdom, however much we disliked it, we would have to cope. With few exceptions, the productions that come to the Opera House are generated in the West End or in other parts of England, where no such ban exists. It is a question of providing theatre-going choice for the people of Northern Ireland.

The 'Hound of the Baskervilles' and 'Trainspotting', which are great productions and award-winning shows, cannot come to Northern Ireland because their management would not change their structures to suit one venue. If actors could smoke herbal cigarettes on stage, such productions would come to Northern Ireland.

Mrs Hanna: I cannot understand why that should be. The only difference is that our legislation would require cigarettes to remain unlit. I am not an actor, but I could pretend to smoke a cigarette on stage — I could pretend to puff and inhale; I do not believe that it would make much of a difference. Is the problem that actors would not be allowed to come on stage here unless they performed plays in exactly the same way as in England or is it because they would not wish to do so?

Mr Botteley: Last week, unlit cigarettes were used in a production of 'Chicago' at the Opera House — they were completely unconvincing. Although that is a personal view, it is shared by the Theatrical Management Association, which represents every theatre director in the UK.

Mr Livingston: When the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made his remarks to this Committee on 17 June, I was surprised by the unprecedented outcry from actors in Northern Ireland. Articles and blogs on the Internet appeared almost immediately, and there was an in-depth article in 'The

Stage'. There is a general feeling that to implement this ban would be to chip away at an important artistic liberty. It seems extraordinary that the stage, which can so accurately portray every other aspect of our lives, will be silenced in this area. From the perspective of theatre technicians and actors, it seems incomprehensible.

Mrs O'Neill: What do the groups that are lobbying against artists being allowed to smoke on stage feel about herbal cigarettes? Have you been in contact with such groups?

Mr Botteley: I have not been in contact with any such groups. I am aware that, as with everything, there is a suitable alternative, and the only realistic alternative to smoking tobacco is smoking herbal cigarettes.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the guys for their presentation. It was said that some actors perceive the proposed introduction of this ban as chipping away at their profession. I disagree. Things change every day — we live in a changing world. I do not wish to be flippant, but, not so long ago, it was thought OK to send children up chimneys. People realised that that was wrong and changed their attitudes.

Roy Castle was mentioned in the presentation, and hope was expressed that if smoking were allowed to continue in auditoriums, no harm would come to audiences in those wide-open spaces. For health and safety reasons, a duty of care exists for staff and workers. The concerns apply not only to audiences but to those who work in those environments every day.

Is there any evidence that plays have not been taken to Scotland and Wales? Dean Martin and 'The Rat Pack' were mentioned. Has that show not been staged in Scotland or Wales?

Mr Botteley: The ban has been in force for too short a time. I arrange the programme for the Opera House 18 months in advance, as do my colleagues, so it is too early to gather evidence. I spoke to a colleague who runs the Festival Theatre in Edinburgh, and the problem has yet to arise there — it is too early to say whether the ban will affect shows in Scotland.

I made a direct programming decision not to bring 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' to Northern Ireland because smoking a pipe is integral to the plot. Therefore, I made that direct decision.

To answer the question about sending kids up chimneys; the difference is that the theatre portrays history, whereas life moves on. In all other circumstance, the ban is utterly justified. However, we still need to portray historical events. For example, 'Mary Poppins', which is currently playing in the West End, portrays chimney sweeps going up chimneys. That is a portrayal; it does not actually happen — that is the difference.

Ms S Ramsey: I am well aware of that. However, Mr Botteley has said that there is evidence that we will

lose out on the theatre productions that could be shown here. The Chairperson asked about the situation in Scotland and Wales because the same legislation operates in those regions also. Can it be said — 18 months in advance — that there is no way that 'The Rat Pack: Live from Las Vegas' will be shown in Scotland or Wales because of the smoking ban?

Mr Botteley: I cannot speak for what will happen in Scotland and Wales; I can only mention the discussion I would need to have with the producer about bringing the show here. The fact is that it would be a lesser production if Dean Martin were not shown in the way in which he is characterised in the current form of the show. I can confirm that 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' will not be coming to Northern Ireland.

Mr Livingston: Essentially, substitute stage directions would have to be written. Reflecting on the points that have been made, the view of most actors is that they respect the author's integrity and would wish to see his intentions carried out. They would want to present a piece so that Northern Ireland audiences could see it in the manner in which the author originally intended.

We will arrive quite quickly at a situation where it will not be possible to approach authors and ask them to write new stage directions for plays because in some cases they will be dead. In those circumstances, that part of the repertoire would be seen less frequently, and that would deny choice to audiences in Northern Ireland.

Mr Botteley: The other issue is that 'The Rat Pack: Live from Las Vegas' is an accurate reconstruction of an concert that actually took place. It has been recreated as accurately as possible from film footage and, therefore, the smoking that featured in the concert must be portrayed in the show. I am not saying that it would be impossible to change that, but it would be against the artistic integrity of the piece to do so. I have not spoken to the producer, but if he said that he did not want to change that aspect, the only option would be not to show it here.

Mr Buchanan: I apologise for my late arrival.

I, too, am a great lover of the arts. However, I find it difficult to believe that those involved in the arts and the theatre cannot come up with something that is akin to a cigarette. If tobacco or cigarettes were allowed to be used during theatrical performances, would that not create the potential for licensed premises across Northern Ireland to be afforded the same right?

Cigarette smoke causes many deaths, and we need to provide a healthier society for young people, many of who see performers as role models. Would it not defeat the purpose of introducing a smoking ban across Northern Ireland if we were to allow performers to smoke cigarettes during performances such as those

described by Mr Botteley? Exempting theatres would defeat the purpose of the ban and provide a bad example to young people in society.

The detrimental effect that the smoking ban will have on theatres across the Province and on the various plays and performances that will not be staged has been mentioned. How much will theatres lose financially because they are unable to present such plays during the first 12 months of the ban?

Mr Botteley: The member has asked several questions. First, herbal cigarettes would be a suitable substitute for tobacco; however, they are also covered by the legislation. Secondly, as regards the effects that smoking on stage might have on young people, theatre drama shows life as it is, not as we would like it to be. I do not believe that an Agatha Christie play showing a murder on stage will encourage people to commit murder. Smoking on stage will not encourage anyone to smoke. People smoke; therefore drama should be able to show that.

The example of Dot Cotton in 'EastEnders' was very clear. The message in that instance was the opposite of the encouragement that Mr Buchanan suggested. Dot lit a cigarette in a pub and was told that, for a very good reason, she could not do that. That was a very positive anti-smoking message.

'Trainspotting' is a very powerful play about people with drug addictions. However, its message is exactly the opposite; it is about not taking drugs. It would not have been possible to stage that play if the actors had not been able to light up, because it was about the fact that lighting up — in this case, rolling joints and injecting heroin — was bad. The piece demonstrated that that was bad, and if the actors could not portray the drugs being taken, they could not demonstrate the message.

There would be no loss of revenue to theatres. The ban will have no financial impact, but it will have an impact on art. That is why we are here.

The Chairperson: Does that answer all your questions, Tom?

Mr Buchanan: Yes.

Mr McCallister: Tom asked most of the questions that I was interested in. I agree with Tom and Carmel: it is incredible that, given the ingenuity of theatre producers, there is no better alternative than herbal cigarettes. I worry about the effects of smoking on young people, and I worry about the message that would be given if smoking on stage were to be permitted. As Tom also said, that might open the legislation to challenges from pubs. If pub takings were being affected by the smoking ban, then why should representatives of the licensed trade not ask for

exemptions also? I feel strongly that the Committee must take a stand on this matter.

I am involved in amateur dramatics, so I —
[*Interruption.*]

Ms S Ramsey: It is called the Assembly.

The Chairperson: Order.

Mr McCallister: I am interested in the arts and in theatrical productions. However, the fact that Northern Ireland's legislation is in line with that in Scotland and Wales leaves our English colleagues as the odd ones out. The sooner they join us, the sooner the problem will be solved.

Mr Livingston: We do not dispute the need for smoke-free workplace regulations in Northern Ireland. However, theatre is a special case. Points that might be made, for example, by the licensed trade, are not necessarily those that we would embrace. Our point is that, if a stage direction — which is a very specific instruction by an author — requires actors to smoke, we are going to be faced with a dilemma. Should we ignore the author's direction, and the characterisation it implies, and would we lose the value of the social or historical setting of the piece? Would the scenes portrayed on stage still be convincing? Would the lack of smoking erode the quality of the experience that the public currently enjoys? Fundamentally, would it affect the choice of plays that will be offered to the public on Northern Ireland's stages?

Mr McCallister: Actors do not have to get drunk to portray drunkenness convincingly. Therefore, they do not have to smoke to make a role convincing.

Mr Livingston: We covered the point about alcohol. Alcohol is not consumed on stage because a substitute can be used. We are suggesting that a substitute for tobacco be considered.

The Chairperson: Carmel, do you want to ask a supplementary question?

Mrs Hanna: As someone who encourages and supports the arts, I hope that actors will not lose out on jobs because of artistic integrity.

We all feel strongly that the ban should apply to all workplaces, including the theatre. However, I hope that actors will still visit here regularly and will not stay away simply because they cannot light up on stage.

Mr Botteley: Let me make one supplementary point. It does not take a great deal of intelligence to realise that we are batting on a fairly sticky wicket here but, pending more research on herbal cigarettes, would it be possible for us to put warning signs outside theatres or reach another compromise?

Although many of my colleagues feel that there should be no compromise on artistic integrity, the people of Northern Ireland will lose out by being given

an inferior choice in comparison with that which is available in England. I am a theatre director, not a scientific expert. If herbal cigarettes do not constitute a risk to health, as I am assured is the case, could an exemption be given for smoking those instead of tobacco? Such an exemption would seem to satisfy all the genuine objections that members raised while providing the alternative for which they have rightly asked. We are not set on having an exemption for cigarettes; we are just asking that the ban should be realistic in the context of the piece.

The Chairperson: We take that point on board.

Ms S Ramsey: I want to make two quick points. First, as Carmel Hanna pointed out, if the Bill were to be introduced, as worded, it could offer individual actors opportunities for smoking that they would not otherwise have. Secondly, if a compromise were to be included in the Bill — which I would not support — who would be responsible for policing such legislation?

Mr Botteley: As the person responsible for the Grand Opera House, I would be facing a substantial fine were the law to be broken. Members can be absolutely sure that I would police it.

Ms S Ramsey: I am conscious of the fact — and I am just trying to think this through — that if Belfast City Council's smoke wardens entered the Grand Opera House and smelled smoke there, performers could claim to be smoking as part of a rehearsal. That suggestion needs to be thought out more.

Mr Botteley: We would have no objection to policing the legislation or to welcoming wardens from Belfast City Council as we do as regards all the other licensing legislation to which we are subject.

The Chairperson: Unfortunately, smoking was made glamorous by film stars and stage actors. The whole thing probably emanated from American movies and from the advertising of cigarette brands such as Camel and Marlboro. Tobacco advertising was then banned. In Northern Ireland, we have a big problem of very young teenage girls taking up smoking as a habit. If we were to slacken the legislation by providing exemptions, where would we stop? We would simply be opening a can of worms.

I hope that the Committee has given you a fair hearing but, as you may have gauged, many of us feel that the interests and welfare of the people of Northern Ireland are best served by protecting them from secondary inhalation and from being in smoky environments. Having said that, I sincerely thank you both, Mr Botteley and Mr Livingston, for attending.

Obviously, the Committee will need to address issues such as what constitutes herbal cigarettes and other minutiae when it considers the Bill line by line.

Thank you for attending. No doubt we will hear from you again.

Mr Botteley: I thank the Committee for listening.

The Chairperson: Mr Kirkwood, does the Republic of Ireland legislation contain an exemption that allows thespians to smoke herbal cigarettes on stage?

Mr Robert Kirkwood (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Yes. During the drafting of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, a conscious decision was taken to adopt a definition of “smoking” that was similar to that applied in England, Wales and Scotland. The definition in article 2(2)(b) of the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 states: “smoking includes being in possession of lit tobacco or of anything lit which contains tobacco, or being in possession of any other lit substance in a form in which it could be smoked.”

That definition was chosen largely because it was designed to aid enforcement in cases in which those caught in breach of the ban would claim that their cigarette did not contain tobacco.

It was considered that amending the legislation in order to permit the smoking of herbal cigarettes on stage would make enforcement more difficult. Any amendment to the Bill allowing for the smoking of herbal cigarettes would mean further defining what herbal cigarettes are. For example, would cannabis qualify?

The Chairperson: As well as acting, the performers would all be merry. Thank you very much.

I welcome the representatives of the Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition: Dr Brian Gaffney, chief executive of the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland; Mr Gerry McElwee, head of cancer prevention at the Ulster Cancer Foundation; and Seán Martin from the Chief Environmental Health Officers Group.

Dr Brian Gaffney (Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition): I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for allowing the Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition to state its case for opposing the proposed exemption.

I am here in my capacity as chairperson of the Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition, which is a coalition of partners from the public sector, statutory bodies, the community and voluntary sectors, and the private sector. Established in the run-up to the introduction of the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, the Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition acted as advocates of the legislation and lobbied for its passage. The coalition remains together in order to provide a voice for partners across Northern Irish society in the implementation of smoke-free legislation. We are also trying to improve public health by preventing smoking in general. Accompanying me today are colleagues who each represent their particular sectors on the coalition.

The coalition obviously opposes the proposed exemption. The reasons why the legislation was originally passed must be recalled. We regard “performers”, as clause 15 of the Bill refers to them, as another workforce, who must be protected from the effects of passive smoking. Why is one person’s smoking harmful to others? Tobacco smoke contains about 4,000 chemicals, 60 of which are known or suspected to cause cancer.

It is well known that people who do not smoke, and who are exposed to second-hand smoke, have a higher risk of suffering from lung cancer, heart disease and strokes, than those who are not exposed. It can also induce asthma attacks, cause pregnancy complications, and put children at risk.

A recent review of international research on the immediate health impact of smoke-free workplace legislation found rapid and dramatic improvements. Therefore, as a result of this legislation, we are seeking to achieve rapid and dramatic improvements for every workforce — including the acting profession.

The director general of the World Health Organization (WHO) summed up the evidence by saying:

“The evidence is clear, there is no safe level of exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke”.

That is true whether it involves a few puffs in a theatre, or a large amount of smoke in the theatre because tobacco smoke is a class A carcinogen — that has been accepted.

The proposed exemption is not limited to performances in theatre productions and other mainstream dramatic arts. It is a loose definition and covers any performance in any venue. It could include a performance in a public house, a hall or even a school. It would be ludicrous for smoking to be allowed at a school play, perhaps performed by an outside theatre company, just because of the belief that it is important to artistic integrity. What does “artistic integrity” mean? It has not been defined. We are opposed to the exemption because of the lack of a safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke, and because there are other implications in allowing people to smoke tobacco on stage or to use a substitute.

The influence of the tobacco industry in film and television is well documented. The ‘British Medical Journal’ has clearly highlighted that influence amongst teenagers. The five-year tobacco action plan for Northern Ireland, which we all work to — including, to my knowledge, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, as a statutory body that is seeking to reduce inequalities in health — emphasises the fact that young people, who are affected by those performances, should be protected from tobacco smoke, and should be prevented from smoking.

To include the exemption would weaken legislation that has already been shown to be well supported across industry. It is important to remember that all workforces in Northern Ireland have had to make changes. Why should the performing workforce not have to do so too? The rate of compliance, as members will hear from my colleague, has been 99% or more. There is no doubt that this piece of legislation is well supported.

Some of the points that were raised previously surprised me. Recently, in Edinburgh, Mel Smith gave a successful depiction of Winston Churchill and was able to do so without smoking. Evidence presented on the basis of one’s opinion, or on the basis of one person attending a production, should not be treated seriously.

We are also concerned about the lack of definition of the word “herbal”. I am not sure what that means. By introducing herbal cigarettes, we could be exposing people to damaging substances. I certainly do not know whether or not smoking herbal cigarettes in the presence of someone who has asthma could induce an asthmatic attack. Therefore, we do not support any move to allow the use of herbal cigarettes.

When people go to the theatre or go to a performance, their choice is to go to the theatre — not to have their health damaged. We ask the Committee to take that into consideration.

As a Sherlock Holmes fan, I am surprised and disappointed that one person can make an arbitrary decision to refuse to allow the Northern Ireland public to see a play that we have seen reviewed in London on the basis that it cannot be performed because of a lack of lighting up a pipe. I do not recall that ever affecting my appreciation of Sherlock Holmes.

Mr Seán Martin (Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition): Environmental Health Officers have been charged with enforcing the new legislation. All sectors of industry have embraced it, and we have had practically no difficulties whatsoever. The law is currently being enforced with regard to theatre productions. Permitting an exemption would be a backward, not a forward step, and we would like to move forward.

In less than a year, smoking will also be banned in mental-health units in Northern Ireland. It would be a step in the wrong direction to grant an exemption that would permit actors to smoke as part of a theatrical production. The legislation gives the Minister powers to add to smoke-free premises, and we feel that that is the way forward, rather than going backwards and permitting smoking to be part of stage productions.

I reiterate Dr Gaffney’s point that the word “performers” and not “actors” is being used in the legislation. It means that the exemption would not

apply solely to theatres. The ridiculous situation could arise in which, even though smoking is banned in pubs, a theatrical production could be staged in a pub, and it could then be argued that actors should be allowed to smoke there for the sake of artistic integrity. That could lead to double standards being applied. At the moment, we are clear on the law, and people accept it. They supported the legislation before it was introduced, and they have shown that they support it wholeheartedly now. We have had few problems with enforcing the legislation.

Mr Gerry McElwee (Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition): I reiterate the point that second-hand smoke is a killer. Tobacco smoke is a lethal cocktail of 4,000 chemicals including ammonia, arsenic and cyanide. We have heard from Dr Gaffney that there is an increased risk of stroke — up to 80% for non-smokers — not to mention lung cancer and heart disease.

The legislation was introduced after a long battle to protect the health of our population. The legislation is popular, and, hopefully, our research will soon prove that it is beneficial in improving the health of the population and, particularly, that of our workforce.

It is worth remembering that the legislation was introduced following many consultations. There were 71,000 responses from the public consultation in 2005, and 92% of the public informed us that they wanted comprehensive legislation. It would be strange if we were to go back on such popular and effective legislation only two months after its introduction. If our colleagues from the theatre discovered asbestos in a theatre tonight, I assume that they would close it and there would be no performance. However, we do not need to close the theatre to keep out cigarettes — all that we need to do is maintain the current legislation. The question is whether we wish to introduce carcinogens into the workplace and public places — to do so would defy all logic.

The Theatrical Management Association spoke about portraying real life accurately. However, if a play were being staged about the shipyard in the 1940s and 1950s, would real asbestos have to be introduced — I think not.

The association also spoke about herbal cigarettes. However, as Dr Gaffney said, the association did not provide a definition for such a cigarette. As far as I can see, they could be described as cigarettes minus nicotine and, therefore, could give us 3,999 chemicals but not 4,000. The association also stated that it has been assured that herbal cigarettes pose no health risk, but I do not know how it could have been given such an assurance. It defies logic. The Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition believes that when substances such as herbal cigarettes are burned, similar cocktails of

lethal chemicals are produced. There is no safe level, and we should not be exposing ourselves to them.

Smoking in the movies was mentioned. In the 1950s, three times as many people smoked as do now, yet several recent studies have found that there is now more smoking in Hollywood movies than there was in the 1950s. Perhaps it is due to product placement from big industry, but it could also be due to lazy scriptwriters who cannot think of another way to portray tension, rebellion — or whatever other emotion — other than by putting a cigarette into the scene.

I do not believe that there is a case for going back on our legislation. We have heard arguments about actors being unable to portray reality. I do not want to place any more tobacco products on the public stage. However, I will demonstrate an exception. Without needing to do much research, a colleague of mine went to a joke shop and bought this cigarette that I have brought with me. I assure the Committee that talcum powder and not a burning substance is coming out of it. We believe that the Theatrical Management Association has scored an own goal by stating that everything else — cleaning chimneys, producing blood, taking heroin and shooting bullets — can be portrayed on stage except smoking.

It is called acting, and it is time that that option was considered. In any scripts that need to be rewritten, the actor should simply be directed to hold, but not light, a cigarette.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I liked your props, which were most convincing. Indeed, I was going to ask whether you would mind stubbing out your cigarette.

Before I open the floor to members' questions, can I ask why the exemption was successfully included in the legislation in England? I assume that the Health Development Agency made similarly rigorous demands to yours that the Government should not go down that route.

Dr Gaffney: I must emphasise that there was no smoke-free coalition in England. In looking back on how the legislation on smoking was introduced, I refer to New York, which was one of the first cities to introduce a ban. The New York Coalition for a Smoke Free City guided us on our approach. It emphasised the need for a lobby, or advocate body, comprising as many of the public, statutory, community/voluntary and private sectors as possible, to send a consistent message. By following that advice, we succeeded in a way that those in England did not. We were able to push through what we consider to be successful, well-supported legislation, with which there is a high level of compliance.

Mr McCallister: Is there any rock-solid evidence that would make you accept the use of herbal cigarettes?

Dr Gaffney: No one really knows what herbal cigarettes contain. There is no consensus on that and no definition. Therefore to ensure that a dangerous substance was not being introduced into public areas, rigorous trials would have to be carried out to define what is meant by a “herbal” cigarette.

Even allowing herbal cigarettes would create role models who smoke for those young people who see actors doing it on stage. It would also allow owners of other businesses, such as licensed premises, to argue that if smoking on stage does not harm anyone’s health, it should be permitted in their pubs.

How to police the smoking of herbal cigarettes would cause confusion. An exemption to allow smoking on stage would introduce a negative element into what the Chief Medical Officer referred to as probably the most important piece of public-health legislation for many decades. When the ban was introduced in England, Sir Liam Donaldson described it as “a footprint” in public health. Rather than seeking to weaken the legislation, the ban should be supported and additional measures sought to prevent further smoking.

The Chairperson: Are you happy with that answer, Mr McCallister?

Mr McCallister: I am more than happy.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the witnesses from the coalition for coming today. I am impressed by your arguments, particularly the powerful and valid one about school plays. Is it an insult to the intelligence of the people in the audience that, although they have no problem with accepting actors in a play portraying drug taking, they cannot make a similar leap of imagination on the portrayal of smoking without it actually happening? If the exemption is agreed, how would it be policed? How would we know that the cigarettes being smoked did not contain tobacco?

Dr Gaffney: I have nothing but admiration for professional actors. However, almost every other workforce in Northern Ireland has had to amend its behaviour to comply with legislation that protects its safety. Any building that contains asbestos, which is another class-A carcinogen, must have it removed.

We have legislation on smoking because tobacco smoke is a class-A carcinogen, and the workforce must comply. I expect professional actors to come up with a creative solution by amending or interpreting stage directions to make clear what they are trying to portray. I cannot tell them how to do that, but I am sure that they can come up with an answer.

Mr Martin: The definition of smoking is good and all-encompassing and is written in a way with which

the Smokefree Coalition is happy, because it prevents expenditure on analysing products to determine what they are.

The difficulty that we would face if herbal cigarettes were introduced as an option for performers is that smoking is defined in the legislation as using “any lit substance”, including tobacco and herbal cigarettes. That is primarily to make enforcement easier.

If an actor were seen smoking a lit substance, we would not have to take a sample or approach the smoker because there is no funding to send a sample for analysis — he or she would be considered to be smoking. From the perspective of the agency that is charged with enforcement, allowing the use of herbal cigarettes would be a retrograde step.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In those circumstances would policing the legislation be impossible?

Mr Martin: It would be expensive and difficult for the enforcement agencies. It would also be a backward step, because the legislation makes enforcement easy: everyone understands that smoking cannot be done in public spaces and workplaces.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Would it insult the intelligence of the audience to expect it to accept a portrayal of drugs, but not of cigarettes?

Dr Gaffney: Any reports that I have heard about current plays have been very positive. I have not heard of anyone saying that they did not enjoy a production because the cigarettes were not lit. I would find it hard to believe if they did.

Mr McCallister: How would you portray Winston Churchill now? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: There we shall end. Cut.

I watch ‘Bones’, which is so realistic that I sometimes hide behind the cushion. If that programme can have such realistic props, surely a convincing cigarette or pipe can also be created.

I thank you, Brian, Seán and Gerry, for your presentation.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Tuesday 4 September 2007

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Paul Maskey
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Mr Edwin Poots	} Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Colin Jack	} Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Miss Irene Knox	} proposed Northern Ireland Library Authority

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): I welcome the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr Edwin Poots, to the meeting. He is accompanied by senior officials.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): They are Mr Colin Jack and Miss Irene Knox, who is the new chief executive designate of the proposed Northern Ireland library authority.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister. I shall hand over to you straight away so that you can make your presentation on the Libraries Bill. Afterwards, the Committee will ask questions.

Mr Poots: I was enjoying the Committee's scones, when I was rudely interrupted.

The Chairperson: I hope that you have not carried any of them into the room in your pocket because eating during the Committee meeting is not permitted.

Mr Poots: We had only half a scone each. However, half a scone is better than none.

It is good to be here. I trust that Committee members had a good break during the summer and that everyone is ready for hard work. There is plenty of work to be done, both by the Department and the Committee. I thank the Committee for my invitation to discuss the timing of the introduction of the library authority.

At the outset, I want to introduce Irene Knox officially. Most members will already know Miss Knox from her previous role as chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. She has now taken up her post as chief executive designate of the library authority. The circumstances of that appointment have been explained to the Assembly. She took up her post in August 2007 and is on secondment from the South Eastern Education and Library Board, pending the final decision on the legislation. Her task is to lead and take forward the setting-up of the new body. She is happy to talk to the Committee about her key priorities for the next few months. With the Committee's agreement, I will invite her to do so later in the meeting.

At their meeting on 7 June, the Executive agreed that the Libraries Bill should be brought before the Assembly. The Libraries Bill sets out the argument for a single library service for the whole of Northern Ireland that will be managed and delivered by a regional body — the library authority. The matter is now for the Assembly to consider, and I am looking forward to working with the Committee to ensure that the issues are considered fully and that appropriate legislation is produced to establish a library service of which we can be proud.

The creation of a single library authority reflects the review of public administration's (RPA) objective of streamlining the management and delivery of public services. It also reflects the desire to build on the developments that have been made towards joint working at regional level by the five existing library services during the past few years. That work has proved valuable, and I appreciate the way in which the library services of the education and library boards have worked together.

The Library Service's provisions are universal and open to all. They are free at the point of use, and have no entry or eligibility requirements to deter users. They are, therefore, valuable in combating social exclusion and promoting equality of opportunity through meeting a range of needs among individuals and communities.

Even though the Library Service's core services of book lending and reference have not substantially changed, a new core service has been added in recent years — internet access. Furthermore, the way in which libraries operate has changed. There

is an additional emphasis on proactive engagement with, and on behalf of, specific social groups, often in partnership with others. It is important to have a structure for the delivery of libraries that will reflect their range of roles and broad customer base and which exploits their potential to contribute to equality of opportunity.

A single library service for Northern Ireland — delivered by one body, linked to other relevant providers and properly positioned to reflect local needs — offers an exciting way forward. Libraries have, inevitably, been the minor partners in education and library boards and the proposed change offers the opportunity to bring a new strategic focus to the delivery of library services that will benefit the public.

Chairperson, I know that you have asked me to talk chiefly about the Committee's concerns on the timing of the introduction of the Libraries Bill, and I am happy to listen to your views and answer questions. However, before we do that, the chief executive designate will say a few words — with the Committee's permission.

Miss Irene Knox (proposed Northern Ireland Library Authority): I thank the Chairperson, the Committee, and the Minister for giving me the opportunity to attend this morning's meeting. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the Committee about the work that I will be undertaking over the next few months, and I will be happy to return to the Committee at any stage. I am aware that the Committee will be involved in the consideration of the Bill over the next while, and I am content to talk to you at any time about the progress that I am making.

Subject to the Assembly's agreement on the Libraries Bill, the aim is for the Northern Ireland library authority to function as a separate legal entity from 1 April 2008. To achieve that end, there is a significant amount of preparatory work to be done.

My first priority relates to the staff of the service. As Committee members will know, schedule 2 of the Libraries Bill makes provision for the transfer of staff from the existing education and library boards to the Northern Ireland library authority under the terms of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE) at the time of commencement of the new authority. At that stage it will be necessary to have a comprehensive framework in place to support the human resource needs of the new organisation and to manage issues such as human resource policies and procedures, payroll, staff recruitment, training, terms and conditions, etc, as well as to establish consultation and negotiating machinery with the trade unions.

The new authority will also require an effective organisational structure to facilitate the delivery of

the key priorities for the Library Service as contained in 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries'. That structure must take account of the regional nature of the new organisation as well as the importance of local delivery and local engagement through, for example, the anticipated community planning process. I envisage the library authority having a strong subregional structure that will facilitate involvement and participation at local level.

While people have a right to expect a seamless and equitable service throughout Northern Ireland in relation to core provision, the Library Service must also be responsive to the needs of local communities and tailor its services to meet those needs. The organisational structures I propose to put in place must facilitate that process.

In developing the proposals for that organisational structure I should like to involve the existing chief librarians and their deputies so that the local needs that they are already aware of can be reflected adequately, and that they have ownership of the outcome. Once that structure has been agreed it will be necessary to recruit the senior team — again, I emphasise, on a secondment basis — to help to make that a reality. As I have said, I see that senior team as being few in number.

The quality of the Library Service, now and in the future, is heavily dependent on the professionalism of the staff who work in it. This is an unsettling time for them, and I am very conscious of the need to ensure that the change process is handled sensitively and that staff are consulted and have an opportunity to contribute to the way forward. I will be taking as many opportunities as possible to visit libraries to meet staff and, indeed, customers and to hear from them the vision that they have for the public library service in the future.

My second priority relates to the financial systems. As a separate legal entity, the Northern Ireland library authority will need to have effective and efficient systems and procedures that comply with accounting and governance obligations. I understand that the Committee has recently received a copy of a report prepared by Deloitte on options for the financial systems for the new authority. Over the next few months it will be necessary to procure, design, test and implement an appropriate financial system and to facilitate the migration of relevant data from the education and library boards.

Given the importance of the human resource, financial functions and the financial aspect of the work over the next few months, I am seeking to engage a human resources project manager and a finance project manager from the education and library boards, again on a secondment basis, to assist with that work.

There will, of course, be other work ongoing on, for example, other corporate services, business planning, administrative functions, and so on. As far as I am concerned, the critical issue is to ensure that the structures and systems are in place to build on the developments in joint working at education and library board level and thus improve the quality of provision for the future.

I should be pleased to come back to the Committee at any stage, Mr Chairman, to update you on progress, and also to hear the Committee's views on the work that needs to be done.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Are there any additional comments?

Mr Poots: Not at this stage.

Mr McNarry: I welcome you, Minister, and your staff.

I can see that a helter-skelter approach to this Bill has been adopted by your officials — you and I have discussed this before, Minister. The project was well under way before you actually took office. I define the Libraries Bill as a rush job, and I think that sufficient evidence of that will be brought to you today. Certainly, I am glad to see that it is going to be up to the Assembly to divert you, because you gave no indication in your opening remarks that you are deviating from proceeding with the Bill and the dates.

There is no specific date in the Bill for the library authority to take over from the education and library boards, and the boards themselves have been given a stay of execution. However, not only are you rushing this Bill, you have already rushed into appointing a chief executive designate to a body that does not exist. Today, I hear from her that she is now recruiting staff. She has said that she is seeking to engage both a human resources project manager and a finance project manager on a secondment basis. Engage them for what purpose, and to what organisation? We do not have a library authority. Minister, how is it proposed that the chief executive designate will fulfil her job description while the education and library boards continue to function and there is no library authority?

Does the chief executive designate have an employment contract? Have other designated appointments been made? Has a recruitment process been activated beyond what the chief executive designate has told us? What costs are being borne by your Department in preparation for the establishment of the library authority?

There is no date for establishment of the authority; that will be for the Assembly to decide. Should the Assembly decide that the date will be late in 2008 or perhaps, as is more likely, that it will be in 2009, will all this not have been premature? What will happen to the appointment of the chief executive designate and to

other prospective appointments if the Assembly decides that it will not accept your rush job? The Assembly may conclude that a date in 2009 is preferable, and other colleagues will argue for such a date in line with RPA. In an era when the Finance Minister seems to be lecturing everyone on prudence — to steal a term from Gordon Brown — here you are, Minister, setting up a post for an organisation that does not exist. Staff have been appointed, and someone has been assigned to the most senior position — I do not know at what salary — in an organisation that does not exist, and the chief executive designate is now recruiting people to join her.

I do not fault the fact that preparation is a good thing, but premature preparation seems to be rather silly in this instance, and I am anxious to know the costs. If the library authority is not going to be established until 2009, what will those people do? What work will they do, who will they report to, and who will carry them? I do not think that the Assembly will respond positively to those costs if the authority is not going to be in place until 2009. I am interested to hear the Minister's comments.

Mr Poots: That is quite a range of questions, but I will try to cover them.

Mr McNarry: I have another question, but I do not want to mix different issues.

Mr Poots: The process started a long time ago. In fact, at that time, the Deputy Chairperson may have been involved in advising those who started the RPA process. Six years after the Assembly decided to have a review of public administration. When I was on the other side of the table, I thought it did not go far enough — it is now being implemented.

It is correct to say that I have been handed the issue of the single library authority and responsibility of delivering that part of RPA. I have no doubt that the single library authority will deliver greater efficiency savings than are currently being made. If the commitment were to efficiency savings alone, the library authority would have been kept with a single education authority, because that would have made for a more efficient body overall. However, it is much better to have a single library authority whose focus is exclusively on delivering quality library services to the public. Library services are not a small element in Northern Ireland; delivery costs are over £30 million. Those services should have their own silo, as opposed to being the poor relation in another Department. Therefore the basis for establishing a single library authority is good, and I encourage the Committee to hear the views of others on the issue.

I come before the Committee today, having obtained the Executive's agreement to proceed with a single library authority. Although I am conscious that 10 or

11 Members of the Assembly are not represented in the Executive, I have the support of the four parties that are represented in the Executive to deliver a single library authority in Northern Ireland, and that is the basis on which the Department is proceeding. When the point of deciding on the intention to go down that route is reached, it is for the Department to work with, and consult with, the Assembly and the Committee to deliver the library authority. The Department can say that it will do something and set a date for doing it, but it cannot achieve it by magic. Preparation work must be done first.

Therefore, with the agreement of the Executive, the Department has begun the preparation work needed to create a single library authority, the focus of which will be on delivering quality library services across Northern Ireland. We want to do that in a managed way and in a way that ensures that there is a seamless separation. We want to ensure that staff interests are not jeopardised. For example, if we do not employ people with expertise in corporate services and human resources, staff might not be paid, and that would be a wholly unacceptable situation. I have no apology to make for the work that is ongoing to take forward a policy that was agreed by the Executive.

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Minister. Is it not correct that the appointment of the chief executive designate was made before the Bill was brought before the Executive?

Mr Poots: The appointment was not made, but the process was in place.

Mr McNarry: The process was under way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr McNarry: I will not go into the details, but you were not fully aware of the circumstances at the time, Minister. The process was well under way, and I am not hanging that on you. However, I am asking you to consider that it was possibly foolish to continue with a process in which nothing has been put into place.

All you have is agreement from the Executive to take a particular route. However, that route ends at the Assembly and, given information that you will know as well as the Committee does, proceeding with the Bill with the intention of having arrangements in place in 2007-08 is unlikely to succeed.

Minister, I am challenging you to address the question of whether you are squandering public money on salaries that are not yet of use. I do not take issue with the need for a single library authority; I have supported that, despite having certain reservations. I am not taking issue with the outcome, but with the manner in which the process has been rushed and the squandering of public money on salaries. Where will that stop? I am glad to hear that two more people are

being considered for posts and that other staff are being considered. However, to whom will they work? I ask you to consider that in the light of what you and I know, Minister. I do not want you or anybody else to look foolish if the Assembly decides on a much later date for the setting up of the authority.

Mr Poots: In the first instance, staff will work to the chief executive designate, who will be their line manager. The chief executive designate will report through the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to the permanent secretary and, ultimately, to me.

As for dates, the Department inherited the date of 1 April 2008. We had to work to that date, because it was the date that the education authority —

Mr McNarry: You did not have to work to that date. Other Ministers changed decisions in light of RPA; will you not do the same?

Mr Poots: Members may have noticed that I phrased my answer in the past tense — the Department was working to that date, and had to do so because if the setting up of the education authority had failed to happen there would be no service for delivering the library authorities. We no longer have to work to the date of 1 April 2008, nor do we have to work to the date of 1 April 2009.

If the Committee agrees — and no doubt it will have further hearings on the matter — that a single library authority is the way forward, the Department and the Committee will work through the Bill to get that right. Ultimately, we do not need to be time bound. Nonetheless, the aspirational date of 1 April 2008 should not necessarily be removed: it is an aspiration; it is not set in stone. However, setting a date helps to generate momentum and drive for the Department to see things through to their conclusion. Having said that, meeting the deadline of 1 April 2008 was always going to be very challenging, and I am glad that we are no longer in the situation where we have to meet that date.

Nevertheless, we should not necessarily tie ourselves to the date on which the education and skills authority comes into being. The Department of Education has set an end date of 1 April 2009. However, the education and skills authority could be established before that date, although that is unlikely.

Once we have brought our work to a satisfactory conclusion, we can set the single library authority up. However, we should do so when we are satisfied that the date is right rather than wait for the education and skills authority to be established.

Mr McCarthy: What are the benefits of creating the library authority by March 2008 rather than waiting another year? Would it not be more sensible to wait until a decision has been made about the future of the

education and library boards before creating a single library authority?

Mr Poots: The decision to establish a single education and skills authority has not changed; the timing has changed. We are still engaged in the same process, even though the timeline has moved.

We have commenced work on the issue, and we are no longer under pressure to have it finished by a particular date. Once the problems and their solutions have been identified and addressed, there is no reason for waiting until 1 April 2009 to establish the education and skills authority. I am not insisting on 1 April 2008, which is an aspirational date; however, neither should we tie ourselves to the establishment of the library authority on 1 April 2009. The handover from the five education and library boards to the single library authority should be as seamless as possible, and I want to work with the Committee on how best to achieve that. Neither the Department nor the Committee should get hung up on dates; let us focus on delivering quality library services in the best way possible while looking at the best solutions.

Mr P Ramsey: You are very welcome, Minister. The single library authority was chosen as a good basis for creating professional partnership links with statutory, community, health, and education bodies. I agree that the single authority is the best way forward in library provision, but we must ensure that it brings benefits. You mentioned efficiency savings several times, Minister, but the change stems from a desire to improve rather than diminish services, and certainly not from a desire to make wide-ranging efficiency savings as part of the RPA.

To increase educational capacity in the community, lifelong learning and informal learning must be provided as part of the move. One in four adults in Northern Ireland has literacy and numeracy difficulties. What output will the new authority give to people and communities that face those difficulties?

Mr Poots: It would be appropriate to ask Irene to indicate how she wishes to see progress be made in that area, and how she intends to achieve that.

Miss Knox: I agree completely with Mr Ramsey that literacy levels, for example, are a major issue. People sometimes think of libraries as simply places from which to borrow a book. They play an important role in delivering a much wider agenda than that. I believe passionately that libraries have a critical role to play in the development of literacy levels among children and among adults. They have a huge role to play in community regeneration. There is a huge agenda for library services.

The benefit of the library authority will be that we can look regionally at how the library agenda is carried through. For example, partnerships can be developed

at a strategic level, but services must be delivered locally. A strategic approach will be needed from the centre — the library authority — but local engagement with further education (FE) colleges, local councils and local community sectors will also be required in order to meet local needs. A single library authority will allow strategic partnerships to develop across Departments, the FE sector and the community sector. However, the single authority will also help to develop those policies at a local level.

Mr P Ramsey: I have a few other questions. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) and other sources have raised their concerns with me. Library staff recognise the crucial role that libraries provide in delivering social learning and development. However, they fear that the drive to create a single authority will mean a rationalisation of services, a reduction in staff, and a reduction in the static and mobile provisions of the current library service. Can we have a commitment and a guarantee that those services will continue?

Another concern is whether there will be rural proofing. We all know the damage that Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS 14) caused. Its introduction brought about the closure of rural post offices and small rural schools. I hope that people in rural areas are treated equally by being given the same access to libraries as those in urban settings.

Equality legislation is also needed to guarantee services for the visually impaired and people with other disabilities. Those are the big concerns outside this Committee room. People want to see a single library authority, as long as it provides a better service, with more social inclusion and high levels of adult participation, which will give them greater confidence and prepare them for work. We want to have libraries across Northern Ireland that are centres of excellence and second to none. However, the proposed legislation does not provide that at present.

Mr Poots: I had the opportunity to visit the library in Mr Ramsey's city, and I was impressed by the numbers of young people who were using it. I was in the library in Coleraine, which offers computer and IT training services to the public. I have been to a range of libraries, and although I have been impressed by the services that are provided, those services are not consistent throughout. I think that the library authority will offer a more consistent service.

Inevitably, there will be a reduction in staff numbers at administration level. The purpose of the RPA was to reduce administration and introduce cost savings that could then be used for front-line services. I will not back off from reducing administration costs. My Department will fight its case with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to retain those savings,

which can then be used to deliver better front-line services.

All staff transfers are protected by the provisions of The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE). I do not like the term “natural wastage”, but we will consider giving people who are approaching retirement age, or who wish to retire, the opportunity to do that, and we will not be recruiting new staff to replace them. That is how we will be seeking to reduce administration costs.

At an early point, those provisions should deliver savings of £600,000 and, at a later point, should deliver savings of £1.2 million. If we do not deliver those savings, the Department of Finance and Personnel will want to know why, because that was what was set out at the outset. We will work with the staff on all of that. In my view, the trade unions are quite pleased with the idea of a single library authority, provided that they have some guarantees that their staff will be treated fairly.

I can again indicate that the trade unions are wholly opposed to the library authority coming under the remit of local government — they can give the reasons for that themselves. I trust that that gives you some comfort about how the staffing issues will be addressed.

Mr P Ramsey: Regarding equality issues and rural proofing, I accept the point about the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, we are not going to improve people’s education, and therefore their opportunities for work, by taking that level of money out of the service.

Regarding the location of the library authority, I hope that it is not just talk about having subregional forums or panels. I hope that they are going to be structured and that there is a place to ensure that people in the subregions have ownership of that single library authority.

Mr Poots: I would love the headquarters to be modest and to house a modest number of staff. Some people talked previously about a chief executive with eight deputies. That will not be the case. There was some confusion with the education authorities. A maximum of three individuals will head the key and corporate services in the authority, and they will not have deputy chief executive status.

We all know that rural life has become more difficult in recent years. Planning has played a key role in that, and a lot of services have been removed from our towns and villages. Services such as filling stations, shops, restaurants and pubs, which are associated with local villages, have disappeared.

Ultimately, we, as the public sector, need to consider how best to deliver services in rural areas. I want a

more joined-up approach with other service providers in those areas. I have said this before: whether it is the local authority that is providing the community centre or the libraries, or it is the GPs who are providing services, if we can get all those services under one roof, there will be a much more sustainable facility.

One of the issues that I will want to give direction on to a future chief executive of a single library authority is that we should consider how we can join public services in rural areas up so that they can be delivered at the lowest cost to the public sector but with the highest possible service to the public. That is something that I will be aspiring to do. Rural issues are very close to my heart, and I want to see the library services continuing to be delivered in those areas.

The mobile library — which is something that I should declare a personal interest in, as my father uses that service — provides a lifeline to many people who are housebound or who have mobility difficulties. That is certainly a service that I want to see continued and not reduced in any way.

Mr Shannon: Minister, you are welcome to the Committee. It is good to see you here. It appears that the chief executive of the proposed library authority, whoever that may be, will have to do much more than an ordinary chief executive.

I want to reiterate Mr Ramsey’s question about rural proofing. I welcome the Minister’s response about the importance of the Library Service to the rural community, especially mobile libraries. I hope that that can be built on and encouraged rather than minimised in any way.

I have two questions for the Minister. The first relates to discussions with the education and library boards. What discussions have taken place between your Department and the education and library boards, and what has been the initial response from the boards? I know that board members will be attending a meeting of the Committee in a fortnight’s time, but I am curious to know about the Minister’s initial discussions with the boards.

Secondly, the Minister rightly indicated that moneys will be saved after the introduction of the new Libraries Bill; that is to be welcomed. However, would it not have been better value for money if that money had been used to keep the current Library Service in place before dismantling it?

Mr Poots: I will ask Mr Jack to respond on the level of discussion that has taken place with the education and library boards. I have a caveat; I am not sure what the education boards or authorities would want to say when they appear before the Committee. However, it may be in their interests to retain libraries within the education authority, as it would constitute a larger empire than the two being separated. The Department

and the Committee will focus on the delivery of quality library services to the public and on finding the best way to do that.

Mr Colin Jack (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): There has been significant ongoing engagement with the education and library boards since the decision to opt for a single regional library authority was announced by direct rule Ministers in 2006. A meeting was held between the then Minister with responsibility for culture, arts and leisure, David Hanson, and the chairpersons of the boards. Since then, regular meetings have taken place between the permanent secretary and the chief executives of the boards, approximately every six months, and there have been more frequent meetings between the Department and the chief librarians and other significant officers in the boards, such as chief finance officers, who will be involved in the implementation.

The Department of Education has established structures for the new education and skills authority. As issues will arise that will be in common with the establishment of the library authority, the Department has engaged in those structures along with the education and library boards. The chief executive designate has already initiated a round of meetings with all the boards, and there will be meetings between the Minister and the boards later this week at chairman and chief executive level.

Mr Poots: In answer to the second question, there will be set-up costs — identified at some £670,000 — which have been secured to deliver the single library authority. Ultimately, I go back to what I said at the start: we will move when we are ready to move, and that will happen in the most efficient and seamless way possible so that the transfer can take place from the education and library boards to a single library authority with the least impact on staff and services. That timescale should not be set by arbitrary dates — either an early or late date. It should focus on delivering the transfer in the most efficient way possible.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Minister's response.

Mr P Maskey: The work of the Committee is concerned with how best to professionalise the service provided by libraries in the best way possible. Some of the issues that I want to mention have already been touched on, but perhaps they could be discussed in a wee bit more depth. The changes will affect rural and urban areas, and areas of high deprivation. Is anything specific planned for those areas where people may find it difficult to buy books or to have the Internet installed in their homes?

The importance of working with chief librarians and their deputies was mentioned. I want to know how exactly that work will enable staff at lower grades to voice their opinions on the Libraries Bill. That is

important, because from talking to library staff, it is clear that each knows how best to run their libraries. Therefore, we should not get stuck on talking to chief librarians and the most senior Library Service staff; we must work out how best to consult those who work in the libraries.

We will be talking to union representatives in the next few weeks, and we will obviously listen to the views of many of the stakeholders. It is good that we will have the chance to do that. However, I am sure that the Minister is aware that all the groups that will give evidence to the Committee will raise concerns. Therefore we must listen to and process those concerns.

I am glad to hear that the front-line services will not be hit. However, we must work out how to professionalise those services to ensure that more people use libraries and to ensure that we use libraries to help education provision generally.

Mr Poots: Internet access has provided a lifeline to many in the immigrant community. Many such people who are working in Northern Ireland use the Internet extensively to retain contact with their friends and families. A new single library authority will operate under the principles of targeting social need, which covers all Departments. Working under those principles, my Department will consider what it can do.

Irene will explain how she intends to cut through senior management and talk to library staff about how best to deliver services.

Miss Knox: The establishment of a new library authority represents a major change process for staff, among whom there is a great deal of concern about what is happening. As I said in my introductory remarks, I want to talk to staff. Library staff know what is required, and their managers should also be aware of those requirements. I have already visited each of the chief librarians, many of whom took me to some of their branch libraries to meet staff. I intend to spend more time getting out and meeting people to find out what they want.

It is also important that I set up consultation mechanisms with staff. In addition to doing that through the trade unions, the library authority will provide opportunities for non-union staff to communicate their views on what should happen in the future.

Mr Maskey mentioned professionalising the service and its staff. The new authority will be able to examine strategically the training needs of library staff and to work effectively with providers on how to ensure that staff receive the necessary training. That will differ greatly from the training that I received 20 years ago as a librarian; life has moved on, and libraries — and the needs of the people who use them — have changed. The new library authority must ensure that staff have

the necessary skills to provide the required level of service.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister and his staff for coming this morning. I shall ask a simple question first: how much was bid for the new library authority for 2008-09? If that amount is greater than what the Department currently spends on the library service, by how much? That is the easy question — your starter for 10.

The Minister knows that a series of issues will arise. However, I want to discuss structures and mechanisms, which have been mentioned. The feeling of a cold, efficient and remote service is beginning to form in my mind. A library should be a warm and welcoming place for everyone, from the smallest customer who comes in at two or three years of age to the elderly lady or gentleman who tootles in for a book once a week or once a month.

I will cite an example of what happened under the former regime. A library was closed down despite being based in a community school on the fringes of a marginalised community. What impact had that on the community? Great opportunities to learn, to introduce children to the joys of reading, to get teenagers in the nearby youth club involved in research and all sorts of programmes, were lost.

Can you or Miss Knox assure me that the new system — efficient and cost effective as it may be — will deliver the warm, caring, helpful, developing service that those communities and individuals need?

Mr Poots: Having sat with you on the former Committee of the Centre for years, Ken, I was concerned when you said that you would ask a simple question. I knew that that phrase was the preamble to an awkward question. I do not have figures for the Department's bids for funding for the year 2008-09. I assure members that the Department bids for more funding than it currently receives. That is how we operate; we always ask for more.

Mr K Robinson: I am surprised to hear that, Minister. I thought that your Department's bid would be absolutely accurate and in keeping with the facts.

Mr Poots: No. My Department bids for a little more than it would normally anticipate receiving.

I cannot tell the Committee that no libraries will ever be closed during my term of office. It would be wrong of me to do that. My Department's desire is not to close libraries, but to provide a better service to the public. Closing libraries does not help the Department to provide a better service. In the past, certain libraries may have been not well used for particular reasons. In any future discussions on whether to close libraries, the arguments for closure would have to be strong to persuade the Department to take such action.

Ultimately, if certain libraries are in difficulty or are not attracting people, we need to look first at why that is happening and see whether the issues can be addressed so as to get more people through the doors of those libraries and ensure that those services are properly utilised. Closure should be the last option. That is the direction that my Department will take.

Mr K Robinson: Minister, is Irene going to address my question on the warm, caring ethos of the modern and future library?

Mr Poots: Absolutely.

Miss Knox: Libraries are a valuable resource for the community. Young babies are brought in by their mothers and are introduced to books at an early stage in life; teenagers come in to do homework; members of immigrant populations come in to use the Internet; and elderly people's use of libraries may form an important aspect of their contact with the public. Libraries play those roles in communities, and I intend to ensure that they continue to do that for the whole community.

Libraries must be welcoming, or people will not use them. No one forces anyone to enter a library. Use of libraries is not compulsory and there is no eligibility or entry requirement to be met. People enter libraries voluntarily, so they must be welcoming.

Mr K Robinson: We all agree with you that libraries must be welcoming. The danger, however, is that the members of staff most likely to leave under the new regime are those with the most warm and welcoming attitude. The service will lose those experienced members of staff. Every organisation that modernises and becomes more efficient becomes more remote and less welcoming to its customers, in whatever business it operates. How will you address that potential loss of those staff members who form the core of the system? I do not mean those at the top of the organisation, but rather those whom you meet while walking through the library. If they are cold and remote in their attitude, customers will not want to be in the library and will want to leave.

Miss Knox: The Library Service needs to retain front-line staff. Those who work at the front line in branch libraries are those who have an interest in helping the public, and we must retain them. As the Minister said, the central administration needs to be looked at.

Staff will always leave the service, through natural wastage, retirement, and so on. However, we must ensure sure that younger front-line staff joining the service understand the type of ethos that should exist in our libraries and that they have the skills to deliver the kind of warm, welcoming service about which the member spoke.

Mr K Robinson: Is a training programme in place?

Miss Knox: We do not have a training programme in place yet, but there will be one.

Mr K Robinson: It worries me that the service will become more like commercial businesses, where customers are welcomed with the question: "What do you want?" The next step on from that is: "We do not have it."

Mr Poots: I encourage Committee members to visit some libraries. I have visited several libraries, and members will find that they are welcoming environments. They are not like the libraries that I remember as a 10- or 11-year-old child, where the atmosphere was quiet and people had to move around silently looking for books. Libraries have moved on, and our larger modern libraries are certainly more vibrant places nowadays. I encourage Committee members to get out there. Mention was made about talking to the staff who deliver front-line services, and it would be useful for the Committee to talk to such staff.

Mr K Robinson: This morning, my wife was talking to a librarian in my house, so I am ahead of the Minister on that one.

Mr Poots: The Committee will find that those people are keen to have a bigger focus on libraries and on the service that they provide.

Mr D Bradley: Maidin mhaith, a Chathaoirleach. Good morning, Minister. Tá céad míle fáilte romhat go dtí an Coiste.

Minister, I wrote to you on 25 July 2007 about the consultancy exercise that is being carried out by Deloitte. I had several concerns about that matter, one of which was the unholy haste with which we were proceeding with the single libraries authority, without due knowledge of the costs involved. I was also concerned that the Committee was not properly informed about that particular consultancy and that, to some extent, we were working in the dark.

Minister, I thank you for your response, dated 8 August 2007, in which you state that before a decision was taken to create a free-standing library authority, an exercise had been undertaken to identify the hidden corporate costs of delivering the public library service. Paragraph 14 of the explanatory and financial memorandum to the Bill states that:

"An exercise to identify the cost of the support services is underway."

Will you comment on the outcome of that exercise and tell us how it has informed the process?

Mr Poots: As regards haste, I explained at the start of the meeting that from 19 July 2007, we were operating under a different scenario, which changed the situation considerably. We are happy to work

within the new parameters, but we nonetheless seek to deliver as efficiently as possible.

We must remember what the Deloitte report is about. I will use an analogy: it is akin to someone deciding to open a shop, choosing the right location, and then bringing people in to see how it will be fitted out. The report is concerned with drilling down to the detail of how corporate services will be delivered.

The Chairperson: The report also deals with financial systems, does it not?

Mr Poots: It deals with financial systems and gets down to the detail. The big decision is made on the basis of the prevailing evidence; more detail is then needed when making the smaller decisions. The report identifies how we can best deliver financial services. The view now is that we should use the DCAL system to deliver financial services to the other non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) in DCAL's remit. I think that that was the recommendation from Deloitte, but I may stand to be corrected.

Mr Jack: The Department has the Deloitte report and has shared it with the Committee. However, consideration of the report's recommendations is still at an early stage, and the Department will need to work with the Minister and the chief executive designate to determine the best options. Deloitte has made certain recommendations, and we will need to consider those carefully.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister assure the Committee that it will be kept informed when the Department is undertaking that work?

Earlier, the chief executive designate spoke earlier about the changing role of libraries. Obviously, we live in a changing society. However, many people's view is that libraries play a passive role in education, lifelong learning, and in the communities in which they are set. Will the Minister and chief executive designate assure the Committee that, under the single library authority, libraries will play a more dynamic and vibrant role in education, in lifelong learning and in their host communities; and will they explain how that is to be achieved?

Mr Poots: Earlier, I said that when we visited libraries we found that opportunities were being taken; for example, in IT training. In addition, some libraries were bringing people in for reading sessions while others were placing emphasis on young people who were involved in examinations. I have also said that one of the problems is that there is a degree of "ad hoc-ery" taking place.

My Department's vision is for a flexible and responsive Library Service that provides a dynamic focal point in communities and assists people to fulfil their potential and having a single library authority

and a chief executive can bring a focus to lifelong learning and to all of the areas to which Mr Bradley has referred. The Library Service, as it stands, is being delivered through five discrete streams with differing priorities.

Miss Knox: I believe passionately that libraries should be a dynamic focal point for local communities. However, that cannot be the case unless they become active participants in the processes within the local community that determine the needs of that community and how services should be delivered. A lot of work has been done by the education and library boards over the past few years. However, we now have an opportunity to take that work a step further by taking a strategic approach across Northern Ireland and starting to build the partnerships that are required at strategic and local levels.

In many instances, I believe that libraries should lead the way in delivering a much broader social and educational agenda, and they should examine how they can play a very active role; whether it is in working with local further education colleges, schools, community groups or councils.

Lord Browne: I should like to take Dominic's question a little bit further. One of the main components in delivering a high-quality service is cost, and although the Committee is in possession of quite a lot of documentation from Deloitte, it is difficult to quantify costs when those for corporate services, in particular, have not been identified. I know that there are difficulties because Library Service corporate and support services are part of the general administration of the education and library boards. However, it is very difficult for the Committee to make informed decisions when it is not in possession of the figures for all of the costs.

We are in danger of proceeding at a very fast rate. I do not know when the Deloitte report on options for the provision of corporate services will be completed. Is there a date by which that report will be available?

We are proceeding rapidly along a particular track, and until decisions on RPA and on the future of the education and library boards are made, it will be difficult for the Committee to make informed decisions.

Mr Poots: The Department is waiting for the report from Deloitte. As has been indicated, the costs of delivering corporate services for libraries has been hidden in the larger education and library services pot, and there has been no division as yet. At some point, the cost of providing corporate services will be determined through best assumptions, as opposed to being able to say definitively how much it costs the education and library boards to provide those services to the library sector.

The cost of delivering corporate services is significant, and I have no doubt that DCAL's views on those costs will differ from those of the education and library boards and that there will be quite a debate as to what the costs really are. We will have to drill down to get general agreement on the costs and on how they can be rolled over to the new single library authority.

Mr McCausland: In this morning's presentation, the Minister spoke about a strong subregional structure. What will that mean in practice? Will it mean staff, buildings, or a committee at a subregional level? What powers would such a committee have?

Mr Poots: Any subregional structure would have to be based on the number of council areas that are agreed through the RPA and on how DCAL will work with those councils on delivering library services in their areas. In many cases the issue will be about how public services can be delivered in a more joined-up fashion; for example, whether we should have GP surgeries, libraries and community centres under one roof, or have a mix-and-match of services, which would be provided in ways that are not currently available. If services cannot be delivered to the public in a more comprehensive fashion, we will have failed.

Community planning will be a key element of RPA and it will play a key role in delivering library services and those provided by local authorities.

Miss Knox: As the Minister has said, the establishment of subregional structures will depend on the number of local councils there will be as a result of RPA. If the Library Service is to deliver co-ordinated and joined-up services, we must ensure that that is achieved coterminously with other local planning arrangements. The community planning process will be extremely important in delivering such a co-ordinated approach, and there will need to be structures in the regional library authority that will co-operate and work locally with bodies to ensure that such co-ordination is achieved.

That does not mean that large numbers of staff will be involved in co-ordination work. Such staff will be based in libraries, and we will need to use those libraries as the bases for going out into the local community, through a subregional structure, to ensure that we are co-operating with people locally.

Mr McCausland: I accept that such staff may be based in library buildings — it makes good economic sense. However, I am not clear about what they will be doing and to whom they will be answerable. How will local input take place? Will it only come about through community planning or will it take place with the local authority in some other way?

Miss Knox: My thinking on these matters is still at an early stage as I have been in post for just two weeks. Through meetings with chief librarians and

other members of staff, I am discussing how we can deliver local involvement and engagement; and as part of that process I will be talking to people in the community about how we can establish the subregional structure that I have spoken about. I cannot give the member a detailed answer yet, but I will be looking at the points he has raised immediately and I will be happy to come back to the Committee to speak about them in more detail when my thinking on the matter is clearer.

Mr Poots: In our discussions with the Minister of the Environment we considered how best DCAL could work with local authorities to deliver library services in their areas if responsibility for libraries is not to go to councils. We also discussed the type of services that local authorities would wish to provide.

The Department has not done anything definitive in that area and is seeking to engage on how best to proceed. We would welcome feedback from the Committee to help us come to a decision.

Mr McCausland: I raised the matter because it is not mentioned in the legislation. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw reference to it this morning as I am keen that there should be as much local input as possible, particularly through elected representatives at council level. Has the idea of a subregional structure emerged recently? Is it a new development?

Mr Poots: It was something I discussed with Minister Foster, because if we go for a single library authority then we would not want such a body to be remote. Delivering library services at subregional level is important. However, I am not sure about the time frame or whether the Department had been working on it previously.

Mr Jack: The Department was keeping a close eye on the discussions about community planning because we saw the process as one in which we would like the library authority to engage proactively. We had discussions about the type of legislation that would confer a duty on the authority to participate in the community planning process. The conclusion of those early discussions was that such provision would more properly be for inclusion in legislation that puts the community planning process in place rather than in legislation concerning libraries. The Department has had local engagement at the forefront of its thoughts from the outset.

The Chairperson: We will move to a conclusion, as I am mindful that the Minister has been very generous with his time. I ask Kieran McCarthy and David McNarry for last comments.

Mr McCarthy: I want to return to a response that the Minister gave to Pat Ramsey earlier. The question concerned possible cutbacks in staff, or redundancies. I was not happy with the response, because the Minister

immediately mentioned senior staff. The age of ageism is past. Senior staff have made an enormous contribution to the Library Service and they should not be put under pressure when change takes place.

The Chairperson: If David would make his point now, the Minister could give a composite answer.

Mr McNarry: The start-up costs for the so-called small unit for 2007-08 have been estimated at £670,000: £380,000 for staff salaries; £200,000 for consultancy; £85,000 for premises, and £6,000 for support for board members, whatever that entails. It appears that, as the Minister has said, there is cover for the in-year monitoring bid. However, will new contingency cost factors create different figures? In light of the Deloitte consultancy exercise, it is expected that corporate services will require the figures to be revised upwards. What does the Minister now estimate the start-up costs to be? He might need to come back to the Committee with those figures. What impact would delaying a start-up to 2009-10, for example, have on those costs? How confident is the Minister that he can sustain his monitoring bid beyond 2007-08?

Mr Poots: The estimated start-up costs are still £670,000. That is the Department's bid, and it will seek to manage with that sum.

Mr McNarry: Is the Minister saying that the costs will be the same in two years' time?

Mr Poots: No. The establishment of the library authority will incur certain costs. However, the start-up costs — the costs of putting in place the structures that are necessary to create the single library authority — are £670,000. The Department has estimated that initial savings from the delivery of those services will be around £600,000 and that they will rise to around £1.2 million per annum. Costs may be incurred in order to reach the point at which such savings can be made.

The member asked what the costs would be if the Department were to delay the introduction of the library authority until 2009-10. The Department has no intention to delay until then; indeed, it has indicated that it will progress at the appropriate time. It has, therefore, not worked out the costs of such a delay. If the Department were to decide to hold back for a year, there would be additional costs.

Mr McNarry: If you will permit me to do so, Chairman, and with all due respect to the Minister, I must point out that he has also been telling the Committee about appropriate times, and so on, with regard to the stadium. Can he not give us a date? It is difficult for the Committee to work towards an outcome when it does not know when that will occur.

Mr Poots: The Department provided a date, which was 1 April 2008.

Mr McNarry: The Minister said that the Department could move from that date.

Mr Poots: Yes. The Committee's desire this morning appears to be that the Department should not be bound by the date of 1 April 2008 and that it should consider delaying the matter until 1 April 2009. First, I am not sure that the Department could wait until 2009, given that the education and library boards may not wait until then. Secondly, if its work has been completed and the best solutions have been identified, why should the Department wait until 1 April 2009? Therefore the date of 1 April 2008 is aspirational.

On the other hand, why should the Department force itself to do something on 1 April 2008 if it is not ready to do so — just because that date has been set? Ultimately, the Department will move forward when the time is right. The momentum to deliver the new service on 1 April 2008 exists, and that momentum must be maintained.

Mr McNarry: That momentum has come from the Minister and his Department since the start. They are rushing the matter.

Mr Poots: That momentum existed before I came into office. The establishment of the single library authority was agreed by the Executive, and the appointment of the chief executive designate and the team will help keep that momentum going. I do not see any reason to stop the momentum if that is the desired outcome.

With regard to Mr McCarthy's comments, the Department is not seeking any enforced redundancies. Staff will have an opportunity to take other positions and will also have the option to retire if that is what they wish to do. However, no one will be forced to do so. Ultimately, the Department is seeking to deliver savings in administration, and that will require fewer staff in the administration of library services rather than at the front line.

Mr McCarthy: I am glad to hear that senior staff are not to be targeted.

The Chairperson: By using the word "senior", do you mean age, Kieran?

Mr McCarthy: Yes.

Mr Shannon: Speaking as a 63-year-old, I am relieved to hear it.

The Chairperson: I thank the Minister, Colin and Irene for speaking to the Committee. I have no doubt that we will meet again.

Mr Poots: Thank you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Thursday 6 September 2007

HEALTH (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL (NIA 2/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Rev Dr Robert Coulter
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Witnesses:

Mr John Farrell	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Ms Christine Jendoubi		
Mr Robert Kirkwood		
Mr Donncha O'Carolan	}	Acting Chief Dental Officer

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Ms Christine Jendoubi, Mr John Farrell, Mr Robert Kirkwood and Mr Donncha O'Carolan, who are here to provide clarification and answer questions as the Committee commences its clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. Members have been provided with much written material, including a copy of the Bill, a detailed commentary and a copy of extracts from the legislation that the Bill seeks to amend. Members will recall that oral evidence was taken from groups before recess and that further written submissions were received over the summer.

Members should use the notes on the clauses that were prepared by the Department and which were circulated last week and the document provided by Committee staff at tab 4. The Committee will have several options on each clause. Before inviting the Committee to choose an option, I will ask the officials

to outline briefly the purpose and meaning of each clause. Members may then seek clarification.

Following discussion with officials on each clause and the potential for amendment, the options available to the Committee will be: first, to declare itself content with the clause as drafted; secondly, to agree the potential for amendment and request that the Department consider the matter and report its position to the Committee — and by doing so defer consideration of the clause. If an amendment is considered appropriate, the Committee can invite the Department to say whether it would be willing to undertake the drafting of such an amendment.

Clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill will now commence. At tab 4 of the papers there is a list of suggested questions on each clause that have arisen from the written submissions. Members may wish to use those during discussions.

Clause 1 (Persons performing primary medical services: listing subject to conditions)

Ms Christine Jendoubi (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Bill amends The Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, which is Northern Ireland's main primary health legislation. The amendments relate to primary care arrangements and specifically to family practitioner services. The Bill also amends The Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, as Kevin Shiels described earlier.

Clause 1 relates to primary medical services. It provides for a person's inclusion — or continued inclusion — on the list of persons performing primary medical services to be subject to conditions. That is a new provision. It also provides for there to be one list for Northern Ireland, instead of the current four. That means that if a person is removed from the list, he or she will be unable to practise anywhere in Northern Ireland. At the moment, if someone is removed from one of the lists, he or she can still practise in the other three board areas.

That concludes my remarks on clause 1. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: If you do not mind, I will kick off. Clause 1 provides for a change from separate board lists to a regional list of primary medical services performers. By and large, that is generally welcomed. However, clause 1 also deals with the conditions for inclusion or continued inclusion on the list. The British Medical Association (BMA) has called for a suspension framework and a right of appeal against suspension. Is a right of appeal provided for in the Bill?

Ms Jendoubi: We will discuss how the tribunal deals with these matters later, but, in general, the Bill

does not provide for a right of appeal against suspension. It provides for a right of appeal against removal from the performers' list, but that already exists, as far as general practitioners (GPs) are concerned. Other provisions in the Bill extend the performers' list regulations to pharmacists, dentists and opticians, and a right of appeal will extend to them, too. However, at the moment, it does not provide a right of appeal against suspension.

That raises an interesting issue: the assertion that suspension is a neutral act has been challenged. The matter was put to bed by the Appeal Court ruling in the Mezey case, which found that it was not a neutral act. It is neutral in so far as it does not prejudice the outcome of a disciplinary investigation, but it has an effect on the individual concerned and their capacity to work.

The Chairperson: The BMA is very keen on the right to appeal, and Kieran, as a GP, may want to comment on that.

Dr Deeny: As a primary care professional, I believe that the Bill should make some allowance for a right of appeal. If I were suspended tomorrow, it would leave me in a dreadful situation professionally. It is very wrong that medical professionals do not have the basic right of appeal that every member of the public is entitled to in law. It leaves the profession very hard done by. I back the BMA completely on this: provision for a right of appeal should be built into the Bill.

Mr John Farrell (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The health board would have to have reasonable grounds for suspending a GP. There would have to be clear criteria: suspension would not occur willy-nilly. The legislation does not contain the detail of the conditions that could apply when a suspension takes place; that detail will emerge in the regulations. However, the Department proposes to provide clear guidance on cases in which a suspension could be made. We will refer to the Appeal Court ruling on the Mezey case, which sets out the types of conditions that could apply.

Mr Robert Kirkwood (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): May I clarify the point? Clause 1 is specific to general practitioners — it applies to no other profession. Clause 1 amends article 57G of the Order, and nowhere in the clause is provision made for suspension. As Christine said, clause 1 simply amends a paragraph of article 57G to allow for subordinate legislation that would provide for one list, rather than requiring GPs to be on the list of the board in whose area they perform services. It also proposes new paragraphs (3A) and (3B), which allow for regulations to set out conditions for inclusion or continued inclusion on the list — the board can include somebody on a list, subject to conditions.

For example, a health and social services board that considers a GP who is returning from maternity leave to be falling short in some areas of her practice must ask that GP to undertake training to compensate for those deficiencies. When the practitioner had done so, she may apply to be included on a list so that she can provide services in the board's area. It is a relaxation of the present provisions because it allows a board to put a practitioner on its list, subject to conditions.

The Bill also introduces an alternative to suspension. For example, if a board feels that a practitioner who is already on its list is falling short in one of his her competencies, it does not automatically have to suspend the practitioner. It will allow the board to discuss any problems that the GP may have so that a solution can be worked out amicably between them. The GP will remain on the list, but subject to conditions. That is what the clause does — no more and no less. Suspension —

Dr Deeny: Is the word “suspension” used?

Mr Kirkwood: No. The provision for suspension is already included in The Primary Medical Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, which inserted article 57G into the 1972 Order. The primary provision for suspension of GPs already exists — but only for GPs. The Bill has clauses that make provision for other practitioners such as dentists, pharmacists and opticians. The enabling power that clause 1 introduces is to draft regulations to amend The Health and Personal Social Services (Primary Medical Services Performers Lists) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 list regulations, to move away from four lists to one list, and to introduce the conditions of conditional inclusion and contingent removal.

Dr Deeny: Suspension without the right of appeal sounds like guilty until proven innocent.

Mr Kirkwood: Clause 1 does not mention suspension of a GP. The primary power to suspend a GP already exists. The performers' list regulations will be amended to include suspension of a GP. The regulations will set out in detail how that is to be done, the involvement of the National Clinical Assessment Service (NCAS) in such a suspension, and the period of suspension. That will be set out in regulations that will come before the Committee before consultation. You may say that there must be a right of appeal against suspension; however, there is no such right in England, Wales and Scotland.

The BMA has debated the matter at length. Northern Ireland is not going any further than England, Scotland and Wales; why should Northern Ireland be different from the established arrangements in England, Scotland and Wales?

Ms Jendoubi: As Robert says, the Committee can discuss that matter when the regulations have been introduced.

Mr Kirkwood: The regulations will cover the issue, but clause 1 relates only to GPs. It amends article 57G of The Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 concerning primary medical services and relates solely to GPs. Similar provisions are made in subsequent clauses of the Bill for ophthalmic, pharmaceutical and dental services. However, clause 1 will enable boards to move from a four-list system to one regional list, and it introduces powers of conditional inclusion and contingent removal, which, I feel, is beneficial, as it will give boards the power to put someone on their list. It will also allow them to introduce conditions rather than simply take the ultimate decision to suspend. The situations in which that option would apply will be set out in amendments to the performers' list regulations. The legislation will appear as an SL1 letter to the Committee, setting out the policy decisions that will be implemented in the amending regulations.

The Chairperson: There will be opportunity to discuss that matter later; however, I want to move on.

Dr Deeny: These matters are of extreme interest to me. I agree entirely that four boards give the impression that there are four different health systems here. I believe that my practice is the only one that takes patients from three different health boards, and for many years I have seen the problems that that creates, so changing the system is a good idea. However, I am suspicious about using the word "suspension" to someone who might lose his livelihood without the right to appeal; it is irrelevant that there is no such right in England, Wales or Scotland.

Mr Kirkwood: That is a debate for another day. Clause 1 is not concerned with those matters, and to debate them would be outwith its provisions. I know that because it is a miscellaneous provisions Bill; it jumps from here to there and is very hard to follow; but that is what it does.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Perhaps this is a question for Kevin Shiels, but in order to include the point that Kieran Deeny made, will there be an opportunity to amend the clause rather than add to it? Can we amend what is already there?

Ms Jendoubi: That would require an amendment to The Primary Medical Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2004.

Mr Kirkwood: What sort of amendment do you want to make?

Ms Ní Chuilín: One that would address the point that Kieran raised. What happens here matters to him.

Mr Kirkwood: Yes, but Dr Deeny was talking about suspension; clause 1 does not cover suspension. An amendment could not be tabled to something that is not in the clause.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is fair enough.

Mr Kirkwood: I hope that I have clarified the effect of the provisions of the clause.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The point that I want to make, and which the BMA raised with us, is about how the costs of suspension would be covered.

Mr Kirkwood: There are provisions —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Are there detailed provisions for costs and how they will be contained?

Mr Kirkwood: There is already provision for the payment of suspended practitioners in The Primary Medical Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, so there is no need for new primary legislation to cover that. There is already subordinate legislation that makes provision to pay a GP suspended by the tribunal or by the Interim Orders Committee. Once we introduce provision for health boards to use powers of suspension, we will amend the subordinate legislation to include that provision. We do not need new primary legislation to introduce that, so we do not need to include references to such payments in the Bill.

The Chairperson: The health and social services councils of Northern Ireland have called for the amendment: "preventing unsuitable inclusion by virtue of professional or personal conduct" to be added to the conditions provided for in regulations. Is that already covered, and should it be added if it is not covered?

Mr Kirkwood: It is not covered. The BMA picked that up with regard to the new condition that will be introduced for the jurisdiction of the tribunal on grounds of unsuitability by professional or personal conduct. The conditions that are being imposed relate to people who are to be included on a list or who are already included on a list. The reason that the unsuitability provision is not included is that there are no degrees of unsuitability: if a practitioner is unsuitable, he or she cannot be on a list and must be removed or suspended. If a board says that someone is unsuitable to be on a list for a professional or personal reason, it cannot impose conditions on the practitioner, because that person will already have been taken off the list. That is similar to the situation in England, Scotland and Wales.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Provision of dental services)

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 2 introduces new arrangements for the provision of general dental services. It places a

duty on each health and social services board to provide or to secure the provision of primary dental services in its area, to the extent that the board considers necessary to meet the needs of its area. Clause 2 also enables boards to enter into contracts with general dental practitioners to provide dental services for their areas.

The provisions in question introduce a range of regulation-making powers. Some respondents to the consultation complained about the lack of specificity of many of the provisions of the Bill. The reason for the lack of specificity is that they are regulation-making powers: the detail and underpinning measures that will allow for the implementation of the provisions of the 1972 Order will come before the Committee as regulations in due course.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That makes no sense to me. There is nothing specific in the Bill, yet we are being asked to regulate something that is not specific.

Mr Kirkwood: What Christine is saying is that the Bill introduces enabling powers to make regulations to enter into dental contracts. Many of the comments from the consultation referred to the lack of specific detail and wanted to know what would go into the contracts. Christine is saying that that issue will be dealt with further down the line.

The detail will be set out in the contract regulations that will come before the Committee; many of the new provisions are technical. Proposed new articles 60A to 61F will replace article 61 of the 1972 Order. That is it in a nutshell. Clause 2 introduces enabling powers to make regulations for entry into a general dental services contract. The terms of that contract are still being negotiated by the British Dental Association (BDA).

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the regulations come before the Committee?

Mr Kirkwood: Yes. The enabling powers that have been drafted are more or less identical to the primary powers for the general medical services contract: “Each Health and Social Services Board shall, to the extent that it considers necessary to meet all reasonable requirements, exercise its powers so as to provide primary dental services within its area, or secure their provision within its area.”

Regulations will be written around that idea. Performers’ lists regulations will be written for dentists. There will be contract regulations. The regulations for the general medical services contract are like a book. The contract, its contents and how it will operate still need to be negotiated. Clause 2 introduces an enabling power to facilitate the writing of regulations that will surround the contract and the boards’ entry into contracts with dentists.

Mrs Hanna: The matter is daunting for the Committee because it has concerns; it is, however,

unsure of the stage at which it should talk about those concerns. Everyone wants the new services to have a positive effect. I hear a great deal from my constituents about the lack of National Health Service (NHS) doctors. There are concerns about the fact that what happens in England and Wales is being more or less copied here. The situation seems similar. I want to be sure that I know when I must intervene and express my concern about how targets will be set and measured and, indeed, about the availability of pilot schemes. I presume that now is not the stage to raise those concerns. However, I want to know when the Committee will have the opportunity to do so.

The Chairperson: I have concerns that so many NHS dentists are removing themselves from the system and into private dental care and about the lack of dental practices.

Ms Jendoubi: We hope that when a contract has been agreed by the BDA it will be piloted across Northern Ireland before it is rolled out. The contract must be underpinned by regulations that will prescribe with whom health boards can enter into a contract, what the contract needs to cover, and dental practitioners’ and boards’ responsibilities under the contract.

Services that can be contracted separately outwith the general dental services contract, such as those of individual, high-street dentists — orthodontists, for example — might be covered by a separate personal dental services contract under primary dental services. The underpinning legislation needs the primary powers of the Bill to enable the Department to make regulations that will bring the contract into being.

The Chairperson: If I am reading you correctly, you are suggesting is that if the ‘i’s are dotted and the ‘t’s crossed, we may see more dentists wanting to operate in the National Health Service.

Ms Jendoubi: Donncha would be happy to explain, at some length, the benefits that the new contract will bring.

The Chairperson: Can we touch briefly on that? I am concerned; because many of my constituents tell me — as I am sure other members’ constituents tell them — that there are queues to get into a dental practice. The number of NHS dental practices that have gone over to private dental work means that services are reducing, especially in disadvantaged areas. We are all concerned about the dental health of young children, but if parents cannot afford to pay the private sector, we need more NHS dentists.

Mr Donncha O’Carolan (Acting Chief Dental Officer): May I respond to the point that Carál made? Although it is very hard to comment on something so vague, the key is proposed new article 60A, which will place a duty on the boards to provide services in their

areas. The 1972 Order allows dentists to choose where they set up and whom they treat. Significantly, proposed new article 60A will transfer the balance of power. The boards will have the power to decide where practices locate and to ensure that there is access in their areas. That is the fundamental provision of clause 2; the regulations will cover the detail on how that is done. The boards will hold the budget and they will decide how it is allocated. At the moment, services are completely demand-driven. The boards cannot compel a dentist to set up in a particular area or to see particular patients, so in many ways their hands are tied. The Bill will reverse that.

Ms Ni Chuilín: On 2 July the Assembly debated the lack of availability of NHS dental treatment, although that might have been a premature debate. My understanding was that boards would be compelled to provide dental services in areas of high deprivation. Apart from being compelled to provide services, I thought that they might consider doing preventative work, improving education and health awareness and promoting healthy eating. It alarms me that aspects of dentistry could be streamlined or that professions could be categorised or sectioned off. I cannot relate that to the Bill. Market forces have determined whether there are dental services in our communities.

Mr O'Carolan: That is correct. Dentists make all the decisions at the moment, but the Bill will give the boards power, and as they hold the budget they will be able to decide where they will target their money.

Ms Ni Chuilín: If the long-term use of antibiotics rots a child's teeth, the parents have to take out a bank loan to pay for treatment, because such treatment is deemed cosmetic. Rather than having to wait months for an appointment, parents should be able to avail of the service in their health centre or healthy-living centre. Access is the key, and at present many people do not have access.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the new legislation interfere with the ability to sell a dental practice?

Ms Jendoubi: No. A dentist will still be an independent practitioner working under a contract with the health board.

Mr Kirkwood: It will depend on the negotiations on the contract. However, proposed new article 61B allows a health and social services board to enter into a contract with those specified in the sub-paragraphs. The contents of the contract have not been decided, so we cannot answer that today.

Ms Jendoubi: This legislation will not affect that one way or the other.

Mr O'Carolan: At present, dentists cannot sell their Health Service contract to anyone, so there will be no change.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Therefore, it would not be in the contract at all?

Mr O'Carolan: That matter would not be dealt with in this legislation. Dentists are independent practitioners and businesspeople. Their premises and equipment belong to them, so they are free to sell them.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In proposed new article 60A(1) in the 1972 Order, each of the four health and social services boards would provide dental services. Is that really in the public interest, especially in the interest of those people who live on the periphery of a board area?

Ms Jendoubi: Proposed new article 60A(1) places a duty on each health and social services board to provide for its area's needs. That may mean a difference in emphasis but not in the service that is available. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is negotiating a Northern Ireland-wide contract with the BDA, under which everyone will work to the same terms and conditions. Therefore, as Ms Ni Chuilín pointed out, boards will have the flexibility to decide, for example, whether to set up a practice in a disadvantaged area. Moreover, it is not compulsory for dentists to enter into a contract. They will still be free to make that decision.

If a board cannot get an independent practitioner to set up in a particular area, it becomes the board's duty to secure dental services in some other way; for example, by employing a salaried dentist or by temporarily appointing the Community Dental Service (CDS) to provide dental services where they are needed. Proposed new article 60A(1) merely places a duty on a board to ensure that dental services are available where necessary.

Mrs O'Neill: The BDA suggests that proposed new article 60A(2)(b), which states that a board:

"may in particular make contractual arrangements with any person",

contradicts proposed new article 61B(1), which states that a board:

"may, subject to such conditions as may be prescribed, enter into a general dental services contract".

Mr Kirkwood: It is not contradictory. Proposed new article 60A(2)(b) refers to primary dental services. Proposed new article 61B(1) deals with a general dental services contract.

Ms Jendoubi: That is the difference. Proposed new article 61B relates to the contract.

Mr Kirkwood: Proposed new article 60A relates to primary dental services, which is the generic term for general dental services and personal dental services; therefore, proposed new article 60A(2)(b) does not contradict proposed new article 61B(1).

Mrs O'Neill: May I have clarification on the categories of dental personnel who will be subject to the Health Service tribunals? For example, will hygienists, dental nurses, and so on, fall into the same category? Will that be covered by regulations?

Mr Kirkwood: Yes, that will be set out in regulations. The tribunal services will cover healthcare professionals, so, when it has been negotiated and is in place, the contract will clarify what personnel, other than dentists, will be covered by the tribunal regulations. However, the overall provision for healthcare professionals will allow regulations to stipulate who will be covered.

Mrs O'Neill: The BDA has also called for provision for piloting the new dental contract. The Northern Health and Social Services Board has interpreted clause 6 as meaning that pilot schemes will not be possible until the Bill has been passed. Is that correct?

Ms Jendoubi: We can deal with clause 6 now if the Committee wishes.

Mrs O'Neill: Shall we come back to clause 6?

Ms Jendoubi: We are happy to deal with it now.

Clause 6 will remove the power to make pilot schemes for provision of personal dental services. However, it will not obviate boards' power of the boards to pilot general dental services. We can do that without the need for primary legislation. We have agreed with the BDA that the new contract — when we get one that we all agree looks as if it is a runner — will be piloted before it is rolled out formally.

Mr Gallagher: I have concerns about a couple of points. We have heard about the current problems with dental services. As has been said, the Committee wants an outcome that delivers a service for the public and that results in a profession that is worthwhile and rewarding for its practitioners. It is to be hoped that our dentists will enter into contracts because those contracts will be rewarding.

I am concerned about what is happening, for example, in England. I am not sure what you mean when you talk about British dental services. I presume that you mean dentists in Northern Ireland who are members of the BDA, and that you are in discussions with those dentists. I see that you are nodding by way of confirmation. That is encouraging. However, the contracts are not working well in England; they have not produced the desired outcome. There are still huge problems with dental services in England. After going to all this bother, we do not want to end up with bigger problems here.

Although I have heard that there is no contradiction between, under proposed new article 60A(2)(b) of the 1972 Order, entering into contractual arrangements with any person and, under proposed new article

61B(1), entering into general dental services contracts, it appears that there is one. Is it necessary to include proposed new paragraph (2)(b) of the 1972 Order? We are trying to solve a problem by removing any doubt or suspicion about the way forward.

Another point concerns the piloting of general dental services, which Christine mentioned. Will the boards pilot those new services before or after the new contracts are agreed? Will the Bill become law before the contracts are piloted, or will it be done the other way around? Will everyone be confused?

Ms Jendoubi: Technically, the Department does not need either primary or subordinate legislation in order to run pilot schemes. However, for practical reasons, the Department will need to know the contents of the subordinate legislation in order to ensure that it is consistent with the content of the pilot schemes. The Department hopes to develop subordinate legislation at roughly the same time as the contract is implemented, so that we can ensure that the contract and the subordinate legislation are consistent.

The Committee will play its role by scrutinising the subordinate legislation that underpins the contract. The detail of the contract will be a matter for negotiation. Tommy Gallagher is absolutely right to say that the new contract that was established in England found no favour with the profession, largely because of the way in which remuneration was handled. Dentists' activity is still measured in units of dental activity (UDAs), and that keeps dentists on what they refer to as the treadmill of "drill and fill". Dentists are paid for the amount of treatment that they carry out rather than for their professional time spent on preventive measures and the promotion of oral health.

We will try to take full account of the English contract and learn what we can from it, such as what to do and what to avoid. Together with the BDA, we will produce a dental contract that suits Northern Ireland and its dentists, that acknowledges their professionalism and that rewards them for the use of their time rather than for the number of root canals that they fill.

Mr O'Carolan: We have never indicated that the English contract will be introduced in Northern Ireland. The Minister told the Assembly that on 2 July 2007. We hope that a joint communiqué with the BDA will be issued this month to all dentists. It will indicate how our contract will be different from the English one.

Mr Gallagher feels that there is a contradiction in the Bill. Proposed new article 60A(2)(b) deals with all dental services, which means primary care as performed by our independent practitioners as general dental services, and personal dental services, which we do not have in Northern Ireland at present. Regulations must be written for that provision to be introduced.

Proposed new article 61B(1) deals specifically with the general dental services contract. It is necessary that that distinction be included in the legislation.

Mrs Hanna: We want a better service; we do not want “drill and fill”. We want to ensure that people are attracted to the dental profession, that they receive sufficient remuneration for their work and that they are not on that treadmill to which Christine referred.

The Committee has been given the impression that the content of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill will change little. However, as Tommy said, if all contracts were to be signed before the pilot schemes were in place, it would be hard to undo the legislation if it were found not to be right. Surely it would better to find out first whether the pilot schemes work, before the contract is set in stone. It is important that that be done.

Ms Jendoubi: The contract will not be set out in regulations, but its underpinning framework will be. The contract will be piloted. It will not be set in stone until after the pilots have been rolled out and it becomes clear what has worked and what needs to be tweaked. Only when we reach the point at which everyone is content will the boards enter into a contract with individual dentists. I agree that the full contract cannot be set out in legislation.

Dr Deeny: I hope that the answer to both of my questions will be yes.

I have been approached in the past fortnight by a constituent and patient, who told me that she could not get an NHS dentist in either Omagh or Dungannon. She had tried to register with every one of them. Is what you are saying that, in future, clause 2 will ensure that the boards will bring that situation to an end?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes.

Dr Deeny: That answer is important, because if patients cannot get an NHS dentist, a serious deficiency in dental care exists.

Last week, I was appointed to the West Local Commissioning Group (LCG), having had to take the Department to the High Court, so I have an interest to declare. The health and social services boards will, at some point, come to the end of their lives — we know that. It is now too late to legislate for their replacement by LCGs, as was to have happened by 1 April 2008. Will the term “local commissioning groups” replace “boards” in the legislation?

Mr Farrell: As Christine has already indicated, the answer to your first question is yes. As for your second question, when it comes to the use of the term “boards”, the Bill must use terminology that applies to the structures currently in place. We currently have health and social services boards; however, if, after the review of public administration (RPA) is implemented, they are to be replaced by a new health and social care

authority, any reference to “boards” in the existing legislation will have to be amended in the legislation that establishes the health and social care authority.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The BDA has called for an independent adjudication of any disputes that may arise as a result of clause 2. Its concern extends to clause 3. To achieve that outcome, the BDA recommends that proposed new article 61E(2)(b) be changed from:

“for the Department, or a person appointed by it”

to:

“for the Department to appoint an independent person or panel”.

Ms Jendoubi: Again, that issue will be set out in regulations, so the Committee will have another chance to examine the details.

Mr Kirkwood: The same dispute-resolution procedure that the general medical services (GMS) contract uses will probably be followed, whereby the Department appoints someone and a tribunal is established.

The Chairperson: The BMA has queried the proposed change to the cross-heading after article 60 of the 1972 Order from “General Dental Services, General Ophthalmic Services and Pharmaceutical Services” to “Primary dental services”. Moreover, in clause 5, Roe Valley Dental Practice has queried the change to the cross-heading and heading that precede article 15B of the 1972 Order from “personal dental services” to “primary dental services”. What is behind the decision to use those different titles?

Mr O’Carolan: “Primary dental services” is a generic term for general dental services and personal dental services, which is an alternative way in which to deliver general dental services. No personal dental services operate in Northern Ireland at present, but that proposed change to the 1972 Order gives the option of having those services in the future. Rather than include “general dental services” and “personal dental services” in every sentence, “primary dental services” is used as a catch-all term.

The Chairperson: Therefore, “primary dental services” is used as an umbrella term.

Mr Kirkwood: I want to raise a further point so that the Committee is aware of the full provision of clause 2. Although we have covered the contract issues, clause 2 will introduce proposed new article 61F to the 1972 Order. That provision sets out the enabling power for how dentists will be listed in future. We discussed that issue when we considered clause 1. The proposed new article sets out similar powers to those that are currently in place for GPs for conditional inclusion on a list and for contingent removal and suspension.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 2 agreed to.

The Chairperson: If members agree, we will call a halt to our scrutiny of the Bill, because we are now due to hear evidence from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. We will scrutinise the Bill further next Thursday. Clause 3, from where we will begin, is fairly short. I hope that it will be full steam ahead. Thank you very much.

Ms Jendoubi: We look forward to it.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Thursday 13 September 2007

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Mrs Anne Connolly	}	Association of Chief Librarians
Ms Katherine McCloskey		
Ms Helen Osborn		
Ms Elga Logue	}	Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals Ireland
Mr John McCormick		
Dr Bob McKee		
Mr John Gray	}	Libraries and Information Services Council (Northern Ireland)
Mr Kirby Porter		

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): I thank the Association of Chief Librarians for its attendance and I welcome Ms Katherine McCloskey, Ms Helen Osborn and Mrs Anne Connolly. They will be the first set of witnesses to give evidence to the Committee on the Libraries Bill today.

Mrs Anne Connolly (Association of Chief Librarians): Good morning and thank you. I am the director of library and corporate services in the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB). I am here in my capacity as chairperson of the Association of Chief Librarians (ACL). I am accompanied by my colleagues Helen Osborn, who is chief librarian of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB), and

Katherine McCloskey, who is chief librarian of the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB).

The association, which was established in 1973 by the chief executives, comprises the five education and library boards. As chief librarians, we are the senior officers who work on the steering group, and we are responsible for the development, management and delivery of library services to the public and to schools in Northern Ireland. At present, there are 113 static libraries and 28 mobile libraries, which deliver services to hard-to-reach areas and to people who are housebound. There are also 11 mobile libraries attached to the schools' library service.

Over the past few years, one of the key objectives of the association has been to try to harmonise services across the education and library boards. One of the most successful outcomes has been the establishment of the electronic libraries service, which has provided a single network for all libraries in Northern Ireland. One example of how that has improved customer service is that each customer now has a single library card that they may use in any library in Northern Ireland to access books or use a computer. In addition, a library member may borrow a book from any Northern Ireland library and return it to any other library of their choice. That seamless service has already been established, and Northern Ireland was the first region to achieve it.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's vision is for a flexible and responsive public library service that provides a dynamic focal point in the community and assists people to fulfil their potential. Obviously, the association concurs with that and believes that libraries in Northern Ireland are well on the way to achieving that vision.

At the outset, we wish to dispel the myth that libraries are just about issuing books, and we are concerned that, despite the wide range of activities in which libraries engage, the emphasis in measuring performance is still based on the number of books that are issued. We wish to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that library services currently extend to: the provision of Internet and website-use classes; open-learning centres; study space and homework assistance; activities and support for ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups; the staging of events and exhibitions, and reading initiatives for all age groups, including the famous Bookstart programme, which is a highly successful initiative that is run in conjunction with Sure Start.

Although most of those activities take place in libraries, some are delivered as outreach programmes by library staff in venues across Northern Ireland. We particularly wish to draw attention to the fact that

library staff work in places other than libraries to deliver library services.

Each year, public libraries in Northern Ireland welcome more than seven million visitors; deal with approximately 1.5 million enquiries; lend approximately 10 million items, and provide access to 1,200 computers with broadband internet access.

In the past year, the association has worked closely with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to produce 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries', the new policy for the development of public libraries in Northern Ireland. We believe that that policy sets the context for the delivery of a high-quality library service. It is the association's view that quality of service should be the priority when it comes to establishing the structure for delivering library services in Northern Ireland.

To assure a high-quality service that best meets the needs of the customer, several key factors should be taken into account. We strongly feel that library services should be free at the point of delivery and that coterminosity with other service providers should be considered to facilitate community planning and successful partnership working. There should be a single-transfer system for all education and library board employees, and we are in favour of maintaining and developing links with the education sector.

Finally, we wish to emphasise that the continued delivery and further development of a high-quality service is dependent on the availability of adequate resources. In that regard, the affordability of a new structure is paramount to the decision-making process.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Anne. Members may now ask questions.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the association for its presentation and congratulate it on what has been achieved to date. At the end of this exercise, we hope that that work will be enhanced.

You said that services should be free at the point of delivery. Clause 6 of the Libraries Bill deals with charges for certain library services. In your submission, you explained that you do not believe that the Bill, as currently drafted, provides enough protection for core library services to remain free of charge. Please explain what you perceive to be the potential problems of not clarifying in the Bill that core services will remain free of charge, and do you have a suggested form of wording that could be added to the Bill to guarantee the provision of free core services?

Ms Katherine McCloskey (Association of Chief Librarians): We are concerned because the idea of a free library service is inherent in the public library service. It should be free at the point of delivery.

However, clause 6 of the Libraries Bill states: "(1) The Authority may not make any charges for any library services provided by it unless—

(a) the services in question are specified in a scheme of charges approved by the Department ...

(2) The scheme of charges may make different provision for different cases including different provision in relation to different persons, circumstances or localities."

The existing legislation made it very clear that the library service would be free except for itemised lists of services that libraries could charge for. UK legislation provides for that sort of arrangement. The English legislation and the current Northern Ireland legislation address charges in that way. This Bill's wording suggests that a broader potential for charging might be implemented, or might be specified, in the future. Existing legislation seems to cover the matter better. We are worried that there is potential to raise funding in the future by increasing library service charges, and that that might be used to augment other services if there was a budget shortfall, for example.

Mr Shannon: You have said that the number of people on the board of the proposed authority will not be sufficient to deal with the workload. The changes are being made for several reasons, and one of the advantages of those changes will be that it will maximise savings. At the same time, the continuation of the service is critical. How many members should there be on the board of the library authority and what evidence do you have to suggest that it may not be able to deliver services?

You also referred to the mobile library service. I think you mentioned that there are ten mobile libraries, is that correct?

Mrs Connolly: There are 11 in schools.

The Chairperson: The figure was 28.

Mrs Connolly: We are also responsible for the schools' library service, but under the new legislation that will not be the case.

Mr Shannon: I am keen to ask a question based on your experience, Mrs Connolly — and Ms Osborn may wish to answer also. If you could do one thing to improve the mobile library service, what would that be?

Mrs Connolly: We have debated the size of the authority at length. However, our experience is based on dealing with library committees. Currently, the library committee within each education and library board comprises between 12 and 15 people. If the library authority is to recruit people who are interested in library services and would be interested in regularly attending meetings, such people might be very busy already and might have to drive long distances. The authority will therefore need to recruit around 20

members to get a quorum and ensure that local and regional interests are looked after.

There is also the view that being a board member — as some Committee members, being board members, will know — is not just about being on a steering group or governing body; it is also about assisting in other committees. The association expects that the library authority will have to have an audit committee and a finance committee. Therefore the smaller the number of people involved, the smaller the pool from which the authority can draw. It will be asking busy people to attend a lot of meetings.

Ms Helen Osborn (Association of Chief Librarians): Mr Shannon is right to suspect that I would like to answer the question about mobile libraries. The mobile library service is extremely important in rural areas, but it is also important in city areas, particularly areas of targeting social need.

There are two ways in which the mobile library service could be improved. First, it could provide more outreach activities. Typically, a mobile library pulls up in a village or a housing estate and stays for an hour or two. During that time people come on board and borrow books, and, in some places, they also use the Internet. That mobile library would be staffed by one person. We would like to be able to provide the same outreach activities as branch libraries, such as playgroup visits, storytelling sessions, local history sessions, IT taster sessions — the full gamut of library services. However, additional staffing is required for that. The Western Education and Library Board has been fortunate to have had external funding to pilot such a service. Outreach activity is important if people are to experience the full benefits of a library service.

Secondly, there could be greater scope for partnership working. Recently, a scheme was piloted in a rural part of the Western Education and Library Board area in which post-office services were provided on the mobile library while a sub-post office was being rebuilt. It is important that such joined-up strategic partnerships are considered. That was a great pilot project, and it worked well for local people and for both services. However, the ideal scenario would be to have strategic partnerships with other organisations serving rural areas, using customised vehicles to meet the needs of the local community and provide the full range of services.

Mr D Bradley: I share your concern about clause 6(2) of the Bill, which relates to charges. It seems to be granting power to vary charges according to locality and even according to individuals. That seems to partially defeat the aim of having a single authority. However, the explanatory and financial memorandum claims that the approach in clause 6: “retains the

approach of the Education and Libraries Order but simplifies the provisions.”

Do you agree?

Secondly, what linkages should there be between the Northern Ireland library authority and the education and skills authority? How would those be reflected in service delivery?

Ms McCloskey: Members of the association are nervous that the previous legislation stated that libraries would be free at the point of delivery, except for certain services that were listed. Why remove that provision? It was clear which services would be charged for. If libraries are to be free at the point of delivery, and there is no intention to raise or to make extra charges, why change the legislation? It has worked well for many years. Such a provision is not in the UK legislation, and we, as an association, are nervous that it may open the door to further charges.

Mr D Bradley: Would an itemised list of charges be helpful?

Ms McCloskey: It would probably make association members happier if potential charges were clearly listed.

Mr D Bradley: Can you give us examples?

Ms McCloskey: If a library provides items, such as a photocopies or book lists, which then become the properties of a person, that person would be charged for the items. In the previous legislation, there was a list, which specified the items and services that could be charged for. I would be very nervous if such a list were not included in the Bill. The phrasing could be taken from UK legislation or it could be just as it was in the previous legislation — why change it?

Mr D Bradley: What form of linkage do you think there should be between the Northern Ireland library authority and the education and skills authority, and how should that be reflected in service delivery?

Ms Osborn: We believe that there are three key areas in which it will be important for public libraries and education to work together. One is the schools' library service. Currently, we manage both the public library service and the schools' library service, which has a number of benefits, one of which is financial. We share premises, IT systems, members of staff, stock contracts, and so on. More importantly, the arrangement enables us to provide a holistic service to children and young people whether at home or at school, and the two services work closely together on extended schools information, literacy, the revised curriculum; all of the key education agendas.

Early years education is another important area, and public libraries have always done a great deal with pre-school children using programmes such as Bookstart. Early years education is now the responsibility of the

Department of Education, which makes it even more important that libraries and education work together in that area.

Public libraries have a great deal to contribute to literacy and lifelong learning. It will be important that the linkages between the education and skills authority and the library authority will be in place at the strategic and operational levels. Our concern is that organisations, during periods of change, or when they are being created, tend to be internally focused. Therefore, it will be extremely important that the links are maintained. It will also be important that all subregional structures in the new library authority will be reflected in the education and skills authority and in the councils so that community planning becomes another device for joined-up working.

The Chairperson: Mrs Connolly, would you give a composite answer to the next questions, which will be from Mr McCausland and Mr Ramsey?

Mr McCausland: There are two points on which I require clarification. What potential difficulties are there for the transfer of staff, particularly if the single library authority does not start at the same time as the single education authority? Secondly, and you have raised questions about this matter; do you think that the Department is overestimating the savings that can be made?

Mr P Ramsey: I would like to acknowledge the contribution that the association is making to lifelong learning. Given that the Minister said during the last Committee meeting that efficiency savings on pay have been projected at almost £1.5 million, how will you be able to provide an enhanced service in lifelong learning in educational centres of excellence with reduced resources? You are saying that you need additional resources. How will you be able to provide the same level of service, given that in Northern Ireland, one in four adults has low levels of literacy and numeracy? How will you effect change?

Mrs Connolly: I will answer Mr McCausland's question first. Many of our staff work across public libraries and school libraries, and currently all of them are education and library board staff. Our concern is that if public library services move first, we will have to determine who our public library staff are and get a transfer scheme in place for them in advance of the creation of the education and skills authority. More importantly, opportunities for them to apply for other posts, to which they are entitled as education and library board staff, would be removed because they would no longer be part of the RPA-affected group.

Staff are already quite stressed and worried about their jobs. We would prefer the organisations to move together. At present, we are managing people in both sections. We believe that there should be a clean

break. People would then be able to see the various opportunities and apply for the jobs that suit their future needs. It is a people issue.

Katherine McCloskey will answer the question on funding.

Ms McCloskey: The question was on what we believe the savings will be. Paragraph 13 of the explanatory and financial memorandum states: "Unifying five separate library services will, in time, lead to efficiency savings".

The memorandum goes on to quote savings of £600,000 in 2009-10, rising to £1.2 million. There is no specific indication as to where those savings will be made, apart from unifying the services and reducing staff. We do know the current budget for the five library services. Over the past few years, my colleagues and I have been working to reduce our staffing levels because of reductions in funding for the Library Service. Indications are that the new library authority will have a budget of £30 million, which is not a lot more than what we are running the service on at present — and we are struggling. The Belfast Education and Library Board will face a shortfall of £750,000 next year. We do not feel confident that savings will be made without swingeing cuts.

There is some indication that we have a large number of senior and middle managers. I have 25 staff, classified as professional librarians and managers, for all of Belfast, covering 20 branch libraries, the schools' library service and the central reference library. We are not awash with staff. The indications are that the new library authority will struggle to provide even the level of service provided at present with the stated budget. We cannot understand where the savings will come from, and that is worrying. Northern Ireland deserves a quality library service. I have spent my life in the library service. Northern Ireland has an excellent library service and the people of Northern Ireland deserve a high-quality, well-funded service that will provide not just excellent community libraries and mobile libraries, but will be able to fund reference and research collections and support the wonderful local studies and collections that exist throughout Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Have Mr Ramsey's questions been answered?

Mrs Connolly: You may have picked up some of the answers. We are wholly behind 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries', which is the Department's vision for the future of library services. However, as has been rightly said, there is much more to libraries than issuing books. Many areas need to be developed, and we are not convinced that the money is available to do that. We have all been in difficult positions, as members will know. In making cuts in our board area,

some of our learning centres have fallen by the wayside, as we cannot afford to fund them.

Mr P Ramsey: Do you believe that cutbacks are imminent? That will entail more than job losses.

Mrs Connolly: Who knows? The North Eastern Education and Library Board has already offered premature retirement to as many people who want it, and it does not have many more people to let go. The funding issue and the development of services are major concerns. In the past, we have asked the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to fund areas that we believed fell under their umbrella. The money that we get from Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is for the core library service. However, we have not had any success in getting funding from other Departments.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Anne, Katherine and Helen, for coming along this morning.

The next witnesses to come before the Committee are from the Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals (CILIP). Following CILIP's five-minute overview of its written submission, members will have a chance to ask questions. I will try to give preference to members who did not question the first set of witnesses. Dr Bob McKee will lead the presentation. Witnesses, you are all welcome, and the Committee is looking forward to hearing your evidence.

Dr Bob McKee (Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals Ireland): Good morning. My colleagues, Elga Logue, John McCormick and I represent CILIP. In my allotted five minutes, I want to cover three areas: some background information on CILIP, our position on the proposals on the way forward for public libraries in Northern Ireland, and comments on the draft legislation.

CILIP was formerly known as the Library Association, and some members may know it by that name. It was established about 130 years ago and received the royal charter in 1898. It is long-established as the professional and regulatory body for the library information sector across the UK.

We are responsible for maintaining the register of qualified practitioners for all parts of the library and information spectrum across the UK, not only public libraries. We provide opportunities for networking, professional development and advocacy on professional issues. It is worth saying that, in Northern Ireland, we have consistently worked across all divides for more than 30 years. A North/South liaison committee has held an annual conference for 30-plus years, without fail. That commendable record is due more to my two colleagues than to me.

We form a community of about 35,000 people who are engaged in library and information work across

the UK, of whom about 12,500 are on the register of qualified practitioners, and, of those, about 3,200 work in public libraries. Therefore, we can speak from an authoritative base. We have been involved throughout the current sequence of initiatives on public library policy in Northern Ireland.

I was involved in the work that led to the original 'Tomorrow's Libraries' report in 2002. Recently, I was a member of the appointments panel that recruited a chief executive designate for the new library authority. We have submitted evidence at every stage of the consultation process and have provided assistance to DCAL officials, both in their work on policy development and in their early preparations for the new authority.

We strongly agree with the role and vision of public libraries that is outlined in the 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' report. We welcome the introduction of a published set of standards, which is in the annex to the report. We welcome the commitment to the equitable distribution of resources and the consequent commitment to equity in library provision across Northern Ireland. We welcome the establishment of a new library authority, which provides an opportunity to strengthen the Library Service in Northern Ireland by building on the collaborative work that has already been carried out across the current five education and library boards. The Committee heard reference to that during the previous submission.

It seems highly appropriate that the new political Administration in Northern Ireland should, as one of its first acts, enact legislation to strengthen the Library Service, because libraries have a role to play in any civilised society in relation to opportunity, equity, democracy, and human rights. For that reason, we are glad to be here.

Most of the points that we want to make on the legislation are contained in our written submission, but I want to highlight just a few. The duty of the new library authority that is set out in the Bill should refer explicitly to the set of standards of provision that citizens can expect. The principle of the Library Service being free at the point of use, which is safeguarded in the Bill, should be strengthened by making it clear that the scheme of charges cannot include charging for any core elements of the service. That requires definition.

We doubt the validity of the specific levels of efficiency savings and start-up costs that are set out in the explanatory and financial memorandum. There is a real danger that a declaration of such efficiencies will cause the new authority to be born into a negative climate of cutbacks, rather than a positive climate of service development.

Although the memorandum refers to start-up costs, there is no explicit reference to transition costs, such as the inevitable costs of redundancies. There must be more clarity about where those figures come from and what they mean.

My next point has already been made by the previous witnesses. The present link with education provides a close collaboration between libraries and schools. That must not be lost. A framework agreement between the new library and education authorities will be necessary.

I wish to draw the Committee's attention to a point that is not included in our submission, which concerns the provision of advice to the Northern Ireland library authority. Legislation across the water makes provision for a body that used to be called the Library Advisory Council; its name has now been changed, intelligently, to the Advisory Council on Libraries. There might be some value in the Committee considering whether a similar advisory role should be enshrined in Northern Ireland legislation. That has been very helpful across the water.

That concludes our introductory comments.

Lord Browne: CILIP's submission states that it is concerned that the start-up allocation of £670,000 may not be sufficient. Please explain why.

Dr McKee: We have seen the figure, but not how it was worked out. I mentioned in the submission that we need to know whether that figure includes transition costs and the inevitable costs of the transfer of undertakings and redundancies.

Lord Browne: The Committee understands that the new education and skills authority will not be in place until March 2009. Will there be any risks for CILIP if the new library authority is not established by April 2008?

Dr McKee: There is no threat to CILIP, because it is an independent body. However, we act in the public interest, which is why we are registered as a charity. There would be damage to the public interest if there were to be continuing uncertainty about the future of libraries in Northern Ireland. What is in the public interest is the orderly transition from the present situation to the new arrangement. We need clarity about that transition and its timetable.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the witness for his precise and concise opening remarks. In your submission, Dr McKee, you stated that there needs to be a clearer explanation in clause 4(8) as to what constitutes commercial activities. What are the problems with the way commercial activities are defined in the Bill? Is the definition that is contained in the Bill too broad or too narrow?

Dr McKee: We discussed that question immediately prior to the meeting. Clause 4(4) contains a helpful

safeguard, namely that commercial activities are permitted so long as they do not interfere with the primary duties of the authority. The subsection that you referred to relates to specific types of commercial activities — the provision of services, and so on — and there is nothing wrong with that. Our problem is with the culture that that may create. Will success be judged using commercial, entrepreneurial, income-generating criteria, or, on social and educational criteria, as it ought to be?

Mr K Robinson: I see the danger of the “burger and a book” syndrome creeping in. Is that what you mean?

Dr McKee: Absolutely.

Ms Elga Logue (Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals Ireland): We asked whether a library that is situated in a highly populated area and that runs many activities might be judged on profit-making, as opposed to the quality of service it offered.

Mr K Robinson: Compared with a library in a rural situation?

Ms Logue: Exactly. We would not want to see a situation in which profit-making jeopardises other libraries, which may be doing tremendous work, but may not be making the same profits because of their location, perhaps in marginalised areas. That, however, does not mean that they are not good libraries — they may be doing wonderful work. The question is whether one assesses quality on the basis of issue figures, or on user satisfaction.

Mr K Robinson: I shall play devil's advocate for a moment. In answer to Wallace's question a moment ago, you said that the allocation for start-up costs would not cover those costs. However, if the opportunity of commercial input arises, the question becomes whether you would sell your soul to keep the system afloat, or keep the system pure because of the end benefits that we all want the library system to produce for us.

Mr McCormick: There is no reason why we cannot have both. Commercial activity for libraries per se is not wrong. Everyone wants to generate some money. We worry that libraries would be expected to become profit-making operations. That would be very difficult to do in many ways.

Mr K Robinson: For geographical and other reasons?

Mr McCormick: Yes.

Mr Brolly: You made an issue of the absence of the words “efficient and effective” and “comprehensive and efficient”. How important is that wording? Surely the efficiency and effectiveness of the Library Service will be down to those people who will eventually be given the job of running the libraries?

Dr McKee: It is very dangerous for things to be implicit in legislation and not explicit. The inclusion in the Bill of the words “comprehensive and efficient” would serve two purposes: it would align the Bill with legislation across the rest of the UK — and there is a value in that — and it would make explicit two requirements that you might think are implicit, but, hey, people change. The inclusion of the word “comprehensive” means that the service has to be inclusive of everyone — people with disabilities, people living in rural areas, and so on. That could get lost if the word is not in legislation for people to see. The word “efficient” is all about public service reform. Again, one would expect efficiency — that is understood — but it would be nice for it to be required in legislation.

Mr D Bradley: You mentioned the importance of the continuing close collaboration between libraries and schools. How do you think that the schools’ library service should be delivered in the new emerging context?

Dr McKee: That is a difficult one for me, because we are looking at this matter as a professional body, not in terms of the local operational detail. However, I listened as you asked the same question to the previous group of witnesses. It seems that there is a very clear understanding of what a schools’ library service is, and of the public libraries’ role and the schools’ role in that service. It would not, therefore, be impossible to construct a framework agreement between the two new authorities that would enshrine that. That framework could then be delivered among individual libraries and schools.

Mr McCarthy: Should a specific or stronger form of words be included in clause 6 so that the authority cannot charge for core services?

Dr McKee: Yes.

Ms Logue: Yes. Membership of public libraries has always been free. All the wonderful activities that go on in the library every day — storytelling, book clubs, and so on — are never charged for. In many ways, that is what makes a library service a quality service that reaches out to all groups — one that promotes social inclusion. The Bill should clearly define the core services that will remain free.

Dr McKee: One could extract a list of core services and write it down — I did that on the plane this morning. If a scheme of charges can be written down, a list of core services can too.

The Chairperson: I will allow Members to ask one other question, if anyone wants to take this opportunity to do so.

Mr K Robinson: The previous presentation touched on the issue that I wish to raise, and the Committee discussed it last week as well. In this new, wonderful

world in which everything will be streamlined and reorganised and money will be saved, and so forth, individuals with tremendous experience may well find themselves in a position whereby they want to leave the service — or it may be advantageous to the service to see them leave. How do you cope with that experience gap? How do you fill it so that the service and delivery are not diluted?

Dr McKee: That is a central issue for us as the professional body, given that our job is professional development. I mentioned a figure of 12,500 qualified practitioners earlier, and less than 100 of them work in Northern Ireland. Thus, the gap already exists here. That workforce developmental issue has to be addressed at some level, and I do not think that the authority could address it unaided.

The Chairperson: I thank the CILIP team, Dr McKee, John and Elga for their contribution.

We now welcome Kirby Porter and John Gray from the Libraries and Information Services Council (Northern Ireland) (LISC (NI)). They will give a five-minute overview of their written submission and then they will take questions from members.

Mr Kirby Porter (Libraries and Information Services Council (Northern Ireland)): I thank the Committee for inviting us here today.

LISC (NI) is a membership organisation that represents the main library providers in Northern Ireland. Members include public libraries, university and college libraries, and even libraries in the voluntary sector. Its two basic roles are to advise the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure on matters pertaining to libraries, and to engage in co-operative activities throughout the library world in Northern Ireland in order to advance libraries in all forms.

Three projects in which you may be interested will give you a flavour of the work that LISC does. One is that it is the Northern Ireland partner for Newsplan, which is a project to collect, preserve and make available newspapers throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The second is Inspire NI, which is a project to widen access to all libraries, on a managed basis, to anyone in the Province. There are several other similar projects, including the Northern Ireland Publications Resource (NIPR), the funding for which comes through LISC. That project’s aim is to collect all material published in Northern Ireland and publications that relate to Northern Ireland.

As an organisation, LISC broadly welcomes the decision to create a single, strategic, library authority. However, our submission includes caveats which are, basically, the same as the concerns that have been raised today. They relate to the service’s comprehensiveness,

charging, and the costs relating to its start-up and continuing functioning. In broad terms, the creation of a single library authority is a useful step forward for libraries and one that should be commended.

The Chairperson: I will offer Committee members the chance to ask questions — unless John has anything to add.

Mr John Gray (Libraries and Information Services Council (Northern Ireland)): I have nothing to add. Kirby has said everything that I would wish to say.

Mr Shannon: You indicated your support for the single library service. In paragraph 3(d) of LISC's written submission, it is stated that a single library authority:

“should ensure the development of specialist services and expertise not currently within the scope of five separate education and library boards”

and

“could enable more effective marketing of the service.”

In the final sentence of the same paragraph it is stated that a single library authority could:

“afford greater capacity to attract significant levels of external funding.”

I am keen to learn from where you might attract that external funding. Is it from independent business? Is it from other Departments? Why do you refer to the greater capacity to attract significant levels of external funding? If you can attract significant levels of external funding, we will be very keen to learn how you can do that, as, I am sure, will the Executive. However, I digress. I just want to get your opinion on the matter of external funding.

Mr Gray: I shall answer that question. It is not provable in advance, but a single library authority, with a higher profile and a high level of focused leadership, is more likely to achieve major strategic partnerships with other bodies that can, essentially, bring funding to the table. Those could include anything from public-private partnerships to such bodies as the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Big Lottery Fund, or other service providers. I suspect that smaller services have less strategic capacity to engage in that type of work.

Mr Shannon: You mentioned partnerships, as did one of the previous deputations. Partnerships are all very well, but have initial discussions taken place with any potential partners? I am keeping a note — I realise that you said that it is not provable.

Mr Gray: The question that you ask is a more of a commentary on the difficulties of the current environment than the possibilities of a single library authority.

LISC (NI) is one example of the possibilities that exist for co-operation on a Province-wide basis, in that the five education and library boards, which provide

library services, and all the other library-interested parties in Northern Ireland co-operate in partnership on a range of beneficial projects. Those projects have been taken forward at a little extra public cost, but they deliver more than the sum of the parts of the organisations concerned.

The Chairperson: In your submission, you state that the number of board members in the library authority — a maximum of 14 — may not be sufficient to deal with the workload or be able to reflect the broad range of library users. Would you elaborate on that?

Mr Gray: LISC (NI) is aware of the need for caution to avoid unwieldy bodies, but is also concerned that library services are spread widely across Northern Ireland and that the board will have to have specific strategic expertise available in a range of fields. The board will also have to provide for adequate representation of age and gender spectrums and issues such as the rural/urban divide. That tends to suggest that a board comprising 14 or 15 members may be a bit tight. One option would be to consider the possibility of giving the board the provision to appoint an advisory council. There is no provision in the legislation for that, but it might help. Our thinking, without being dogmatic about the matter, is that the board should have more than 14 or 15 members.

Mr Porter: LISC (NI) is particularly concerned that, during the first years of the new library authority, when a lot of strategic work will have to be done, a board comprising 14 members may not be sufficient to provide the required expertise. Currently, between 50 and 60 people are involved in the library committees of the education and library boards, so having a board with 14 members would be a considerable reduction. As John Gray says, LISC (NI) is not suggesting a board of 30 or 40 people; we are asking for a modest reconsideration to ensure that the balance is correct.

Mr K Robinson: In a corporate and individual sense, local government has been excluded from this process, presumably due to the fear that councillors may burn or eat books. Given that councillors can accurately reflect the feeling of communities, is there a place for a local government presence on an extended board? If larger local authorities are created, the role of councillors will become more apparent.

Mr Gray: The difficulty is that the number of local authorities under the review of public administration is unclear. If I am right, there will be a minimum of eight councils, but there are likely to be more. If that is so, it will not be possible for every local authority to be represented on the new library authority; there will have to be another mechanism. Local government representation may have to be organised through the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. However, adoption of the

idea for an advisory council would provide scope for more local input.

Mr D Bradley: Could, and should, the Northern Ireland library authority deliver schools' library services?

Mr Porter: There is no doubt that, given how the schools' library service is delivered, a partnership arrangement — at the very least — with the public library service is required. However, should the public library service, rather than the education and skills authority, deliver the schools' library service? It would be difficult for school libraries to realise their full potential were they not part of the educational framework.

The Libraries and Information Services Council (Northern Ireland) has done a great deal of work to try to improve school libraries' efficiency. However, the standard of that efficiency varies, and depends on the level of support that a head teacher gives to his or her library. If school libraries were seen to be removed further from the education service, they would lack the necessary credibility to make progress. Therefore, it is probably best that school libraries remain within the ambit of the education service.

Mr McCarthy: Do you believe that clause 6 should include a specific form of words that would not permit the library authority to charge for services?

Mr Porter: Undoubtedly, it is essential that core services are protected in legislation to prevent that from happening in future.

The Chairperson: Kieran, you seek stronger wording in that clause.

Mr McCarthy: I have undoubtedly made that point this morning.

Mr Porter: Where possible, the tendency is to charge for services. The temptation in future will be that, if something can be charged for, at some stage that issue will be raised, and charges will be introduced. By definition, that is the way in which things work — if a charge can be levied, it eventually will be.

The Chairperson: I thank Kirby and John for coming along this morning, and for sharing their wisdom with the Committee.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

13 September 2007

TAXIS BILL (NIA 4/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Samuel Egerton
Mr Robert McAllister

Mr Stephen Long }
Mr Stephen O'Reilly } West Belfast Taxi
 } Association

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): The next item of business is the Committee Stage of the Taxis Bill. As the Committee will be dealing with a lot of business today, each person giving oral evidence will be given a maximum of 15 minutes to make a presentation, after which I will move proceedings on so as to afford everyone an opportunity to present his case. Members may raise questions about the clarity of the evidence, and, finally, if required, the Committee will hear from officials from the Department of the Environment, who will shed light on the details of the legislation.

The Taxis Bill is complex, and there may be some difficulties in it, but I ask the witnesses to bear with us, as we aim to stay focused on its main content and the issues contained therein.

The Committee will now hear evidence from Mr Samuel Egerton. Thank you for attending, Mr Egerton. I will ask you to identify yourself and the organisation that you represent. Mr Egerton, the floor is yours. The

Committee will time the proceedings, so please bear with me if I interrupt to say that your time is coming to a close.

Mr Samuel Egerton: Thank you for giving us the opportunity to express our views. Some of those views will be the same as other taxi drivers, and some will be personal.

I have been in the taxi industry for 25 years — since approximately 1982 — and age tends to blur time. Since I am the first taxi driver to give evidence to the Committee, I urge members to spare a moment to consider some of my colleagues who are no longer with us. Northern Ireland suffered much over the past 40 years, and many taxi drivers were murdered or assaulted or had their cars hijacked. Given the current trend of binge drinking, many taxi drivers are subjected to verbal abuse at the weekends. I am sure that, in their own areas, members see young ladies and men hanging out of taxi windows and doing all sorts of things such as yelling and singing, but it is taxi drivers who get those people home. We should not forget those who work in the taxi industry — and from other sectors of Northern Ireland society — who are not with us today.

The Chairperson: Yes. Thank you for that.

Mr Egerton: I acknowledge the effort that the taxi review team has put into the Taxis Bill. The team has been working on it for a long time, but I have been involved for even longer. I sat in this Building a long time ago with other taxi drivers, and we were given promises by the then Minister Richard Needham that there would be changes in the taxi industry. Those changes did not materialise. The recommendations of the Sterling Report were not implemented, and I would be delighted if a Committee member were to ask the Department why they were not even partly implemented, because one of the report's many prominent proposals related to depot licensing. There are many similarities between what happened to the Sterling Report and the current process. If depot licensing alone had been introduced all those years ago, I suspect that we would not be sitting here today, wondering where we are going.

We have been down this road before, and I feel restricted in what I am permitted to say. However, the Taxis Bill is weak: its foundations may not be built on sand, but they are weak in aggregate. Matters that should be covered by the Bill — such as taxi driver numbers — have been omitted. If you wish to rule me out of order, Mr Chairperson, please do so.

The Chairperson: The Committee is restricted to consideration of what is in the Bill, so I ask you to restrict your comments likewise.

Mr Egerton: I accept that, Mr Chairperson. The Taxis Bill is enabling legislation, and, as the Minister

said, its recommendations will not cost anything: it is a piece of paper. However, taxi drivers and their associated bodies anticipate all sorts of ramifications from the Bill. I and many others feel that we are being asked to issue a blank cheque. I am sure that Committee members who are in business, in some shape or form, know that. People who are in business need to have cost projections, but we do not have any.

Taxi drivers have been told that the legislation will mean the introduction of standards, increased enforcement and depot licensing. We have no problems with that. However, clause 2 of the Bill deals with the licensing of sole operators. I have been self-employed — a sole trader — for many years, as have most other taxi drivers. There will be ramifications for the taxi industry if the Department pushes ahead with the licensing aspect of the legislation. For instance — and this has been discussed before in other places — if a Committee member flags me down at 1.00 am, perhaps a wee bit under the weather — and my apologies for saying that — I have to ask him for a destination and a name, because I am a sole operator. Therefore, those involved in the taxi industry see many practical difficulties. I am a legitimate taxi driver, but I cannot speak for legitimate taxi-depot drivers.

We should not fear change, because change is long overdue; it is the outworkings of that change that concerns us.

Let me go back to the point about operator licensing. Those operators pose no problems because they run commercial businesses and have systems in place. One of the significant messages that came from the consultation document, however, was that many taxi firms have fewer than five drivers, many of whom are self-employed. In rural areas, there are several one-man operations in which drivers work from home and cover their villages or towns.

The cost implications of the proposed legislation are very important to us. Let us make no bones about it: taxi depots will pass the costs of the changes on to the drivers. As an individual, I cannot pass those costs on to my customers.

To be honest, the Department of the Environment's record on setting reasonable fares is quite appalling. In 2004, after two and a half years, Belfast public hire drivers on the day shift — I call myself a day-shift worker — were awarded a mere 10p of a fare rise. During that time, fuel costs rose by between 20p and 25p a litre, and the Department's inspection fee was increased to £126. Those figures speak for themselves. How was the 10p fare rise arrived at?

With regard to sole drivers/operators, many of my colleagues in Belfast feel that we do not need to have sole operator licences. That will be discussed later. I am easy about that; I do not have a problem with it, but

I do have a problem with the cost involved, which is a concern for one-person operations. I really feel that although the Department has considered the option, it has not thought it through properly.

If the Department wanted to, it could include a clause in the Bill to outlaw any contrived arrangement made to get around the requirement to apply for an operator's licence. For example, the Department said that if a person who was running a depot had say, six or seven guys with an operator's licence working from his depot, he would not need an operator's licence himself. To me, that would be a contrived arrangement, which should be outlawed. I have no idea how such an arrangement could be made, but it could be circumvented.

The other major issue, which relates particularly to Belfast, is the abolition of the two-tier system. In her speech to the Assembly on 26 June during the debate on the Second Stage of the Taxis Bill, the Minister of the Environment made it clear that the two-tier system was history. However, not enough research has been done into the economic impact that the abolition of that system will have on individuals like me. The T&G Section of Unite estimates that as many as 450 drivers may lose their jobs. That is the equivalent, for example, of the closure of a major manufacturing complex, and it will mean a gradual strangulation and deprivation of work for individuals like me.

The Department of the Environment raised the issue of exclusion zones. The taxi rank at the corner of Great Victoria Street and Amelia Street is one of only two ranks that operate during the day in Belfast — I will return to ranks later. However, there are a couple of food outlets near that rank. If the DOE imposes a 250-metre exclusion zone, into which only accessible taxis are permitted, guys who are not supposed to be there will drive in and say "I am tying my shoelace", or "I want to go to the shop for 20 cigarettes", or "I want to buy a drink". It is happening already. They sit at the back of our ranks as though they are waiting for somebody; and if they are looked at suspiciously, they go and buy something. Other drivers say the same. I have heard that a member of the Committee has been out and about in Belfast investigating the matter. We are having these problems all the time. It is a serious situation; there are too many drivers — I do not want to get into that discussion. The idea of an exclusion zone poses several difficulties.

One of the biggest problems for the Department lies between the hours of 1.00 am and 3.00 am on Saturday night and Sunday morning, when the nightlife in Belfast empties out into the streets. Everyone can understand that young people come into Belfast for a night out — we have all been young. However, the problem is that they all leave the bars and nightclubs at the same time. In my many years as a private-hire

driver, I often thought that I would be a millionaire if I were able to split my vehicle four ways. In any city, taxis cannot cover the busy period when bars close and people want to go home.

Based on the recommendation of the Office of Fair Trading, other cities have deregulated the licensing system, resulting in more taxis being introduced. Several years ago, for a three-week period, DOE officials marshalled taxis in the Shaftesbury Square area to ensure that people got home.

When the World Irish Dancing Championships took place in 2004 at the Waterfront Hall, people needed taxis, and the result was a free-for-all. Private-hire vehicles were trying to pick up people from the streets illegally, and my public-hire colleagues were trying to work a rank legally. It was chaos. However, Belfast City Council viewed Belfast public hire — the black taxis — as hoods and nasty people. I am an example of one of the good guys — and there are plenty of us — who work the streets, but we were rubbished. When the World Irish Dancing Championships took place again in Belfast in 2006, the DOE and the PSNI were present on the first day. DOE officials waved the black taxis forward, and the system worked well. I ask the Committee to seriously consider a taxi-marshalling scheme. Such a scheme works across the water. Although it would cost money, it is right that the Government invest in helping people who bring money into Belfast to get home at the end of the night.

I listened to the Minister of the Environment and other Members speaking during the debate on the Taxis Bill. It seemed that their minds were already made up that the Bill was needed and would be going through. I accept that that is their prerogative in a democratic society. However, the 'Public Carriage Office (London) Conditions of Fitness Reconsideration', 15 December 2005, page 6, states:

"Concern has been expressed that some members of the PCO (Public Carriage Office) appeared to hold views on key aspects of the reconsideration. The PCO does not consider it improper for members of their staff to hold such views on particular questions relevant to the reconsideration of this process: indeed, it would be surprising if staff whose jobs concern the regulation of taxis did not hold such views on such issues."

The following is the important sentence:

"What is important is that any such views should be subject to change in the light of new evidence available from the studies undertaken."

I hope that the Committee will recognise that my evidence and that of other individuals from the taxi industry constitutes new evidence.

Since 1994, along with every taxi driver in Northern Ireland, I have experienced a steady decline in income, because there are too many drivers. Some taxi drivers in Belfast may be earning less than the national minimum wage. Rather than considering that, taxi drivers tend to

think about their next job. There was a time when waiting in a rank for 20 minutes would be considered a bad day for a taxi driver. Today, public-hire taxi drivers can wait for 30, 45 or 75 minutes for a fare. It is busy at 5.00 pm, and everyone wants more taxis between 1.00 am and 3.00 am because they want to get home in one piece after a good night out. I hope that the Committee will ask where those taxis go after those busy periods.

Public-hire vehicles are sitting in totally inadequate ranks, as the Committee will already be aware. Drivers of public-hire vehicles have to fight off widespread illegal p-uing, because if private-hire taxis do not have a fare and see an opportunity to grab one, they will take it.

If I can turn to the issue of taxi ranks —

The Chairperson: We are approaching the end of your 15 minutes.

Mr Egerton: I will make it quick. Today, and during a previous meeting, Committee members have referred to tourism, and I remind the Committee that tourists often meet a taxi driver before anyone else in Belfast to either ask where the Belfast Welcome Centre is, because they cannot find it, or to go somewhere. Therefore, it is essential that public-hire taxi drivers have somewhere to ply their trade — to wait legally and not be forced to sit in the middle of the road illegally where one can fall foul of the PSNI traffic branch.

I could say much more, and if any Committee members want to get in touch with me privately, I am more than happy to deal with any enquiries. I have not been in touch over the holidays because Committee members were entitled to a break, but, as the saying goes, the "honeymoon is over". I think that someone said that on television.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Mr Egerton.

Mr Egerton: I am free for another two hours, but I do not think that I would be allowed to talk for that long.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that; you have kept well within your time limit. Members, let us focus on some of the distilled issues that have emerged from Mr Egerton's evidence.

Mr Weir: Thank you for your presentation, Mr Egerton. I wish to seek clarification on two matters. First, you mentioned the impact that the regulations would have on single operators, particularly in regard to costs. Can you explain the nature of those additional costs and their financial implications?

Mr Egerton: An earlier DOE presentation to the Committee referred to those costs. We are aware of the costs that are associated with the three-year licence period, such as a three-day training module — taken for a day a year, or all together. The DOE has a better

idea of the cost factors. A further example is that the reduction of a taxi licence from five years to three years means that, in a 10-year period, three licences rather than two will be required, which means more revenue for the Department but less for us. However, I cannot quantify those costs because, as I said earlier, we are being asked to sign a blank cheque.

I know that the Bill is enabling legislation and that much legislation will follow on from it, but my main concern is that the industry is dominated by a strong black economy; everyone wants to be a taxi driver, but only around 10% of those people want to go through the necessary formalities. I am sure that all Committee members know someone in their area who has done some taxiing. I think that a Committee member, speaking in the Assembly, referred to our industry as being low-wage and high-hour; that member hit it the nail on the head, because our status has plummeted. People say that one cannot go any lower, but we have. Perhaps this is the beginning of a comeback, but I cannot give you the detail of the costs. The Department may be able to do that.

Mr Weir: You also expressed concern about the ending of the two-tier system in Belfast. A two-tier system operates in Belfast, particularly in the city centre. Why do you think that Belfast should be different from anywhere else in the Province?

Mr Egerton: For a start, Belfast is a conurbation. Other cities have a two-tier system. What concerns me, as someone who is heading towards retirement, is that I see many people — particularly young ladies — who, if you will excuse the expression, “knock the bottle back” before they even hit the town. The partition between the driver and the passenger is very important, especially in the case of a female passenger.

I was in private hire for many years. I am no longer, or I could possibly argue the case for those taxis. I have noticed, since I came into the public-hire side, is that if a saloon can pick up off the street, incidents can happen, such as those that happen in cities across the water. We have taxi badges now, but I can remember a time when we did not. We got them because there were incidents, and I will put it no more strongly than that. That is my primary concern. The Department has a history of having to be dragged forward by the arms and feet.

The second point concerns public hire. If someone stops a taxi in the street and is not too sure where he wants to go, the taxi driver is supposed to know the way. I gained my knowledge through experience and the grey matter — forget about satellite navigation, which is a good toy, but goes no further. Most of the private-hire drivers rely on directions from their depot; a depot is a group instrument, because many drivers

are in the business for four or five years. No one has ever studied how long the average working life is.

The Chairperson: Excuse me, Mr Egerton, I am conscious of a few other members who want to ask further questions, and you have adequately answered that question.

Mr Weir: Mr Egerton has answered my question.

The Chairperson: I remind members to stay focused on today's subject matter, please.

Mr Boylan: Mr Egerton, thank you for your presentation. Can you elaborate on how the proposed taxi-marshalling scheme will be enforced?

Mr Egerton: If you want an honest answer, enforcement is a bit of a joke, because there are only five dedicated enforcement officers. If you read the ‘Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency: Enforcement Strategy 2005–2008’, as I did, it is clear that the DOE is having a shake-up of enforcement. It seems to be more concerned with the overload of HGVs hammering along the countryside than with a lot of wealthy taxi drivers in Belfast. Enforcement is a real problem. If the DOE had a sophisticated enough computer system, similar to the one used for motor tax, that could make a difference. The DOE come out in Belfast and clear the streets of public- and private-hire taxis, and that speaks volumes about the number of taxi drivers. I hope that answers your question.

Mr Ford: I have a couple of quick questions on your written submission. First, you clearly have concerns about hirings on behalf of another operator, and, in particular, the difference between you as a single operator and some of the larger companies. The way I read the Bill, as it is currently drafted, that would not be a problem as long as your friend is a fully regulated taxi driver. What particular problem do you see in handing over hirings?

Secondly, you highlighted clause 34, which relates to an appeals procedure that will stop short of court proceedings. Have you any evidence from across the water, or anywhere else, of how that might operate?

Mr Egerton: Unfortunately, I do not. Liverpool, Birmingham and London and other cities have some licensing systems, but they are not as rock solid as they seem. My point is that the Department's mindset seems to be that if taxi drivers are not happy, they can take the Department to court. There must be an intermediate system. If someone were to make an allegation about me after I took him or her from A to B, enforcement officers would pull me in.

The Department has my statement, and it would also hear my side of the story. It would then act as — I am sure that Committee members, as politicians, are aware of the phrase — “judge, jury and executioner”. I would be on my own and in trouble because an allegation

had been made. If I wanted to challenge that, I would need to hire a solicitor to accompany me. Quite often, drivers are not aware that such an allegation has been made against them until it is sprung on them.

To return to an earlier point: when the member asked about a “regulated driver”, did he mean an affiliated driver? I need to be clear about the terminology.

Mr Ford: Clause 4(1) states:

“A licensed operator (‘the first operator’) who has accepted a taxi booking may not arrange for another person who requires an operator’s licence to provide a taxi to carry out that booking as sub-contractor unless the other person is a licensed operator”.

Mr Egerton: I want to give the Committee a brief example, if I may. I am licensed as a sole trader. For instance, if I had a couple of bookings and was prevented from carrying those out, I would ask a guy who lives a couple of streets away from me — a mate of mine who works for one of the large depots — to cover those jobs on my behalf. However, my understanding is that because he is an affiliated driver with another company, he would not be able to cover those jobs. Please correct me if I am entirely wrong. However, as many of you gentlemen will know from political experience, such fine details — the nitty-gritty — must be clarified.

That primary legislation could be on the statute book for at least 15 years. If it is not right at the outset; unfortunately, I will be the victim. The taxi industry is far down in the pecking order of Committee priorities. It has more important issues to consider. However, it is number one on my agenda. I have listened to, and taken on board, what members have said about previous progress, and so on. I realise that on the grand scale of things, taxi drivers are far down the pecking order. However, on our scale, we are high up.

The Chairperson: The Committee is determined to get such an important piece of legislation right.

Mr Egerton: That is why I tried to interject with those points earlier.

The Chairperson: It is crucial that the Committee hears from someone with your grasp of the issues, Mr Egerton.

Mr Egerton: I have serious concerns about the Bill. I want to conclude my remarks, as I am sure that my time is almost up. I want to make the point that the Taxis Bill is an in-house document from the Department of the Environment. Across the water, councils and bodies have used firms that have specialist expertise. To the best of my knowledge, no one from the Department has ever come along and stood at my rank and noted that it took the taxi at the end of the rank 25 minutes, for example, to get to the front. I do not believe that such a survey has ever been carried out,

although I may be wrong. That is a simple, basic survey that should have been undertaken.

Mr Gardiner: Thank you, Mr Egerton, for your presentation. I wanted to ask you about the two-tier system. However, Mr Weir asked you about that, and you expanded on it. Will you consider installing a mechanism in your taxi to protect yourself from the sort of conversations that take place, for example, when you are leaving people home late at night, and they become abusive towards you?

Mr Egerton: Across the water, several systems are available and have been installed in taxis. Some taxi drivers and operators slip a small video camera underneath their passenger seats. Some professionally installed systems are available as protection. However, an issue that occurred to me when I read through the documents was that use of such systems may have implications under the Data Protection Act 1998. Drivers can use small cameras in their taxis. However, the industry is vulnerable. When a driver has four young male or female passengers in the back, the trick is to get them home as quickly as possible. A few months ago, one of my colleagues had a nasty weekend. He was taking certain individuals home to Dunmurry when he was stabbed. Fortunately, he is out and about and working again. My colleagues who are sitting behind me know whom I am talking about.

Taxi drivers endure much abuse and what the police call “small incident violence”, which is not reported. Another colleague asked a passenger for the fare, which was £4.00. What he received was a punch in the eye. It is as simple as that.

Mr Gardiner: That is why there should be a recording. Taxi drivers do sterling work, and they must be protected. It is only a suggestion on my part that we try to assist on that.

Mr Egerton: It costs money to install cameras.

Mr Gardiner: I know that it does, but lives are worth more than money.

The Chairperson: That is another issue that will arise. Let us distil the main issues. We discussed the two-tier system, its economic impact and the costs that, inevitably, will be passed on to drivers. There was also the issue of enforcement, which Cathal Boylan raised, and the associated issue relating to the taxi-marshalling scheme. Have we covered the main issues? It is my intention that the Committee will take evidence from the groups here today and will then ask the Department to respond later to the issues arising.

Mr Ford: I think that Peter Weir mentioned an appeals process, which would stop short of moving into the normal court system. I am someone who, as far as possible, prefers to keep lawyers out of such matters.

The issue merits consideration as regards alternatives or experiences we could learn from other places.

Mr T Clarke: Mr Egerton touched on another matter. He suggested that Belfast taxi drivers wear badges and that others do not. Is that correct?

Mr Egerton: No, it is not. To clarify that point; in 1981–82 the only identification that taxi drivers had was having their names on green discs on their windscreens, similar to the public-service-vehicle licence discs. A number of incidents occurred in the university area, and there was a considerable outburst from the press, in which the point was made that people wished to know whether taxi drivers were working legitimately — in those days, anyone could claim to be a taxi driver. That was when the badge scheme was introduced. Departmental officials will be able to go into greater detail on that matter. However, the badge scheme arose from specific incidents, and the DOE had to be dragged into doing something. Unfortunately, it has been Department's policy down the years to be dragged into doing things.

Mr T Clarke: I asked that question because I notice that the issuing of a driver's badge is provided for in clause 24 of the Bill.

The Chairperson: We can get clarification from the Department when we come to that issue.

Mr T Clarke: The provision of a driver's badge is in the Bill. I thought that there was a concern about it.

Mr Egerton: My point is that everything that has come to us from the DOE over the years has had to be dragged out of it.

The Chairperson: Do you rate this as progress?

Mr Egerton: Many taxi drivers think that there should be two badges. If I am not wearing my badge, as I am wearing this security pass today, a police constable or a DOE officer can prosecute me.

The Chairperson: Thank you for giving up your time to give evidence this morning, Mr Egerton. It has been very useful.

Mr Egerton: Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address the Committee. I hope that the point I made about the Public Carriage Office will be borne in mind by the Committee.

The Chairperson: Welcome, Mr Long and Mr O'Reilly. Please clarify who you represent and in what capacity.

Mr Stephen Long (West Belfast Taxi Association): We will cover that in our oral submission, which will vary slightly from our written submission.

The Chairperson: I ask you to please stay within the remit of the Taxis Bill. You will have a maximum of 15 minutes to make your presentation. As you were

present during the previous witness session, you will know how the process works. Thank you, again, for attending.

Mr S Long: Good morning. My name is Stephen Long, and I am the general manager of the West Belfast Taxi Association. I am accompanied by Stephen O'Reilly, who is the chairperson of the nine-member committee that is elected annually to look after the interests of all association members. I thank the Committee for today's invitation. We are conscious of the time allotted for our presentation, but, in the interest of all present, we want to present some background information about the West Belfast Taxi Association.

The West Belfast Taxi Association has been in business since 1970 and has 230 members, on behalf of whom we are authorised to speak. All association members hold current public-service-vehicle licences, and each member is covered by a current Roads Service operator's licence, issued by the Department of the Environment's road transport licensing division, to provide multi-stage carriage fares and occasional private-hire contract services. This is the reason that the association is the only holder of a Department-licensed taxi-bus plate.

All our vehicles are wheelchair accessible and display plates allowing them to carry six or seven passengers, depending on the type of approved vehicle. I will show the Committee the type of plate that we use, which says "taxi bus".

An independent survey carried out in March 2001 demonstrated annual usage of our service by 5·8 million passengers. That was before the construction of our new operating centre in Belfast city centre — a gateway to west and north Belfast, for which we provide services.

Although the core of our service provision is based on multi-stage carriage fares, we also provide occasional private-hire services, specifically for tourists, and, through contract services, supply transport for the Belfast Education and Library Board and health trusts for passengers with special needs.

As well as being regulated by statutory agencies, the West Belfast Taxi Association is self-regulating through its constitution and code of conduct, which already contains the majority of the key elements in the Taxis Bill. To fully appreciate the services that we offer, we suggest that the Committee visit our operating centre and experience at first hand the workings of the taxi-bus service.

The association has the only hail-and-ride bus service in western Europe, and it can be a lifeline for anyone who lives, works or socialises in the areas to which we provide services. The association recognises the need for the Taxis Bill, and it was a key stakeholder

in the consultation that led to the development of the Bill. We commend the DOE, especially the taxi review team, on the consultation held in March 2005. We also commend those who made themselves available for public and private meetings about the impending regulations.

Like many other service industries, the taxi industry is growing due, in particular, to the increasing number of tourists. In many instances, taxi drivers at ports, airports and bus stations give tourists their first impressions of the place we live in. Passenger and provider satisfaction must be achieved. Consideration must also be given to the economic effect of changes on providers. Any excessive increase in regulatory demands made on providers will, ultimately, lead to increased fares, which will impact on consumers, and the effect of that must be considered.

In some countries, increased regulation has led to an increase in illegal services: taxi users who do not have a sizeable disposable income elect to use illegal services, even in the knowledge that they are not properly covered by insurance, and so forth.

I will deal with certain elements in the sequential order in which they appear in the Taxis Bill and give the Committee details of our proposed amendments, additions, omissions and advice.

The association agrees in principle with the one-tier system for all. The more forms of amenable taxis there are, the better it will be for taxi users, especially those who socialise in the evenings. The more service provision there is, the lower the likelihood of low-level street disorder and antisocial behaviour, which will also benefit the accident and emergency services.

In dealing with the arrangement of the Bill, we suggest adding the term “taxi bus” and its definition to an introductory section. Taxi bus means the provision of a taxi service based on multi-occupancy of a vehicle by up to six or seven passengers with an agreed and publicised fare tariff and regulated under a Roads Service operator’s licence.

With regard to the regulation of taxi operators, we suggest the following amendment to clause 2(4)(a)(i) after:

“is a fit and proper person to hold an operator’s licence”

add

“and checked against the child sex offender register.”

At the end of clause 2, which deals with operator’s licences, we suggest inserting the following new subsection:

“(9) Holders of existing Road Service Operators Licences who provide taxi bus services will

Require no need for an additional operators licence;

Not require any changes ... in the conditions and criteria of a Road Service Operators Licence to operate existing services under new operators licence;

Capping of charges for Road Service Operators Licence in view of service provision to public transport by licensed taxi bus providers.”

At the end of clause 6, which deals with compliance with a departmental taxi-sharing scheme, we suggest the following new subsection:

“(4) Those who currently hold a Road Service Operators Licence will be permitted to operate a taxi-sharing scheme any additional taxi-sharing scheme in the defined areas of provision of transport already provided for must demonstrate the need for an additional taxi sharing scheme.”

We suggest an amendment to clause 9(b) because the frequency of the services, the times of departure and the times to be taken on the journeys included in those services, and the number of taxis to be used in those services, is not realistic. Frequency of service is restricted in relation to the volume of traffic, specifically at peak times. Times of departure are based on demand. Times taken on a journey are restricted due to the length of journey and the volume of traffic. The number of taxis will be denoted by the number of vehicles on the operator’s licence.

In Part 2, which concerns the regulation of drivers of taxis, the Department needs to look seriously at the design of some vehicles that are used as taxis but have never been crash-tested as taxis.

We suggest that clause 14(5)(a) should be redrafted to:

“(a) give notice under same conditions of SORN information to the Department of the fact that the name and address of the new owner whose vehicle must be licensed in accordance with the taxi service they will provide under an operator’s licence.”

At the end of clause 15, which deals with the identification of licensed vehicles, we suggest inserting a new subsection (7):

“(7) No licensed taxi will be permitted to carry signage that is not applicable to the service provision that the taxi is licensed to provide. Permitted signage should only indicate applicable type Accessible or Non-accessible Public Hire, Private Hire or Taxi Bus. Anyone who contravenes this regulation is guilty of an offence.”

In clause 16, which deals with the regulation of fares, we suggest including a new paragraph (1)(c):

“(c) In accordance with Disability Discrimination no differential in application of taxi fares or charges irrespective of able bodied or non-able bodied usage.”

We suggest that clause 19(1), which deals with taxis not being permitted to carry more than the prescribed number of persons, should relate specifically to the carrying of children of five years of age and under in taxis. Usually, parents and guardians keep children on their knees or in their arms. Primary legislation is required.

In Part 3, which deals with the regulation of drivers of taxis, clause 23(2)(a)(ii) should be amended to state:

“(ii) is a fit person in accordance with a General Practitioners examination and statement of same. The applicant is of good repute, which is determined by internal Departmental process. Applications will be accepted from a person who is classed as exempt under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. Schedule 1 and 2 offences to be dealt with in accordance with the exemption under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. The Department will consider applications from those not exempt under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. Repute checks will also include checks against the Child Sex Offenders Register.”

The part of the Bill that relates to training should be omitted, because of an ongoing consultation process relating to training needs. Training needs must be delivered in a format that includes current holders of public-service-vehicle licences who have low-level educational skills but are ideal taxi drivers.

Finally, the Department must protect under legislation those who provide taxi services in a similar way to that in which other public-service providers are protected. The West Belfast Taxi Association is willing and, within its capacity in the taxi industry, welcomes operational and other changes that are required. Compliance costs are paramount. In the light of that, the association suggests that an independent regulatory body or taxi commissioner be appointed to adjudicate on the introduction of fees and regulations in relation to the Taxis Bill.

The Northern Ireland taxi industry already faces higher costs for insurance and fuel than any other provider in England, Scotland or Wales. The much-needed establishment of an independent authority should be responsible for the seamless transition of the new Taxis Bill, particularly in respect of fees.

Representation in an independent authority should include urban and rural taxi providers from the following sectors: public hire; private hire; wedding and funeral cars; stretch limousines, including novelty vehicles; chauffeur-driven cars that provide exclusive services; and taxi buses. Representation should also be included on behalf of consumers.

From a user and provider scenario, the taxi industry is made up of people irrespective of social, economic, religious, gender, or ethnic background. In many ways, the industry is the first face of tourism. Although the Department has no direct responsibility for tourism, it needs to recognise its role. Any higher additional compliance costs will clearly bring increased driver and vehicle costs to consumers. It must be realised is that, while addressing illegal taxis, the Taxis Bill could lead to unachievable compliance costs, resulting in the further establishment of illegal activity.

The West Belfast Taxi Association thanks the Department for the opportunity to consult on the process. Furthermore, we are happy to discuss the contents of our document with any duly appointed responsible persons. We suggest that particular attention be given to the changes to the Bill that we deem appropriate.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your comprehensive overview. Will members indicate whether they wish to ask questions?

Mr Boylan: Thank you for your presentation. You mentioned the additional costs that will be incurred to bring taxis up to the standards required for carrying children. Will you elaborate on the taxibus system?

Mr S Long: Under the multi-occupancy arrangements, we provide a transport system on seven routes in west Belfast and one in north Belfast, which works on the basis of passengers sharing the price of the fares. The West Belfast Taxi Association transports 5.8 million passengers per annum, which is four times greater than the number passing through the George Best Belfast City airport. That is an indication of the service that we provide.

With regard to compliance costs, under the new legislation, there will be two increases in those costs over a 15-year period, because licence renewal will take place every three years instead of every five years. In addition, anyone over the age of 45 who applies for the renewal of a public service vehicle (PSV) licence must undergo a medical, which will mean two additional medical costs in that 15-year period also.

The training needs, which are still in the consultation process, will also involve additional compliance costs, and those costs, whether we like it or not, will be passed on to consumers. If it gets to the stage where those costs are outside the capabilities of taxi drivers, and fares become too expensive for consumers, illegal activity will start. It happens in other countries.

Mr Boylan: Would you elaborate on the carrying of children?

Mr S Long: The proposed legislation does not refer to children in taxis — I cannot see anything there about seatbelt wearing, booster seats etc. I suggest that the Department considers how children are carried in taxis. If they are not strapped in, children can act like missiles, and we are all conscious of the damage that can be done.

Mr Ford: I would like to follow up on a similar safety point. You referred to a design issue with certain vehicles: I take it that you are thinking about stretch limousines and new style multi-purpose- vehicle (MPV) people carriers, which are allegedly wheelchair accessible. Are you saying that PSV tests are not currently picking up safety issues in such vehicles?

Mr S Long: We would describe some of those vehicles as hybrid — their registration documents might show that they are van conversions. Such vehicles may have been tested to various national and European approval standards such as the M1 standard, some of which have been adopted here. However, seats

could be removed after testing, as they are only framed in. Recently, I was in a private taxi, an MPV, which was registered to carry six passengers. I was sitting in the back, which had two rear seats, and there were three seats in front of me. Had there been an accident, and had the vehicle been rear-ended, I would have had great difficulty getting out.

Our advice to the Department is that it must be very careful when considering the type of vehicle to be classed as a taxi, especially if that type of vehicle has not been crash-tested as a taxi.

Mr Ford: Are you saying that that issue is distinct from the annual PSV testing?

Mr S Long: No. I am suggesting that when the annual testing is taking place, some criteria should be established for what is classed as a type-approved vehicle, especially one that has been adapted for people with special needs.

The Chairperson: You mentioned the potential for a disparity in the fares charged to people with disabilities.

Mr S Long: Legislation should ensure that there can be no differential.

The Chairperson: Is there a disparity at the minute?

Mr S Long: Yes. I do not have any evidence of that, or I would give it to the Committee. Some companies charge a premium rate for providing a service to people in wheelchairs, and that is a disgrace.

The Chairperson: Please expand on the educational standard of drivers and how that should, or should not, affect their ability to obtain a licence.

Mr S Long: The issue is not about a driver's ability to get a licence. A consultation process is ongoing on training needs, and we have submitted a document, which we have also given to the Committee. I do not think that there can be legislation on training needs until the consultation process has been completed and every area examined. A lot of PSV drivers are good taxi drivers who keep their vehicles in pristine condition and provide a great service, but they may have training needs. However, they may not be able to get that training, so training must be given in such a way that drivers with low-level educational skills can avail of it and still work in the industry.

The Chairperson: Have you ideas about the remit, or form, that an independent regulatory body should take? I do not want to bounce that one on you.

Mr S Long: It should comprise representatives from rural and urban areas, including those from private-hire and public-hire firms, taxibuses and the chauffeur-driven, novelty-type vehicles I mentioned earlier, such as fire engines and former British Army vehicles. There must be representation from across the board, including the Consumer Council, which was referred

to earlier. Consumers must get value for money — compliance costs could be incurred and could be passed on to them.

Mr Boylan: Please clarify your remarks about clause 23(2)(a), and training delivery. Your comments, as regards low-level educational skills, are key. Would you also say something about schedules 1 and 2?

Mr S Long: As regards schedules 1 and 2, former prisoners still have to list on their original PSV licence applications that they were convicted in, say, 1973, and, as they renew their vehicle licences, they have to continue to list those convictions. Other convictions are dealt with under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, and it is high time that everything was dealt with under that Act. If convictions are spent, that should be the case for everyone. We are talking about social inclusion, not social exclusion. People whose convictions are spent should not have to list those convictions continually.

Mr T Clarke: I disagree.

The Chairperson: The Committee can ask the Department to elaborate on that point, and quite a lot may depend on the nature of the offence — if I am correct. The Committee will ask the Department to clarify those matters later today.

Mr T Clarke: The question is straight forward. If there is a conviction, the answer is either yes or no. If the answer is yes, the nature of the offence is immaterial. People have to be honest and complete the application form correctly. There should be no get-out clauses, regardless of the offence involved.

The Chairperson: To clarify, I have seen two scenarios relating to convictions. In some cases, a conviction is spent, which has applied to taxi drivers; in others, they are not: it depends on the nature of the offence. Perhaps we can call in officials from the Department today to clarify, if possible, the different situations.

Mr Boylan: Each witness is here today to submit challenges to certain clauses of the Bill, and it is up to the Department to respond. The only reason that I brought up the subject was to clarify the nature of the various offences.

Mr Weir: Mr Long, it was probably a slight omission on your part, but you referred only to the child sex offenders register. Surely you should have referred to the entire sex offenders register, because it would be inappropriate for someone who had been placed on the sex offenders register for a sexual offence against a woman to be permitted to have a licence.

Mr S Long: Perhaps that was an omission on my behalf. I should have said the entire sex offenders register. Any reference to the register was left out of the legislation.

I want to clarify a point that relates to the offences listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill. On the original application for a PSV licence, if a conviction is spent, that is that. However, even though the Department has been made aware of a conviction, a driver who wants to renew a vehicle licence annually must continue to list any convictions on the application. The association thinks that that is wrong. Once a driver has been awarded a PSV licence, there is no need to repeat that process at each annual renewal.

The Chairperson: I take your point. Thank you very much for your time today. There are several issues to which the Committee must return.

I will summarise for the Committee the issues that I have identified, and members can draw to my attention anything that I have missed. The association highlighted child safety, training needs — especially for drivers of lower educational ability — and cost issues linked to the question of a regulatory body. If I picked it up correctly, there is also a query about the criteria used to define a taxi and a lack of clarity about convictions.

The next witness is Mr Robert McAllister. Good morning, Mr McAllister. You are most welcome. Thank you for giving up your time to be here today. I do not know whether you were present earlier to see the format that the meeting takes. The Committee is working within time constraints. You are welcome to give evidence, but will you please limit it to a maximum of 15 minutes— and you may only need 10 minutes. After that, members will question you on specific issues that you have mentioned. Further down the line, the Committee will take evidence from the Department or seek clarity where required.

Today is your only opportunity to give evidence to the Committee: you will not have a further chance to come back. Please start when you feel comfortable.

Mr Robert McAllister: My name is Robert McAllister, and I am a concerned public-hire taxi driver whose vehicle is wheelchair accessible. I must congratulate the Committee for the Environment for listening to my concerns about the Taxis Bill.

My main point about the operator's licence is that private-hire taxis that are not wheelchair accessible will be able to pick up members of the public without having been pre-booked. The only taxis to be Government-regulated in Northern Ireland are public-hire taxis that are wheelchair accessible. I agree to everything else in the Bill.

The Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, stated in the news media on 26 June that there was great demand for taxi services. I have to contradict that. Obviously, she has been misinformed by her officials.

The Chairperson: Can I say, Mr McAllister —

Mr R McAllister: Am I talking too quickly? I apologise.

The Chairperson: It is not that. Please focus on the legislation that is before us. We cannot ask members to interpret what the Minister may or may not have said. Please bear with us on that.

Mr R McAllister: OK. This is about public-hire accessible taxis. Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland and London is the capital of England. Whether we like it or not, Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom. A single-tier system like the one that the Department is trying to create in Belfast has always operated throughout the six counties of Northern Ireland.

I have already submitted written evidence to the Committee that the Department of the Environment has created a taxi monster in Belfast. The peak time for taxis is from 1.00 am to 3.00 am or 4.00 am on Sunday mornings. For hours before that, taxis are waiting in the streets doing nothing.

I work 70 hours per week — 10 hours per day — in a £32,000 wheelchair-accessible vehicle. I had to borrow £2,000 from a member of my family to pay for it. I find it very hard to break down the barriers. I believe that the national minimum wage is £5-odd per hour; public-hire taxi drivers in Belfast do not earn that much. As a taxi driver, you may be parked for an hour on your stand to get a run to Botanic Avenue. That brings in £2.70 or maybe £3.00. Then you come back and wait another half an hour. When you work out the cost of running the taxi and the other costs and payments, it does not add up. To be honest, I am seriously considering becoming unemployed. Public-hire services in Belfast are at a standstill. Drivers are not making a living.

Where is this coming from? Unfortunately, it is DOE mismanagement. There is a lack of enforcement. I have photographic evidence here that contradicts the assertion that taxi services are busy.

The Chairperson: The Committee hears what you are saying. However, enforcement is for the Department. We have to stay focused on the legislation.

Mr T Clarke: Part of the legislation that we are discussing relates to improving enforcement. That is why we need to stay focused on that point. I have sympathy for the taxi drivers if the enforcement is not there or is not being carried out correctly. However, the fact that it has been included in the legislation shows that the Department is trying to put that right. It might have been wrong; the wheel has been broken; but now the Department is trying to fix it.

The Chairperson: There are enforcement issues there, and the issue of resources for enforcement has been raised.

Mr Boylan: I am seeking clarification. I agree with some of Mr McAllister's remarks, but I urge him to explain his concerns clearly.

The Chairperson: If you do not mind, Cathal, the Committee will return to that later. Mr McAllister has not had his 15 minutes yet.

Mr R McAllister: There was to be 15 minutes for me to make a presentation, and another 15 minutes for members to question me.

I will tell you where the main problem lies in Belfast. Again, I have photographic evidence. The main problem is that FonaCab and Value Cabs —

The Chairperson: We cannot allow witnesses to mention specific companies or name individual operators.

Mr R McAllister: I am sorry. OK, two major companies in Belfast city centre — *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I am sorry, but you must bear with me. The Committee's purpose is not to adjudicate on allegations, it is to hear evidence. If you have other specific issues, you can report them to the Department, and it will be up to the Department to investigate them. The Committee's purpose is not to act as a court or to make judgements on what companies may or may not be doing.

Mr R McAllister: OK. Excuse me for saying that.

It would be totally wrong to create a one-tier system in Belfast. If the Committee and the Department are going to allow private-hire, non-accessible taxis to pick up fares on the street, they must consider the following; a wheelchair user may stick out his hand to flag down a private-hire taxi on the streets of Belfast in a situation in which the taxi driver is not duty bound to drive a wheelchair-accessible taxi. In addition, the taxi driver will not have the proper facilities in his car to cater for that wheelchair user. Public-hire taxis have partitions in their taxis. About four or five weeks ago, a private-hire taxi driver in a non-accessible taxi picked up a job in Belfast city centre. Four males got on board and said that they were going to Andersonstown —

The Chairperson: I think that that matter may be before the courts at the moment.

Mr R McAllister: Again, I am sorry for saying that.

The Chairperson: It may be helpful to give you an indication of the type of issues that we are dealing with today — it is up to you whether you pick up on any of them. The issues are: the regulation of taxi operators; the regulation of taxis; the regulation of taxi drivers; licensing; enforcement, which we have touched on, and miscellaneous aspects of the Bill. So, if there are issues in those areas that you feel you should dwell on, please do.

Mr R McAllister: Public-hire taxi drivers in Belfast city centre do not have a lot of problems with the majority of the Bill. Truthfully, there are only two problems. The first is with private-hire non-accessible taxis being allowed to pick up people on the streets, and the second is the fact that public-hire taxis are currently the only regulated taxis in Northern Ireland. We are regulated by the Department, which seals our taximeters. We are the only sole operators, and we are under an operators' licence as things stand.

In my experience, there are too many taxi drivers in Belfast city centre. To be frank, PSV licences are being given out like Guinness labels. I had to sit a PSV driving test before I could get my PSV licence. Now, a driver can apply for a PSV driving licence, which will be sent out in the post. The only requirements are a medical check, and a background check for any skulduggery that might be found, and then the PSV licence is posted out to the driver.

The Department has created a taxi monster throughout Northern Ireland. The Department was formed in May 1972 and if it had got its act together from the beginning, it would have created a two-tier system throughout Northern Ireland. A public-hire taxi in any place outside Belfast should be wheelchair accessible. A terrible amount of taxpayers' money has been wasted on this. If the Department had got its act together from the start, we would not be sitting round this table today.

I want to make another point, which is relevant to the discussion. In the 1970s, before Stormont was abolished, taxi services in Belfast were run by the Belfast Corporation Transport Department. The time has come for the Committee to put taxi services back into the hands of Belfast City Council.

The Chairperson: That may be a point well made, but, unfortunately, we cannot discuss it.

Mr R McAllister: I understand that it cannot be discussed at today's Committee meeting.

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr R McAllister: What sense was there in my investing £32,000 on a purpose-built wheelchair-accessible taxi that can carry six people — five in the back and a ramp for use by someone in a wheelchair, someone using a Zimmer frame, someone who has suffered a stroke or someone who is elderly and has difficulty in walking? That taxi is purpose-built to accommodate disabled passengers. A private-hire taxi — without access for the disabled — does not cater for disabled passengers. That is the main reason that the two-tier system should remain in Belfast.

I have already mentioned other parts of Northern Ireland, where the one-tier system operates. Belfast, as a busy capital city, should be treated differently.

The idea that there is a large demand for the creation of a one-tier taxi system, which will result in people loitering about the streets waiting for taxis, is totally unfounded. Committee members should experience travelling by taxi for themselves. Some members travelled with two public-hire taxi drivers from the T&G Section of Unite. I can honestly say that from 1.00 am to 3.00 am on a Sunday morning there is a peak-time demand for taxis, as there is in any other part of the United Kingdom. Every city in the world has that peak time. If there were a million taxis, they would not be able to cater for the demand during that peak period.

Usually, people want a taxi at the snap of their fingers. Unfortunately, that is a result of the public-licensing laws in Northern Ireland. I realise that I am moving away from the issues under discussion today. All the bars and nightspots close at some time between 1.00 am and 2.00 am, at which time people flock onto the streets. That only accounts for three hours out of 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Therefore, I ask the Committee to go out with taxi drivers, any time before that three-hour period, to confirm what I have said.

I have provided the Committee with photographic evidence, which will allow members to see that taxi drivers are sitting in taxi ranks and that there are insufficient parking spaces for taxis. To my knowledge, Belfast is the only city in the world that does not have parking spaces for taxis in its city centre. Most people will have witnessed that — from Royal Avenue, Castle Place, Donegall Place and Donegall Square North; taxis have to double-park to get onto a nine-car taxi rank in order to accommodate people leaving Belfast city centre during daytime. That is bloody ridiculous.

Do any Committee members — if their parents are living — want their elderly mother or father, who may be infirm, to walk from CastleCourt to Donegall Square North to get a taxi? That is totally unfair. I realise that that is an issue for the Department for Regional Development.

The Chairperson: I am not criticising your mentioning that issue, but I am merely advising you that your time is up. You have made your points in a very articulate way. Thank you for that.

Mr T Clarke: You referred to Guinness licences. — *[Laughter.]*

Mr R McAllister: Fortunately, I do not drink.

Mr T Clarke: The regulation of licensing and the introduction of tests are an issue. You have said that there is a negative aspect to the rationing of licences, similar to the problems in the past with Guinness licences. Surely the DOE must be congratulated for its suggestion that testing for all taxi drivers should be

introduced rather than it being a matter of a licence being sent out as the result of a postal application.

Mr R McAllister: I apologise for interrupting, Mr Clarke. That would be like my saying to you to close the door after the horse has bolted. Go out to the taxi industry, throughout Belfast, and you will see that there are too many taxi drivers.

Mr T Clarke: If I may pick up on that point, even taxi drivers who have been issued with a taxi driver's licence will be regulated and asked to sit the test or go through that procedure.

The horse may have bolted, but the DOE is attempting to remedy the situation. You say that you are having problems with the industry and are not making money. The DOE recognises those problems and is addressing them to help public-hire taxi drivers.

Mr R McAllister: The Taxis Bill makes no provision whatsoever for public-hire taxi drivers working from Belfast city centre. We feel that we have been let down by the Department of the Environment and other Government bodies. To put it bluntly, public-hire taxi drivers have been shafted by all the relevant Departments. The Taxis Bill contains nothing for public-hire taxi drivers. There are not enough public-hire taxi ranks, and there are too many taxis.

Mr T Clarke: You say that there are too many taxis and not enough ranks. If there are not enough ranks, perhaps that is because there too many taxis? You are contradicting yourself. The DOE recognises that there are difficulties, and it is introducing measures to help and support public-hire taxi drivers.

The Committee understands that everything is not as it should be. The purpose of the Committee's speaking to the taxi industry as part of the consultation process is to determine parts that can be tweaked or remedies that members can suggest to the Department of the Environment. The Committee must take on board what the taxi drivers say. We all see how many taxis are on the roads and realise that there are problems. The DOE is attempting to find a remedy, which it may not achieve, but with the support of the taxi industry and others, it might.

Mr R McAllister: Taxi marshals work well in other parts of the United Kingdom, and I have emailed information to the DOE taxi review team. Taxi marshals are important, and they would be welcome during limited hours — for example, between 1.00 am and 3.00 am on a Saturday morning — when they could bring order and discipline. Taxi marshals should have similar powers to those afforded to the DOE's taxi enforcement officers, of whom there are only five for the six counties of Northern Ireland, which is not acceptable, given the influx of taxi drivers across the board.

On a different point, public-hire taxis are the only regulated taxis. On their regular checks in Belfast city centre, DOE officials seem to target only public-hire vehicles and turn a blind eye to private-hire taxis, which have always picked up fares illegally off the streets because of lack of enforcement and control.

Mr T Clarke: May I answer that question, Mr Chairman?

The Chairperson: Only if it relevant to the proceedings.

Mr T Clarke: I feel that I am representing the industry, and Mr McAllister is a member of the Committee.

[Laughter.]

The reason that the Committee is meeting is to discuss all those issues, including the lack of enforcement. All the issues are covered by the legislation, because the DOE is trying to fix a system that it recognises does not work.

Mr I McCrea: During your presentation on the lack of revenue, you mentioned that earnings do not reach the minimum wage. Earlier, Mr Egerton said that, some years ago, public-hire taxi drivers were allowed to increase fares by only 10p. Can you give us a steer on what you feel would be —

Mr R McAllister: To be honest, Ian, the problem is based on the fact that two main companies in Belfast city centre —

The Chairperson: Please deal with the subject generally, without referring to specific companies.

Mr R McAllister: Private-hire taxi services in Belfast city centre are picking up fares illegally off the streets. Would you like it if I put my hand into your pocket and took money out? I doubt it. However, that has been happening to public-hire taxi drivers in Belfast over years, and it is unfair.

The situation is such that I have to borrow money to enable me to go out to work. That is not acceptable: perhaps it is time for me to go down the unemployment route. The DOE has made a shambles of this matter, and it has put me and fellow taxi drivers in a position where we are at our wits' end. I believe that the DOE has an agenda to force public-hire taxi drivers off the street and into the private-hire sector. That is disgusting, to be frank.

The Chairperson: The Bill aims to achieve a level playing field.

Mr R McAllister: There is no level playing field here.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr McAllister, for your presentation. I am sorry that there are some areas that the Committee cannot discuss with you. I agree with Trevor Clarke's comments, and, Mr McAllister, I appreciate your remarks about the frequent checks on

— and heavy regulation of — the operation of public-hire taxis. The aim of the legislation should be to try to extend the scope of regulations.

Your main concern seems to be about the abolition of the two-tier system in Belfast. I was confused at one stage, because you seemed to be contradicting yourself. At one stage, you seemed to suggest that the same standards should apply throughout Northern Ireland and that there should be the same system throughout. However, you later said that the two-tier system should be protected in Belfast, because Belfast is unique. Those are slightly contradictory positions. Either Belfast is unique and needs a unique solution, or the whole of Northern Ireland should be treated in the same way.

Mr R McAllister: Northern Ireland — whether some people like it or not — is a part of the United Kingdom, and this exercise would not happen in London. Belfast is the capital city and the busiest city in Northern Ireland. That is why we need accessible public-hire taxis on the streets for people who have disabilities.

Mr Weir: Is London an appropriate analogy? Northern Ireland people have a tendency to think of themselves as the stars of the picture, but Belfast city has a population of between 250,000 and 300,000, whereas London has a population of between eight million and 10 million. Is Belfast so very different from medium-sized cities in other parts of the UK?

Mr R McAllister: The DOE taxi review team conducted a study among consumers four or five years ago, but it was not aware of the increase in the public-hire taxi sector in Belfast city centre. Belfast public-hire taxis have been operating for years, and by-laws dating back to 1951 show that those taxis were the responsibility of Belfast Corporation at one time. Public-hire taxis are the only accessible taxis. There is no demand in Belfast for an end to the two-tier system.

Mr Weir: The only —

Mr R McAllister: Mr Weir, I do not wish to be rude, but please hear me out. The DOE and other relevant bodies are saying that the one-tier system is required to cater for the increase in public demand for taxis. That is untrue.

Mr Weir: I know that you were restricted in what you could say about ministerial matters, but you were attacking the rationale behind abolition, because you believe that there is a need for the two-tier system in Belfast on the grounds of volume of business. However, you also said that you had photographs showing that, for the vast majority of time, some areas were not very busy.

Mr R McAllister: That is correct.

Mr Weir: If that is the case, and if, as you said, you are on the verge of unemployment —

Mr R McAllister: I am not telling lies.

Mr Weir: I do not doubt you for a second. However — if I may play devil's advocate — does that suggest that the current system is working? If the current system is forcing current taxi drivers out of business, surely there is a need to change that system and introduce the regulations that pertain in the rest of Northern Ireland.

Mr R McAllister: Are you saying, therefore, that the one-tier system should be introduced and that it should be acceptable for private-hire taxis to make illegal pick-ups on the streets of Belfast without any enforcement from the DOE?

Mr Weir: I am not saying that.

Mr R McAllister: That is the way that what you are saying is coming across.

Mr Weir: Does your suggestion that there are currently too many taxi drivers chasing too few fares, except during those three or so hours at the end of a Saturday night and the beginning of a Sunday morning, not imply that the system in Belfast city centre is not working well? Ultimately, the number of taxi drivers who are currently operating will not be able to survive economically.

Mr R McAllister: There are simply too many taxis. To be frank, it is similar to that scone that you are eating. If everyone in this room wants a slice, someone will not get one.

[Laughter.]

I know that that sounds funny, and you may laugh, but I am not laughing. A similar thing has happened to public-hire taxi drivers — we have been shafted. Our democratic and human rights have been taken away. The human rights of people with disabilities have been taken away. If legislation is passed that allows non-accessible private-hire taxis to pick people up in the streets, half the guys in the public-hire industry will end up in the private-hire industry. That is not a threat: private-hire non-accessible taxis will not be legally obliged to pick up a person who is in a wheelchair. If that happens, which I believe it will —

The Chairperson: Excuse me, Mr McAllister.

Mr R McAllister: No, I am sorry, Patsy, this is relevant.

The Chairperson: I am sorry; other members want to discuss other matters, and given that time is short, I ask you to please make your point.

Mr R McAllister: The public-hire taxi drivers will get their backs up because private-hire, non-accessible taxis will be allowed to be hailed in the streets. If, God

forbid, a wheelchair user is at a public-hire taxi rank, the public-hire driver will be so annoyed that they will drive past that person. A private-hire taxi driver will not be obliged to pick up a wheelchair user, because their car is not equipped to do so. It is asking a disabled person to get out of a wheelchair so that they can get into a private car. It does not make sense. My experience tells me that all relevant parties concerned with making this decision are making a big mistake.

Mr Boylan: Thank you for your presentation and for answering the questions. You mentioned that there are only five enforcement officers, and you also discussed your concerns about the two-tier system. The Committee recognises your concerns. However, I am a rural MLA, and I know that areas other than Belfast must be considered. Will you talk in more detail about the enforcement officers?

Mr R McAllister: There are five taxi enforcement officers for Northern Ireland, but there are between 9,000 and 10,000 taxi drivers. Therefore, there is an insufficient number of taxi enforcement officers. The Department's concern should be with the introduction of taxi marshals to maintain order and discipline. Those should have similar powers to check the dress code and manners of drivers as the taxi enforcement officers. Eventually, it will give the public confidence that there is a taxi marshal who will address their concerns at the time.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for giving the Committee your time, Mr McAllister; a fair bit of ground has been covered.

Mr R McAllister: I am sorry that I am not well educated enough to be talking in front of people like you. Excuse anything that I said; I apologise.

Mr Boylan: You got your point across.

The Chairperson: It came across loud and clear. You appreciate that the Committee is constrained by the type of evidence that it can take. Thank you.

The major issues that came across today include the provisions and pick-ups for disabled people, as well as the old question of the two-tier system and how that can best be harmonised and addressed. Other major issues are: enforcement — the Committee has just heard that there are only five enforcement officers for the whole of the North; and the concept of marshalling, which had previously been raised by other witnesses. Much ground has been covered, but that is it in a nutshell. Again, thank you for your contribution.

Mr R McAllister: I am sorry that I did not bring headache tablets for everyone. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Do not worry; you were as good as a high.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

13 September 2007

HEALTH (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL (NIA 2/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr John Farrell	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Ms Christine Jendoubi		
Mr Robert Kirkwood		
Mr Donncha O'Carolan	}	Acting Chief Dental Officer

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome the departmental officials, Christine, John, Robert and Donncha — I have found out how to pronounce that name. Members will recall that clauses 1 and 2 have been agreed. Members have been provided with much written material, including a copy of the Bill, a detailed commentary and a copy of extracts from any legislation that the Bill amends. Members will also recall that we took oral evidence from a number of groups before the summer recess, and further written submissions have been received over the summer.

I suggest that, in the main, Members should use the notes on clauses that the Department has prepared, which were circulated to Members last week, as well as the paper provided by the Committee staff.

The Committee will have a number of options when considering each of the clauses. Before choosing an option, I will invite the officials to outline briefly the purpose and meaning of the clause. Members can then,

if they wish, seek clarification. Following discussions with officials on each clause and the potential that there might be for amendment, the Committee can consider the options available to it.

The first option is to decide whether it is content with the clause as drafted. The second is to agree the potential for an amendment and request that the Department consider the matter and report its position back to the Committee: by doing so, we effectively refer the clause for further consideration. In cases where an amendment is considered appropriate, we can invite the Department to indicate whether it would be willing to undertake the drafting of such an amendment. We will now begin the clause-by-clause scrutiny at clause 3.

Clause 3 (General dental services: transitional)

The Chairperson: I invite officials to outline the meaning of this clause. Thereafter, questions will be taken.

Ms Christine Jendoubi (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): This clause deals with general transitional provisions and provides for the transition between the existing contract for dentists and the new contract. It also provides that all practices will have the right to enter into a new contract. At the point of transition, the boards will not have, for example, the right to decide to which existing dental practices they will offer the new contract. All existing practices must be offered the contract. The clause ensures continuity of provision for patients so that they will not notice the transition between the old and new contracts.

We must organise matters so that the new contract will come into effect on the same day as the transitional arrangements that are provided for in the legislation. There must be no gap: the legislation must be ready for the new contract to come into effect. When the legislation comes into effect, the old contract will fall, so the new contract has to be ready on the same day. This clause provides for that transition.

The Chairperson: The British Dental Association (BDA) has called for an Order made under clause 3(7) to be subject to an affirmative, rather than a negative, resolution procedure. What is your view on that?

Ms Jendoubi: The draftsmen, rather than the Department, usually decide whether a clause will be subject to affirmative or negative resolution. In my experience, the affirmative resolution procedure is usually reserved for clauses that include a power to set fees, charges or financial penalties. We have no strong views on that matter, and we are happy to take a recommendation from the Committee.

The Chairperson: If members are agreed, can I ask the panel about the relationship between negative resolution and affirmative resolution?

Ms Jendoubi: “Affirmative resolution” means that the clause cannot go forward unless the Assembly votes in favour of it. “Negative resolution” means that the clause is put before the Assembly for a period of days, I think of 40 days, during which time the Assembly can pray against it. If no-one prays against it during that period, then it is carried.

The Chairperson: We are covered. We do not lose out, we have a period of grace, then.

Mr Robert Kirkwood (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The transitional arrangements would require that at a stage before drafting, the Committee would be involved in the policy that was being set out. As Ms Jendoubi said, the difference between affirmative and negative resolution is that, with affirmative resolution, the legislation has to be approved by the Assembly and it is necessary to go before the Executive for approval to make the legislation. Although it is an Order, it is still subordinate legislation. With negative resolution, the policy intention included in it would come before the Committee, so you would have an opportunity then. Once the legislation had been made and was laid, the Committee would have another chance. Any Member could pray against it, and the legislation could be annulled at that stage, if that was what the Committee wanted.

The Chairperson: Therefore, there is a window of opportunity.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If we go for affirmative resolution, on the other hand, we give the prerogative to the Executive, and we have no recall. Is that correct?

Mr Kirkwood: No. We would be going to the Executive first, in the affirmative —

Ms Ní Chuilín: And then come back to us?

Mr Kirkwood: Yes.

The Chairperson: Am I correct in thinking that the Committee has a period after the Executive give their —

Mr Kirkwood: Yes, but with negative resolution it would not need to go to the Executive. We would come to the Committee setting out the policy that was intended to be taken forward in the legislation.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Mrs Hanna: We should go with whatever leaves us with most opportunity to come back. I find that it becomes very complicated when we ask a question. Sometimes the answers make it almost more complicated, because we get a lot of information back. Really, we want to leave it as open as possible so that we can come back if we feel it is necessary to do so. The Committee should choose whichever is most

favourable to it and affords it the most opportunity to return to the issue.

The Chairperson: If the clause provided for affirmative resolution an order for transitional provision would go to the Executive first and then we would have the opportunity to come back to it for a second time.

Question, that the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Charges for dental services)

The Chairperson: I invite the officials to explain the meaning of the clause, and we will invite questions thereafter.

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 4 provides for a change from the existing item-of-service payments to dentists to a new regime of charges. It removes paragraph 1A of schedule 15 to the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 — which provides for item-of-service payments — and inserts a new paragraph 1A that allows regulations to set out a new system of charging. It also inserts a new schedule 15A, which deals with exemptions, into the 1972 Order. Schedule 15A replaces article 26 of the Health and Social Services (Primary Care) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Therefore, the exemptions in the primary legislation are all now contained in one Order. It does not add any new exemptions, and it does not change any of the exemptions that are already in force. That was the basis on which we consulted.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Does it mean that people of 65 years of age and over will be exempt from charges?

Ms Jendoubi: No, because they are not exempt at present. The basis that we consulted on —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Was that the primary dental care strategy?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do you want to expand on that, Carál?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I believe that there should be exemptions for people aged 65 and over.

This may not be the time to discuss that; maybe we can do that when we go into the nitty-gritty of the dental contract.

Mr Donncha O’Carolan (Acting Chief Dental Officer): Recommendation 5 of the primary dental care strategy, which the Department consulted on, was that the existing exempt groups should continue to receive free dental treatment. None of the groups that were consulted wanted the current exempt groups to be changed. No one wanted the over 65s to be exempt

from dental charges. The Department drafted the legislation on that basis.

Ms S Ramsey: That does not make it right. It is my birthday today and, although I am not 65 yet, I would like free dental treatment when I reach that age.

Mr Kirkwood: There would be an expense attached to that. If a policy decision were made or an amendment tabled that over 65s should be included among exempt groups, the Minister would have to consider whether it was affordable and whether it was a priority compared to other priorities in the Health Service.

Dr Deeny: What groups did you consult with prior to drafting the legislation?

Mr O'Carolan: An extensive list of consultation groups is held in the Department. I do not know exactly how many groups are on it, but there are around 70 names.

Dr Deeny: Did any of them say that over 65s should receive free dental care?

Mr O'Carolan: None of them came back with that view. Free treatment for over 65s is not available anywhere else in the UK.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that it is offered nowhere, not even in Scotland?

Mr O'Carolan: Some areas offer free dental examinations. The Department costed free dental examinations at a total of £600,000 — [*Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.*] That is just for examinations; the cost of the treatment would run to millions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: People have paid their stamps for most of their adult lives. At the age of 65, people would imagine that they would be able to get their dentures without paying — [*Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.*]

The Chairperson: Do you want it to be called?

Ms S Ramsey: Free dental care for the over 65s needs to be explored. I understand that there are cost implications. However, elderly people receive free transport, free eyecare and free prescriptions. The fact that no other regions have taken action on free dental care for over the 65s should not stop us from leading the way. I do not mean to be flippant, but the fact that none of the consultation groups requested the measure should not stop us from introducing it either.

The Chairperson: Can you give me an idea of how many in the population are over 65?

Ms Jendoubi: I cannot answer that off the top of my head.

The Chairperson: Do members agree that before the Committee takes any decision, we defer and come back to it, deo volente, next week? I suggest that a

rough calculation is made to find out what the cost might be and the number of people that it would affect.

Dr Deeny: Did you say that 70 groups were listed for consultation on the issue of dental charging?

Mr O'Carolan: I do not know exactly how many are listed. The Department has a distribution list that all consultation documents have to go out to.

Dr Deeny: Is Age Concern on that list?

Mr O'Carolan: Yes, as far as I am aware, Age Concern is on the list.

The Chairperson: Help the Aged is also on the list.

Mr O'Carolan: It is a comprehensive list.

The Chairperson: We shall set clause 4 aside and invite the witnesses to return and provide a report with further information.

Mr John Farrell (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Our population is ageing, and the number of people who are over 65 today may not reflect what the number will be in five or 10 years' time. We should look forward a couple of years, if possible, and forecast what the future cost may be.

The Chairperson: It would be appropriate to consider more than one year.

Ms S Ramsey: Money can be saved by investing in health.

The Chairperson: I am sure that that view is not just a personal crusade.

Clause 4 referred for further consideration.

Clause 5 (Provision of dental services: Article 15B arrangements)

The Chairperson: Could you please talk us through clause 5, Ms Jendoubi?

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 5 looks very daunting. It seems very complicated, but all it does is make minor technical amendments to existing articles 15B, 15C, 15D and 15F, under which boards can enter into arrangements for "personal dental services": the clause changes that to "primary dental services". As was mentioned during last week's Committee meeting, primary dental services embraces both general dental services (GDS) and personal dental services — those being services for which boards can enter into contracts, except for general dental services that will be contracted for with each individual dentist. For example —

Mr O'Carolan: Are you looking for examples of when personal dental services might be used?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes.

Mr O'Carolan: Under the new contract in England, all orthodontic treatment is carried out under the banner of personal dental services. However, other areas, such as out-of-hours care or when a preventative scheme is needed in a deprived area, are not covered under the heading of GDS. A specific tailor-made scheme could be set up to target such areas. That would offer a degree of flexibility for the future; GDS is a bit more rigid. This would allow other providers such as dental hygienists and dental therapists to deliver services alongside dentists.

The Chairperson: The purpose is to protect the public.

Ms Jendoubi: We do not currently have personal dental services in Northern Ireland, nor do we have a vision for them in primary legislation. We have never brought the provisions that already exist into force. Clause 6, which was also mentioned at last week's meeting of the Committee, deals with piloting personal dental services. Clauses 5 and 6 together will remove the provision to pilot personal dental services, because we cannot foresee circumstances in which we would want to pilot that type of separate contract. That might be a fixed-term contract dealing with specific areas, and it is not the sort of arrangement that a health and social services board would want to pilot. A board would simply want to let the contract. Articles 15B, 15C, 15D and 15F will provide for personal dental services to be made permanent.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Revocation of power to make pilot schemes for provision of personal dental services)

Ms Jendoubi: That is the clause that I have just mentioned.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Assistance and support for persons providing primary dental services)

Ms Jendoubi: The boards currently have such powers in respect of general practitioners, but not dentists. Clause 7 gives boards the power, when a dentist is injured, off sick, or when there has been a fire at a dentist's surgery, for example, to step in and appoint a locum to ensure that continuity of service is maintained.

The Chairperson: The clause simply protects the continuation of services.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Ophthalmic services)

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 8 provides for ophthalmic services what preceding clauses provide for general medical and dental services, in so far as it provides for them to be on a performers' list for Northern Ireland.

It provides for the conditional inclusion, and contingent removal, of practitioners from the performers' list, and it provides for suspension by boards in the same way as other family practitioners.

The Chairperson: As in malpractices?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes. It is on exactly the same grounds.

Dr Deeny: Does that apply solely to optometrists? They used to be called opticians, but they are optometrists now.

The Chairperson: They all have fancy names now.

Dr Deeny: There can be confusion with ophthalmologists when we refer to "ophthalmic services", but we are talking about optometrists.

Ms Jendoubi: It is "persons providing general ophthalmic services".

Dr Deeny: But it is referring to optometrists?

Ms S Ramsey: I am being blinded by science.

Ms Jendoubi: To be honest, so am I. I understand that opticians did not like to be called opticians, but preferred to be called optometrists in the same way that chemists prefer to be called pharmacists.

The Chairperson: They just like big words. That is what it boils down to.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Perhaps the Chairperson is right. People say that they are going to the chemist's, not to the pharmacist's —

The Chairperson: Or to their pharmaceutical adviser.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You normally use the name of the shop that you get your glasses from, but we will not give anyone free advertising.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Local optical committees)

Ms Jendoubi: There are local optical committees in the same way that there are local medical committees in Northern Ireland. At the moment ophthalmic medical practitioners are not included in local optical committees, and clause 9 provides for them to be included.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Dispensing opticians are not included — we have just had this conversation.

Ms Jendoubi: As I understand it, dispensing opticians are people who sell glasses. They do not actually examine your eyes.

Dr Deeny: Therefore, a dispensing optician is not an optometrist?

Mrs Hanna: Nor an optician.

Ms S Ramsey: Yes, because you get your eyes tested there.

Dr Deeny: The optician only sells the glasses.

Ms S Ramsey: Most of them do eye tests as well.

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the place where I get my glasses — which I will not name — I just walk in, get my eyes tested, get my glasses and walk out.

Mr Farrell: An optometrist carries out the eye examination.

Ms Ní Chuilín: And then a salesperson will sell the glasses?

Mr Farrell: It would not be a salesperson. The dispensing optician will be responsible for ensuring that the lenses that you are prescribed have been done up in the correct way and are put into the glasses. Dispensing opticians do not actually carry out eye tests. They have their own separate role to play in the optician's practice, but they cannot examine eyes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: A bit like the hygienist in the dentist's, really?

Mr O'Carolan: My understanding is they can fit the glasses and dispense them, but they cannot examine your eyes.

The Chairperson: Why are dispensing opticians not included, and is it appropriate for them to be included, in local optical committees?

Ms Jendoubi: We can look at that and come back to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Optometry Northern Ireland argues that it is anomalous that dispensing opticians do not have a statutory right to membership of local optical committees and has proposed an amendment to clause 9 to provide for that. The Committee wants to explore why dispensing opticians are not included and whether it is appropriate that they should be. Can the Department examine that?

Mr Farrell: The Department will examine that and come back to the Committee. Local medical and dental committees comprise either doctors or dentists. The Department wants optometrists — the people who carry out eye examinations — to sit on the local optical committees. Dental hygienists, for example, do not sit on dental committees. One must read across to specify what professions should have places on committees.

Mrs Hanna: I think that there is a difference. An optometrist examines eyes. However, a dispensing optician fills out prescriptions and measures it all up. I do not wish to denigrate what dental hygienists do, but I think that dispensing opticians have a much more technical role.

Ms Jendoubi: Optometrists are on the local optical committees.

Mrs Hanna: Surely dispensing opticians are arguing to be on the committees.

Ms Jendoubi: You have described optometrists, who are already on the committees.

Mrs Hanna: So dispensing opticians do not fill out prescriptions; they do not measure?

Ms Jendoubi: Exactly.

Mrs Hanna: When I get my eyes checked, one person examines them and another person works out what the prescription should be. Certainly, at the practice that I go to, it seems very much like teamwork: one person examines my eyes and the other does somewhat more than simply choose the frames.

Dr Deeny: Clarity on that is needed. GPs get referrals from optometrists. They are synonymous with opticians of the past. However, the Committee is hearing the term “dispensing optician”, which is confusing. My understanding is that a dispensing optician is not qualified to examine the back of someone's eyes. That must be made clear, because, until now, people have understood opticians and optometrists to be synonymous. That is not the case. A dispensing optician is not a qualified optometrist. Can the Department provide clarity on that? Indeed, is the term “optician” a proper description of someone who is just selling glasses?

Mr Farrell: I believe that opticians do more than simply sell glasses.

Mrs Hanna: That is the point that I have tried to make.

Mr Farrell: Dispensing opticians ensure that a prescription is made up correctly and that the fitment is correct. They do not carry out eye examinations or assess whether a person's eyesight is strengthening or weakening. They do not determine what prescription lens a patient needs. The optometrist does that. Optometrists are also able to refer their patients to secondary care, whereas dispensing opticians cannot do that because they are not able to examine the eyes.

The Chairperson: Members agree that the Department will provide more information on that.

Clause 9 referred for further consideration.

Clause 10 (Pharmaceutical services)

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 10 largely consolidates the provisions for pharmaceutical services that are already

in the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. However, over and above that, it makes the same provisions for pharmacists that the previous clause made for optometrists and ophthalmic services: the performers' list; conditional inclusion and contingent removal; and suspension. We want provisions to be consistent throughout family practitioners services.

The Chairperson: The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland argues that the provision adds further confusion to the regulation of pharmacists and feels that it will cause duplication. Can you respond to that?

Ms Jendoubi: It depends what it means by "duplication". If it means duplication of the role of the regulatory body and the role of the tribunal, the Department argues that there is none. That was discussed last week. I do not know what else the society might mean by duplication.

The Chairperson: Could we defer that? A delegation from the Pharmaceutical Society will address the Committee later.

Clause 10 referred for further consideration.

Clause 11 (Disqualification by the Tribunal)

Ms Jendoubi: This clause covers schedule 1 of the Bill, which amends schedule 11 to the 1972 Order in relation to the provisions for the tribunal. We will come to that in a moment.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with the clause as drafted?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that we discussed that before; however, the issue of suspension and neutrality seems to be a neutral act.

Ms Jendoubi: We will get to that when we discuss the amendments to that schedule. This is just the covering clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Charges for services provided to persons not ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland)

Ms Jendoubi: This is a humanitarian provisions clause. It is extant already in other parts of the United Kingdom and is a parity measure. It provides that, when someone has been allowed to come into the country for a course of treatment, the Secretary of State or, in our case, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, can determine that, on humanitarian grounds, that person should not be charged. The reasons for being brought in for treatment must include the fact that the treatment is not available in the person's own country. For example, specialist services, or some cutting-edge technology, might be provided by the Royal Victoria Hospital.

The Chairperson: Someone may be classed as a "bleeder" and may not be able to have a tooth extracted unless senior consultants are on hand.

Mr Kirkwood: It will be only for treatment that is not available in the person's home country.

The Chairperson: I use that as an example of a specialist treatment that may not be available in other countries.

Mr Kirkwood: The provision allows for that person to come over here to be treated and for the Department to consider if he or she should be charged.

The Chairperson: On the other hand, does it open the floodgates? You must prove that it cannot be —

Mr Kirkwood: Specific criteria will be set down in regulations. As Christine said, the first requirement is that the treatment is not available in the person's home country.

Mrs Hanna: My query may be covered in some other part of the legislation. Will that provision cover emergency treatment for toothache for someone visiting the country? Is that covered anywhere?

Mr Kirkwood: That is covered in "persons not ordinarily resident".

Mrs Hanna: It is covered?

Mr Kirkwood: A person can receive emergency treatments during a temporary stay in Northern Ireland. Legislation already covers that.

Ms S Ramsey: Christine, did you say that this is not available in other parts of England, Scotland and Wales?

Ms Jendoubi: I said that it is.

The Chairperson: We are coming into line.

Ms S Ramsey: Sorry. Such a provision is a good idea, on the basis that we should have top-of-the-range, merged services, as long as it is not abused.

Mr Easton: Will this "humanitarian grounds" provision apply only to serious cases or could it be used for simple things?

Ms Jendoubi: Ordinarily, simple things are available in the person's own country. An example might be a youngster who has been caught in a bomb blast in Iraq and who is then brought to Northern Ireland because surgeons here have specialist skills, or a child born with a severe abnormality that specialist plastic surgeons here have skills to treat.

The Chairperson: Is that like the dental surgery that is required to correct a cleft palate?

Dr Deeny: On that costing, I know that the charge is waived for someone coming in from another country where the treatment is not available, but is the country not charged? For example, if someone from Canada

— a wealthy country — came for neurosurgery in the Royal Victoria Hospital, will that country not be charged for the treatment?

Ms Jendoubi: This clause deals with exceptional humanitarian grounds, and “exceptional” means just that. Someone coming to Northern Ireland for treatment that is not available in another country would not necessarily attract the use of that clause. There would have to be something particular about the treatment that would move the Department to regard it as exceptional in that way.

The Chairperson: The member picked a bad example. Canada would be able to cope with all kinds of dental work.

Dr Deeny: Is it for people from poor countries? Is that what you are saying?

Ms Jendoubi: Treatment would have to be examined on a case-by-case basis.

The Chairperson: Do you feel that the wording ties down what it actually means?

Mr Kirkwood: The clause more or less brings Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK, where it has currently fallen behind. The provision would probably be used more in London, for example, where there are specialist hospitals. It would be used more there than for patients transferring to Northern Ireland for specialist treatment.

Dr Deeny: Does a similar arrangement exist in America, for example?

Mr Kirkwood: There is reciprocity among various countries in relation to the Health Service.

Dr Deeny: Last week, the Committee met one patient who is now in Chicago having treatment that is not available here. I wonder whether we can draw a comparison, when there is no available treatment here.

Ms Jendoubi: I am afraid that I cannot comment on whether the Americans should charge that patient.

Ms S Ramsey: Why the NHS?

The Chairperson: That is a fair point; the family are paying half the cost of treatment, and we are asking the Department to pay the other half. However, that is another issue that we have not sorted out.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Retirement of practitioners)

Ms Jendoubi: The Committee may be familiar with this clause and its import already. The Department came to the Committee before the summer recess with the underpinning regulations for this clause. It will remove from the primary legislation the requirement

for age restrictions for dental practitioners and GPs. The GP age restriction is no longer in effect, and the restriction on dental practitioners is the only one left. Dental practitioners were required to retire at 70 years of age, which is against the European directive that deals with discrimination on the grounds of age. Therefore, the Department is asking for it to be removed.

Dr Deeny: GPs will be able to work forever or until we drop?

Ms S Ramsey: Dr Deeny will be OK; he can work for another 40 years.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 13 agreed to.

Clause 14 (Minor and consequential amendments)

Ms Jendoubi: This clause deals with small technical amendments that are necessary for the interpretation of the 1972 Order. For example, “Article 17C” should be replaced with “section 17C”, because that was a mistake in the original Order. There is nothing of import.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not understand what this clause is about.

Mr Kirkwood: It is a clause that can be included in any primary legislation. It is a standard type of clause, similar to Clause 16, which deals with interpretation. They are clauses that pick up on any minor or consequential amendment that is needed because articles are being changed.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 14 agreed to.

The Chairperson: If I may, we will finish there, because we have other deputations from which to hear. Next Thursday, we hope to consider the remainder of the clauses, as well as the two schedules and the long title, thereby completing the Committee Stage of the Bill. I thank you for your attendance.

Ms Jendoubi: Thank you very much.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Thursday 20 September 2007

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Ms Adrienne Adair	}	South Eastern Education and Library Board
Ms Joan Christie		
Mr Stanton Sloan		
Mr Barry Mulholland	}	Western Education and Library Board
Ms Helen Osborn		
Mr Bill Reilly		
Mr David Cargo	}	Belfast Education and Library Board
Mrs Rosemary Frawley		
Mr David Jess		
Mrs Marie Donnell	}	Southern Education and Library Board
Mr Wilbert Mayne		
Ms Kathleen Ryan		

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McNarry): Good morning. On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the witnesses. You have been asked to provide a five-minute overview of your written submission. I am compelled to ask that you keep within those five minutes, after which Committee members will ask questions. For the record, I am also obliged to ask that you answer the questions succinctly; I am sure that you will do that. May we call you by your first names?

Ms Joan Christie (South Eastern Education and Library Board): Please do.

Deputy Chairman, thank you for the invitation to attend this Committee meeting. We are grateful for the opportunity. In our submission, we outlined the background of the role of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) in the Library Service. We are on a tight timetable, so I will avoid repeating that information. I will outline the six points that were highlighted in that submission.

First, our view is that a single library authority will provide a unique opportunity for the Library Service in the future. If it cannot be under the remit of the education and skills authority, we are happy that it will be a single, free-standing organisation; we support that concept. That said, libraries have always had, and should continue to have, a close relationship with education; that is a vital partnership that we wish to continue.

Secondly, the SEELB highlights the community planning and partnerships that the Library Service already has, which it hopes will be developed and will grow as the new authority develops. The Library Service provides a local service to local communities. There are several other bodies, including the new education and library bodies, the health boards and various other organisations, with which the library service should be coterminous.

Thirdly, the board is conscious that, at present, the setting up of the new library authority is less than six months away. The establishment of the education and skills authority has been deferred until 2009. That throws up particular difficulties for the Library Service in some areas. The board is anxious that any changes must be carried out smoothly and that staff should be the focus of attention.

Fourthly, the board has outlined its view on the free library service in its submission, and welcomes the opportunity to do so again. We consider a free library service to be vital. Recently, someone wondered whether the chap who created libraries, if he were alive today, would have been able to set up free libraries. The board, however, already has them and considers it vital to keep them.

Fifthly, I have already mentioned the relationship with the schools' library service, which is vital. At present, the schools' library service comes under the umbrella of libraries. The board understands that that will change under the new library authority. However, maintaining that relationship and working together with the schools' library service is vital.

Finally, I have kept the most important point until the end, which is funding. The board supports the concept of the new library authority; it wants to be involved in it. However, we put our hands up and say that it must be funded properly — it must not be set up on a shoestring. The board strongly urges that the

resources that the new library authority needs must be made available.

If there are any questions, I am inclined to point towards the two experts on either side of me. I apologise for not introducing them properly. Stanton Sloan is the new chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. He was appointed during the past month. Adrienne Adair is the assistant chief librarian. Unfortunately, the chief librarian is on holiday and is unable to be here. I am one of the commissioners. The chairman is also on holiday and, therefore, sends his apologies to the Committee for being unable to attend.

The Deputy Chairperson: I congratulate Mr Sloan on his appointment. If my question is unfair, you do not have to answer it: your predecessor was seconded, so where does that leave the board? In my understanding, if someone is on secondment, it means that they can be returned to their previous post. However, you are now the chief executive.

Mr Stanton Sloan (South Eastern Education and Library Board): I am also appointed on that basis. However, with the support and agreement of the commissioners, I will continue to act as the chief executive. If circumstances change, they will be dealt with as and when they arise. At present, however, there have been no significant effects on the board. Matters are progressing as usual.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. That is good to know. Thank you.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the board for its presentation. Ms Christie mentioned a free library service. The Committee agrees with her on the need for that. Is the board content, therefore, that the wording of clause 6 of the Libraries Bill is strong enough to guarantee the continuation of a free library service?

Ms Christie: In our submission, we suggested that stronger wording is necessary. I will ask Adrienne to deal with that.

Ms Adrienne Adair (South Eastern Education and Library Board): The board would prefer that the wording of the legislation were much stronger in order to clarify that there will be a free library service at the point of use. There is concern that if budgets were to be reduced in the future, charges could be applied. The South Eastern Education and Library Board is keen to ensure that minimum charges are applied.

Mr McCarthy: That is fine; thank you.

Mr Shannon: You are very welcome, and congratulations, Stanton, on your new post.

In your submission to the Committee, you expressed some concern about the savings predicted for 2009-10 and through to 2011. You said that savings were unlikely

to come from reducing management costs alone. First, what brought you to that point of view? Secondly, where do you think savings can be made?

Mr Sloan: Perhaps I could turn that question around somewhat. The South Eastern Education and Library Board supports a single library authority, but is concerned that it is properly funded.

We have some specific concerns. For example, there will not be five chief librarians, so there will be redundancy costs. Recent reports from Deloitte examined estates management, human resources, IT and finance systems. Mr Shannon's question is on the mark and would be better directed to the new authority. The SEELB would like to be convinced, and we simply want to know how all those factors have been taken into account, and we are asking the Department to ensure that, when the authority is set up, it delivers a high-quality service and is adequately funded. We want to be assured that all those factors have been taken into consideration.

Mr Shannon: You are not convinced about how savings can be made. Do you feel that any savings can be made?

Mr Sloan: The SEELB's experience of other amalgamations, albeit of schools, is that the first and second years require investment to achieve savings in the longer term. Therefore, we suggest that there may need to be considerable investment in the first two years to ensure savings later on. We want to be assured — as will the Committee — that sufficient funds will be available for that investment.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, Jim. That was an important question and response.

Mr K Robinson: My question about your submission is similar to Jim Shannon's. You have asked the Department to clarify how the start-up costs and the estimated efficiencies have been calculated. What are your underlying concerns about that, and do you think that the Department has underestimated or overestimated the costs and savings?

Mr Sloan: That follows on from Mr Shannon's question. I received and read the Deloitte reports only in the last few days. On the basis of those, the library authority will have to address certain things. There is potential for savings. For example, the SEELB is close to Belfast and has a library at Cregagh, which is close to another library further down the Cregagh road.

To return to the point, the Department is underestimating the costs and overestimating the savings. We pointed that out in our submission. We are simply asking the Department, if it is going ahead with its plan, to give us the details, so that we can be assured that the service is properly funded. That is our

simple intention: to ensure that there is proper funding and that the level of funding is clear and transparent.

Mr K Robinson: You think that the Department has overestimated one sector and underestimated the other?

Mr Sloan: The initial estimate of savings is probably too high, and the start-up costs may be underestimated. However, we are simply asking the questions. The answers must come from a more detailed response from the Department.

Mr P Ramsey: There are several areas of concern, which your presentation clearly highlighted. What is your current budget for library provision in the SEELB? Can you tell us what the costs for staffing are and what revenue there is?

I have raised literacy and numeracy problems in Northern Ireland, because one-in-four people have such difficulties. The Department of Education provides money for numeracy and literacy education and for early-years programmes. Will that money be lost, or do you see the early-years programmes and help for those less skilled in numeracy and literacy continuing?

Ms Adair: Our budget this year is £5.235 million, and approximately 68% of that goes towards the staff costs that are required to run our library services — we have 24 static libraries. We work closely with Bookstart and Sure Start to deliver books and services to young children. Professional librarians work across groups of libraries to deliver those programmes. Those librarians devise content, and our staff on the ground deliver programmes to improve literacy, numeracy and computer literacy. As Mr Sloan has said, the SEELB does not know what the budget and structures of the new service will be, so the board does not know whether it will deliver those programmes in the future. However, the board currently delivers those programmes.

Mr P Ramsey: Are there indications from the Department of Education that the process will lead to links between the Department and the library authority?

Ms Adair: We hope that formal structures will be set up so that we can link closely with education, as the education and library boards do currently. We also run the schools' library service, which runs programmes for literacy, reading and reading exploitation. However, we need formal structures.

Mr P Ramsey: That point should be noted for future reference.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is a good point. You said that you do not know what the budget for the library authority will be.

Ms Adair: We know that the budget will be £30 million for the entire Northern Ireland library

authority, but we do not know what the structures will be or how the new service will be delivered.

The Deputy Chairperson: You do not know what the carve-up will be — that is important.

Mr D Bradley: My question concerns the link between the education and skills authority, and the library authority. I notice from the Department of Education's policy papers on the review of public administration (RPA) that it envisages a service-level agreement between the library authority and the education and skills authority. What do you see that agreement encompassing?

Mr Sloan: That relates to Mr Ramsey's question. Libraries play a significant part, as do youth services, in the areas of literacy and numeracy. New literacy and numeracy strategies will shortly be launched, and there is every indication that the early-years programmes will continue. The schools' library and education service will work closely on that; the SEELB has recently received an additional allocation from the Department, and it is working, through its education and library sides, to develop those initiatives. Support for those initiatives will be available through the schools' library service, and that will be part of the education and skills authority.

Literacy problems do not only affect children up to the age of 16 or 19. Mr Ramsey mentioned adult literacy, and we need to ask bodies such as libraries and education associations, and the people who work in them, what we need to do in that area.

Any service-level agreement that the library authority will have will probably relate to areas where cover is needed — for example, estates management. Estates will transfer over to libraries, but libraries do not have an estates branch, so who will look after them? I have met Irene Knox, the chief executive designate of the library authority, and we have discussed the need for service-level agreements on areas such as that.

The Deputy Chairperson: I need to remind you that time is pressing on. I apologise to our guests that we have to push ahead, and although the Committee may hear the same points being made by the other boards, it is important that we hear from those boards.

I remind members that the Committee has asked the Department for a report on the start-up costs of the library authority, and the spread and make-up of those costs. Perhaps it is an indication of joined-up government, but that report is not expected until tomorrow. We will have to deal with that report at our next meeting.

Lord Browne: You referred to the fact that the education and library boards will now be in place until March 2009. The library authority is due to be in place

by April 2008 — do you feel that there are any risks to the SEELB if it is not in place by then?

You said that you foresaw difficulties with the changeover, especially with your staffing. If the library authority is not established by April 2008, do you foresee that being a difficulty? Do you feel that a later start would help with the difficulties in synchronisation?

Ms Christie: It is difficult to see how the single library authority will be up and running by April 2008. We are less than six months away from that date, and there is a question over whether that deadline can be met.

On the other hand, my understanding is that the commitment has been made to having a single library authority, and one wonders if there will ever be a time when everything is absolutely ready. Therefore, should we not proceed with the target of April 2008, with all the potential problems involved, and deal with those as they occur?

The issue of staff morale concerns me deeply. It is already in difficulty and will continue to be so. Irene Knox, previously of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and now the chief executive designate for the library authority, will be recruiting staff from RPA-affected bodies, which means that our staff will be recruited. The SEELB, while sorry to lose Irene, is happy with its new executive, Stanton Sloan, but the problem remains that other jobs are going to be filled by people from our board.

A key issue for us and our staff is that we do not know where the new library headquarters are going to be located, and that presents a real problem. The SEELB has quite a percentage of female staff with commitments, and they cannot necessarily move to, for example, Omagh. I am not saying that the headquarters are going to be in Omagh, or that there is anything wrong with that as a potential location, being a Castlederg native myself. However, the new headquarters could be in a place that renders it impossible for current staff to apply for jobs, and that presents an equality issue.

Mr McCausland: Would it make more sense if the library authority and the education and skills authority were established in sync, as regards the organisational aspect of the transition? Are there advantages in having the two in sync?

Mr Sloan: There are certainly advantages to that. To expand on what Ms Christie said, the problem is that the staff who work in education and library boards cannot be classified as either library staff or education staff, and they cannot be treated separately — they comprise one set of staff, and should be treated accordingly.

The board supports the establishment of the new bodies. There should be sufficient time to ensure that that is done properly, but it should not cause undue delay. We think that it is only when the organisations are up and running that we will see benefits. When single procedures are in place, the organisations may well start their work at different times, but I agree that the closer together those dates are, the better.

Mr Brolly: I see a weakness in clause 6 as regards library services being free at point of delivery, particularly as the SEELB is concerned about savings being overestimated and costs being underestimated. Is it possible — and this is a bit of a conspiracy theory — that the clause may be a loophole, and that any losses incurred could be supplemented by charging in some subtle way?

Mr Sloan: I do not believe that to be the case.

Mr Brolly: It is something that should be watched.

Mr Sloan: That may be prudent.

Mr Brolly: Do you have a view on how the new library authority should engage with other local structures apart from those in education — the local councils, for example?

Mr Sloan: Although there will be a central library authority, library services will be delivered locally. Therefore, we must take account of other subregional structures that may be set up, including what may transpire as a result of the establishment of the education and skills authority. We have to take account of what happens in the health sector, and members will have already heard about provisions for literacy and numeracy, early years, and the Sure Start initiatives that are in place. I am not a politician, but I would say that, as far as joined-up government is concerned, it will be important to consider subregional structures throughout Northern Ireland and ensure that they are co-ordinated and include a wide range of services.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. Contrary to public perception, politicians do listen to good advice.

Mr Sloan: It was not my suggestion that they do not listen.

The Deputy Chairperson: I know. I merely wanted to make the point.

Mr Sloan: I apologise if the Committee took that inference from my remarks.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. Your presentation and timeous replies set a good standard for the witnesses who will follow. If you feel that you have missed anything, or wish to add something, please contact our officials, because this is a major issue. The Committee welcomes such information — we are only too aware of time constraints.

I welcome Ms Helen Osborn, Mr Bill Reilly and Mr Barry Mulholland from the Western Education and Library Board (WELB). I understand that Rev Robert Herron is unable to attend today. You will have five minutes for your presentation, and the Committee would appreciate it if you would keep to that time. Members will ask succinct questions so that you can give succinct answers. I am sorry to press you for time. The previous presentation set the standard, so please do not let us down.

Mr Bill Reilly (Western Education and Library Board): I am chairperson of the library committee of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB). The board is the local authority that is charged with the provision of education, library and youth services in the west of the Province, covering 289,000 people. The public library service and the schools' library service are integral parts of the board's activities, and we are particularly proud of four areas of our activities in library service provision. First, we work in partnership with the statutory, community, voluntary and private sectors to improve customer services.

Secondly, we are proud of the way in which the public library service and the schools' library service work closely together to address education priorities and initiatives. Current examples include the revised curriculum, extended schools, the One Book project and the Children's Books Ireland festival.

Thirdly, we take pride in our early-years provision activities, which is particularly important now that the Department of Education is responsible for early-years education provision. The board has seven play and learn centres in its libraries; it supports 113 preschool groups; operates the Bookstart scheme, and holds weekly rhymetimes in most libraries for children under three. Finally, our local history collections are popular and deserve to be made more accessible to everyone.

I wish to briefly highlight seven points from our submission. First, core library services should be free at the point of delivery. Secondly, there should be a single transfer process for the establishment of the Northern Ireland library authority and the education and skills authority, and the subregional structure that will be developed for the library authority should mirror that being developed for the education and skills authority. Thirdly, there should be close working relationships between the education and skills authority, and the library authority. Fourthly, we are concerned about the proposed size of the board of the library authority; we are unsure whether it will be sufficient to provide the breadth of expertise required for what will be a considerable workload. Fifthly, we have serious reservations about the figures provided on projected financial savings and about the limited budget for start-up costs. Sixthly, the cost of support

services, which is currently provided for in WELB's budget, also concerns us.

Finally, the current funding allocation to each board for public libraries is based on a formula that relates to population and takes account of social need and rurality. That provides a level of transparency and equality, and we would like an assurance that it will be maintained, when the Northern Ireland library authority is set up, so that the west will not be disadvantaged.

That is a synopsis of what our very hard-working staff in the Western Education and Library Board are doing, and we are very proud of them. We hope that when the library authority is established, services in the west will not be disadvantaged and that they will be at least as good if not better.

The Deputy Chairperson: I apologise to members for not giving them an opportunity to let me know if they want to ask questions. I will sort that out before the next session. I have a note that Mr McCarthy wants to ask the first question, then Mr Shannon and Mr K Robinson. Would those who have not signalled to me please follow on from the next three questions?

Mr McCarthy: You have said that you would like the wording in clause 6 to be strengthened. What do you see as the potential problems if the words "free service" are not included in the Bill?

Ms Helen Osborn (Western Education and Library Board): Our belief is that without an explicit commitment in the Bill to provide core services free at the point of delivery, there is a danger that charges will be levied to address budget shortfalls, which would clearly undermine the purpose and ethos of the public library service.

Mr Shannon: In your written submission, you referred to what will probably be the biggest single UK library authority. You also said, and I quote: "the level of savings referred to in the financial memorandum is a matter of grave concern."

Your concerns are very clearly to do with savings that may, or may not, happen. The Committee has received indications that some of the savings could be achieved from reducing management costs. Do you agree? I suspect that you do not, going by your submission. Do you feel that any savings can be made?

Mr Reilly: Ms Osborn is probably the best person to answer that as she has had experience in the Welsh and English library services.

Ms Osborn: We do not know how the figures for savings were arrived at as we have not seen the calculations. There will be some scope for streamlining management structures, etc. However, in the Western Board, only 6.6% of our budget, some £200,000, is spent on senior management and their administrative

support staff. It is difficult to see how the level of savings indicated in the explanatory and financial memorandum could be achieved with that level of expenditure.

As regards specialist staff and being the biggest library authority in the UK, and possibly in Europe, an authority of that size needs certain specialist staff in order to have a vibrant, dynamic, community focus and be at the forefront of library developments.

Mr Reilly mentioned local history. The new library authority will need to be at the forefront of digitization in order to make material accessible. It will also need to have expertise in other areas, for example, an external funding officer. The service currently benefits from having external funding officers within each board area. The new authority will have to have those types of specialists if it is to be effective and efficient.

Mr Shannon: Do you feel that savings can be made in the long term?

Ms Osborn: There will be significant initial costs in setting up the library authority, and substantial funds will be required to finance redundancies. Thereafter, there may be some potential for savings, but without seeing the calculations and knowing the proposed structure and how support services will be delivered, it is difficult to say what those savings will be.

Mr K Robinson: My colleague has fully explored the financial aspects, so I will move on. Mr Reilly, you expressed concern that the proposed library authority board will be too small to provide the necessary expertise, and that it should reflect the geographical spread of Northern Ireland. How many board members would be required to cover committees, subcommittees, and so forth? How should the geographical spread be reflected in the board?

Mr Reilly: The board should comprise between 20 and 25 members. The current education and library boards each have 35 members, but that could probably be pruned back a little. One way to solve the geographical question would be to hold all meetings at the board's headquarters in Omagh — where I live. That would be very convenient. *[Laughter.]*

I have probably annoyed everyone else in the Province now.

We must ensure that the composition of the board represents a good geographical spread and expertise in various fields such as financial control, staffing and local councils, as well as those who have an interest in the running of libraries. One must remember that all members will not be able to attend all meetings, and if the board comprises as few as 12 members, we will run the risk of meetings being inquorate. Furthermore, the committees and subcommittees will be almost be incestuous if there are only 12 board members, because

the same people will be appearing all the time. A board comprising 12 members will not be sufficient to achieve a spread of expertise and allow for members to miss meetings for such reasons as holidays and sickness. Mr Mulholland has experience of running a board.

Mr Barry Mulholland (Western Education and Library Board): I agree with Mr Reilly. Our board enjoys a good level of public-representative membership — 40% of the board comes from local government.

Mr K Robinson: You have anticipated my next question. I was going to ask whether the involvement of public representatives in a board is the solution to the incestuous relationship that was referred to.

Mr Mulholland: It is an advantage in our board because it ensures a level of public accountability and that communities in the five district council areas coterminous with our board area — Limavady, Derry city, Strabane, Omagh and Fermanagh — are well represented.

Mr K Robinson: I am glad that you said that. Several of us had concerns about that.

Mr Reilly: Expertise is also important — that does not mean that we do not get that from local representatives — and there is a double whammy in that respect. If we proceed with a small committee, everyone must bring a degree of expertise with them. A bigger committee will mean that more people can be accommodated.

Mr P Ramsey: Paragraph 15 of your written submission refers to the overall costs for the single library authority. What are the overall costs of the Western Education and Library Board's library provision, excluding staff costs and revenue?

Ms Osborn: The overall recurrent budgets of public libraries in the western board area is £4.3 million, of which £3.1 million is spent on staff, because — as members will appreciate — public library provision is a staff-intensive service. Staff must be present in the branches to provide front-line services.

Mr P Ramsey: I know that, but another import matter is that the establishment of a single library authority will mean that library services will not have the benefits of the regional support they currently enjoy. Therefore, I wonder about those costs being taken on board at some stage.

Paragraphs 9 and 10 of your written submission state that the schools' library service and the public library service share buildings, resources and IT facilities, and provide a holistic approach to the education of children.

How will that work? Will you be able to ensure that you continue to provide the same excellent service to both youngsters and adults?

Mr Mulholland: The questions are excellent, and similar enquiries have exercised our board members. A single library authority for the whole of Northern Ireland was not the Western Education and Library Board's preferred option, and our board colleagues share that view. Given that schools' library services are very much integrated, we believe that library services should remain an integral part of education. For that reason, and for those already outlined, library services have a critical role to play in all levels of learning.

The difficulties that the new library authority will experience are clear. The Western Education and Library Board operates what is almost a shared-service facility in which human resources, finance, procurement, property services, and management of assets for library, youth and educational facilities are run centrally. Therefore, the budget will have to be disaggregated to ensure that the new library authority has the proper baseline funds to cover all those areas. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is carrying out that exercise.

The change will present a challenge. The new education and skills authority's chief executive designate and the chief executive designate of the library authority will have to work together extremely closely.

Mr Reilly: The schools' library service is critical, particularly for primary schools, as it provides valued support to teachers in those schools. It is becoming more obvious that getting children as young as three years old accustomed to going to libraries, reading books, and enjoying reading is important to their later educational development. Therefore we must ensure that the schools' library service does not suffer and result in an inferior service to people who are too young to complain for themselves.

The Deputy Chairperson: I am conscious of time, and I do not want to curtail either the later questioners or the relevant answers.

Mr McCausland: Would there be merit in having the new library authority and the education and skills authority established at the same time, so that the two processes could run in sync? What would be the practical implications if that were not to happen?

Mr Mulholland: It is crucial that the processes that will bring about the transition from the education and library boards to the education and skills authority and the library authority are aligned. That would reduce the duplication of effort needed. More importantly, it is crucial that we continue to deliver high-quality services to the public. It will not be an effective or efficient use of staff time for us to have to break away

from delivering those services in order to consider the human resource, transfer, property and financial services of the two services — in the first instance for an early set up of the library authority, and then again for the slightly later establishment of the education and skills authority. That will create many difficulties. However, if the processes were aligned to ensure that we work effectively once they are complete, the education and library service could be established in April 2009 and the library service could be established in January 2009. The starting dates could be agreed if the processes could be aligned.

Mr Brolly: Until the new library authority is established, the Western Education and Library Board will be in charge of the provision of all things associated with libraries. Does that include proposals for new build? I am concerned that the proposed new library for Dungiven might be handed over and would have to wait until the library authority is in place.

Mr Mulholland: The Western Education and Library Board will continue with its plans for the development of new libraries and the refurbishment of old libraries until such times as the new library authority is created. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be aware of what we are doing, and approve of our work, as it always has.

Mr Brolly: When do you think that Dungiven library might be ready?

Ms Osborn: I will answer that. We understand that planning permission has been granted; however the board has not yet been officially notified. Assuming the traditional route for building, it will take approximately 12 months thereafter.

Lord Browne: Further to Mr McCausland's questions, what risks do you anticipate, particularly concerning staffing, if the library authority is not established by April 2008?

Mr Mulholland: I do not envisage any difficulty if there is a delay — far from it: a delay will allow more time to ensure that the transfer is as seamless as possible. Morale issues, which have been referred to, will be greater if people believe that a difficult timescale for establishing the new authority is being forced on them for the sake of hitting a particular date. People would prefer that it were done properly.

Mr D Bradley: The Department of Education's policy papers on the review of public administration stated that there would be a service-level agreement between the library authority and education and skills authority. What should be encompassed by such an agreement?

Mr Mulholland: That is a question for the chief executives designate of the new authorities. We consider it crucial that the Library Service continues to

work closely with the Department of Education concerning school libraries.

There are opportunities for service-level agreements in areas such as, human resources, finance, property services, asset management etc. However, any arrangement would have to be a consequence of agreement between the chief executives designate of the new organisations.

Mr D Bradley: Do you think that that might be a means to achieve savings for both bodies?

Mr Mulholland: It would be an efficient use of resources.

The Deputy Chairperson: How is your staff coping with the goings-on?

Mr Reilly: The board is worried about staff insecurity. Education board employees, more so than those in the Library Service, are looking for jobs in other areas. The problem with library staff is that they are highly specialised.

The Deputy Chairperson: Please stick to discussing library staff.

Mr Reilly: We are not losing as many library staff. Where else could they get a job?

Ms Osborn: Library staff have many skills and are employable in several sectors. Staff morale is fairly high; however, certainty about a date is needed. The possibility of an alteration to the timescale would be welcomed by most staff members, some of whom have many years' service. For someone who has worked for the board for 20 or 30 years, it would be difficult if the board were to continue without libraries being a part of it. However, those staff members would appreciate knowing with certainty whether changes are to take place in January 2009 or April 2009 or whenever.

The Deputy Chairperson: If you have the opportunity, please pass on the Committee's regards to your staff for the future, and assure them that their good intentions are behind our deliberations.

I apologise for the speed of these sessions; however, more comes from them than you think. Thank you for your presentation and for answering our questions. Please contact our officials to advise them of any additional matters that might come to mind after today. Thank you and safe home.

Good morning to the delegation from the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), and thank you for coming to address the Committee. The standard so far has been excellent, and I am sure that you will not let us down.

I remind you that there is a limit of five minutes for your presentation; Committee members have been instructed to make their questions succinct, and I ask that you be as succinct as possible in your responses.

I apologise that this is not a calming exercise, but — given the time restraint — that is the way that things have to be done. We will force the time and the issues with you.

Mrs Rosemary Frawley (Belfast Education and Library Board): I thank the Committee for giving us the opportunity to speak at this meeting. My colleagues are David Cargo, chief executive of BELB, and David Jess, assistant chief librarian for Belfast public libraries. I am a member of BELB and vice-chairperson of the library committee. I also have a long association with the public library service; I worked there for 36 years, spending the latter years as a member of the electronic libraries project team.

As the Committee has our written submission, I will not go through it now. I will simply highlight several issues that members may wish to explore further.

Belfast's public library service operates in what has been, effectively, a divided city for the past 30 years with a large urban population. That has had, and continues to have, serious resource implications for effective service delivery. Furthermore, some 70% of the community libraries are located in areas of high social deprivation. At a time when outreach activities are extremely important to address the challenge of improving literacy, numeracy, employability and economic prosperity, those libraries are severely constrained by staff and resource shortages.

Belfast's public library service is unique in the Northern Ireland Library Service. It operates a large central library and reference facility whose role is to conserve, preserve and exploit historical and contemporary resources for in-depth study and research. Many of the collections are of national and international importance, and we are concerned that the legislation does not adequately reflect the custodial role of the new library authority. Developing those collections and employing specialist staff means that it costs the Belfast Education and Library Board much more than other boards to maintain that resource. Perhaps the Committee will consider the case for separate, ring-fenced funding for a provincial reference library service to include the extremely valuable collections that are located throughout the other board areas in Northern Ireland, which have a major role to play in the cultural capital of the Province.

We emphasise the fact that a quality library service is the overriding priority and that a few fundamental factors are imperative to its delivery. It should be free at the point of service, and there should be coterminosity with other service providers to facilitate community planning and productive partnership working. The strong links with education should remain, so that we provide a seamless service to children and young people in the city. There should be

a single transfer system for education and library board employees.

Finally, we have concerns about the affordability of the new library authority.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much for your clear presentation.

Lord Browne: In your written submission, you stated that the draft Libraries Bill should not proceed until the results of the review of public administration are known. Why have you taken that position? In your original response to the consultation on the draft Libraries Bill, you did not oppose the creation of a single library authority. Is that still your position, or has it changed? Should libraries, perhaps, become part of local government?

Mr David Cargo (Belfast Education and Library Board): I will deal with your questions in the context of our submission. When it was first mooted that a reform of public administration was needed, the board had two distinct views on the future of libraries. Our preferred option was to view libraries in the context of lifelong learning. Therefore, we felt that there should be a close relationship, in any regional body, between education, youth and the Library Service, because we have all spent the past 30 years trying to embed and conjoin those services in that context.

Should that not be possible, the board's view was that the Library Service needed to maintain close links with its users, so our second preference was for libraries to move towards council control, because that would ensure a close relationship between libraries and the public.

There are two issues at the core of the debate. Rationalisation can bring structural efficiencies: one of something is probably better than five of something.

However, the downside of that is that the effectiveness of services can also suffer. The Library Service is dependent upon the close proximity of the library to its community and to its users. We are all struggling with a tension: where, on the continuum, does the crossover between structural efficiency and customer effectiveness meet?

Therefore, we are not opposed to a single body. Our preference is for a single body with democratic input, which is close to its users so that there would be a strong subregional structure that would ensure effective community use.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is pretty clear. I think that everyone is happy with that response.

Mr D Bradley: In its submission, the BELB stated that the Bill does not adequately address the potential for libraries to be community hubs. Could you outline for the Committee how the Bill should address that?

Mrs Frawley: I cannot identify that statement in our submission. However, our view is that libraries, as community hubs, constitute a vital part of the future development and prosperity of library services. We view partnership working as critical to successful strategic and resource planning.

We are already involved in that process — for example, in the Grove project, which is the result of a partnership among the Library Service, Belfast City Council leisure services, and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. I will not go into the details of that project, but I assure the Committee that we have a lot of documentation and reports on it that we would be happy to submit. We will send the Committee any information on any of our services that members require.

Mr D Bradley: Do you think that the role of libraries needs to be more clearly spelt out in the Bill?

Mrs Frawley: We feel that the generic description of services should be strengthened. Inclusion of the word “comprehensive” would help, because, without some recognition of the breadth and depth of services, there is danger of dumbing down all services.

We also feel strongly that the research and study role of the Belfast reference libraries and their unique collections, as well as the specialist collections held in other boards, should be part of the role and responsibility of the new library authority. They are a part of our cultural capital and their continued development is important, not just for the libraries themselves but for the Province as a whole.

Mr D Bradley: Do you think that the Bill should go as far as to specify exactly what libraries should be used for?

Mrs Frawley: We do not think it necessary for the Bill to identify every role and activity. We are more concerned that the legislation might proscribe the libraries from doing certain things. We would not want to be limited in expanding current services, in introducing innovative new services or in any options along those lines.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the board for the presentation. Mrs Frawley has highlighted an important factor, namely the archives held by the library boards. I know from bitter experience what can happen. A member of a library board, on his way to shred an archive, just happened to know that I had an interest in that particular area, and I was able to save that archive. Is that a danger? With reorganisation, do we need to list and protect those archives before they are transferred? That is a point that the Committee needs to highlight.

Now, I will ask my question, which is a simple one.

The Deputy Chairperson: Hear, hear.

Mr K Robinson: What, if any, are the specific risks to your organisation if the new library authority is not established on 1 April 2008?

Mr Cargo: Such matters are never risk free; however, our service currently operates through the Belfast Education and Library Board. If the new library authority is not established on that date, the service will continue to run. The risk to the service is minimal, because the board will continue to provide that service.

Mr K Robinson: You have a plan B in place.

The Deputy Chairperson: Perhaps the officials will take note of Ken's point about archives, and the Committee could return to that. It is a valid point.

Mr P Ramsey: Rosemary, you and your team are most welcome.

I have read your formal submission; you obviously take great pride in the outreach work that you do in library provision. However, you are very straight in challenging Government on monetary value, set-up costs, and so forth.

Are you happy with the proposals? The Belfast Education and Library Board is concerned that the costs for a stand-alone service have not been identified. We share that concern. The board's submission states that:

"Projected budgetary forecasts indicate that overall funding for libraries looks set to decrease."

It also points out that access to library services in rural areas may be reduced, which is a fundamental concern for the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson: What about a question now, Pat?

Mr P Ramsey: I am leading up to it.

There is clear criticism of the proposed single library authority. Can you provide us with any information or evidence us other than that which you have already provided? We do not have any costs for start-up, only projected costs. I asked the previous witnesses about the attempts to reduce literacy problems in Northern Ireland — one-in-four adults has such problems. How can you ensure that the collaborations among library services, the Department of Education, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure continue to adopt a holistic approach to children's and adults' education?

Mr David Jess (Belfast Education and Library Board): The question of cost is a vexed one. The start-up costs for this year will probably cover what is required in this financial year, and that is fine. However, we are concerned that there are no figures for start-up costs for next year and the succeeding

years. We assume that, for the first two or three years, there will be further significant start-up costs.

There will also be a figure for the infrastructure costs for those parts of the service that are currently provided by the boards. Figures that we have just received from consultants estimate that those costs will be around £900,000. Those costs will have to be factored in, and additional funds will have to be found from within the libraries' budget. We have not yet had time to fully analyse those figures.

Turning to the savings that are required; referring to our experience in Belfast, the library budget in 2003 was £6 million. This year, that was reduced to £5.2 million, and next year it goes down to £4.7 million. In order to live within budget, we have, in the last three years, shed, or not replaced approximately 30 staff, which makes it has become very difficult to maintain current levels of service, and we are now at risk of ad-hoc closures.

Another problem to note is that when staff numbers are reduced, it becomes much more difficult to carry out the important one-to-one library activities, such as those involving, for example, literacy and special needs. Some of those activities produce low statistics, but they are labour-intensive. Therefore, having fewer staff means that there is less capacity to do the jobs that involve one-to-one services.

The explanatory and financial memorandum suggests that there will be nearly £2 million in savings — £600,000 in 2009-10, and £1.2 million in 2010-11. From a budget of £30 million, that is quite a considerable saving, and we cannot envisage where that level of saving will come from. From the current Belfast example, with reduced staff numbers, we will still face a potential £700,000 shortfall next year. As costs increase, reducing staff numbers may not produce sufficient savings. We are concerned about where those savings will come from, and we believe that they cannot be achieved without the wholesale closure of libraries and the consequent paying-off of staff. Closing buildings saves a little, but the big savings are in reducing staff numbers. We are very concerned that that is how the savings may have to be achieved.

Mr P Ramsey: David, you said that the overall Belfast library budget for this year was £5.2 million. How much of that is for staff costs?

Mr Jess: Approximately 70%.

Mr K Robinson: We have come to a key point. Staff numbers have been reduced, including face-to-face staff. Is the suggestion that front-line staff will be sacrificed in the new system, as opposed to middle or senior management, as was suggested?

Mr Jess: The redundancies have been of senior staff, by and large. Front-line staff have gone mainly

through natural wastage, if I can use that term. We have also moved a lot of staff around to try to keep service points running.

We have also transferred a number of staff from what were traditionally back-room jobs to the front line. Staffing has reached a critical level whereby everyone is manning the fort.

Mr Cargo: We have already been part of an efficiency programme, as have all boards, in the past few years. Any back-room staff are now front-office staff. If more staff are lost, there will be library closures.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for that. That provides a clear picture.

Mr McCausland: Do you think that the new library authority and the education and skills authority should be established in sync? Would there be any disadvantages, with respect to staff and buildings, if that did not happen?

Mr Cargo: There is a danger that one becomes fixated by dates. Dates are useful for targets that everyone can work towards. An important point, both for this Committee and the Committee for Education, is that, if there is going to be change — and none of us is opposed to change — it should be done right, rather than by a certain date.

Another point to consider is that the board does not have education staff, youth staff and library staff. Rather, it has Belfast Education and Library Board staff. If those staff go to different organisations, there should be a single scheme of transfer. There should not be a scheme of transfer for libraries staff, one for youth staff, and another for school staff. Therefore, there is a major piece of work that must be done in respect of the reorganisation and redeployment of those staff in the new organisation. That needs to happen in a co-ordinated, planned way — to use your phrase, Nelson, in sync.

I would find it extremely difficult, as chief executive, to manage or hive off a group of staff on one set of terms and conditions, and another group of staff on slightly different terms and conditions. There are also practical issues involved in moving to new organisations, such as signage, rebadging of vehicles and uniforms, and the like. We want a one-off exercise.

Lastly, I do not want to get to a situation in which I am going around with little bits of paper that state that we are now the Belfast education board, rather than the library board. The work needs to be done properly, in a co-ordinated fashion, and at one time, on whatever date that may be.

Mr Brolly: Fundamentally, my understanding of your submission is that you are worried that the new library authority will provide something which is very

clinical, almost like a banking service. You have mentioned the services that your organisation has provided as an education and library board, in particular the disabled, and your association with schools. All of those services are very local and produce a sense of warmth, so to speak, from the Library Service. Do you have a view as to how the new library authority can engage with all those local structures, including the local council, to make sure that that engagement is not lost?

Mrs Frawley: The most effective way to engage with the local population is through local people and/or their local representatives. As a member of the board and the library committee, I have seen that working in practice — it has facilitated many joint exercises between education and libraries, and between libraries and the city council. My view is that there should be more public representation on the new library authority.

Mr D Bradley: Excuse me, Mr Deputy Chairman. I need to leave the room for a few minutes. Please excuse me.

The Deputy Chairman: Are you coming back?

Mr D Bradley: I will be back.

The Deputy Chairman: I have heard that before. *[Laughter.]*

Witnesses, thank you for your presentation. You kept the standard up. I am not going to say whether it was better or worse than the previous witnesses. Take with you the best regards of the Committee to your staff.

There may be another meeting in the near future, and, if so, our officials will bring it to your attention. Please keep in contact, as this matter is ongoing. We are under pressure and time, as you have acknowledged.

I wish you all the best, and perhaps we will see you again. Thank you very much.

Mrs Frawley: Before we go, I would like invite the Committee to view the collections in Belfast Central Library.

Mr P Ramsey: That would not be a bad idea.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is lunch any better there than it is elsewhere?

Mr K Robinson: Are you still operating an amnesty? I might have an overdue book tucked away somewhere.

Mr Cargo: We will have an amnesty arranged for you.

The Deputy Chairperson: The next set of witnesses is from the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB). You are very welcome. We are

formally informal here, so if I may, I will address you as Marie, Kathleen and Wilbert; I hope that you are not offended. I am Mr McNarry. *[Laughter.]*

I know that you have been apprised that you should make a five-minute presentation. Up to now, the presentations have been bang on time, and I apologise for pushing you on that, but time is tight for all the matters on which the Committee is working. Nevertheless, I am sure that that will not detract from what you have to say to us. Please proceed, and we will be ready with our questions.

Ms Kathleen Ryan (Southern Education and Library Board): I shall begin by making the introductions. Marie Donnell has been chairperson of the Southern Education and Library Board since 2006 and has been a library interest member of the board since 2001. She is a retired head teacher and has worked in schools in England and Northern Ireland. Mr Wilbert Mayne has been vice-chairperson of the libraries committee since 2005. He is currently a library interest member of the board, and he has been a board and library committee member since 1999. I am Kathleen Ryan. I have been chief librarian of the Southern Education and Library Board for the past five years. Prior to that, since I left school I have worked in public libraries in England.

Mr Wilbert Mayne (Southern Education and Library Board): Good morning. With your permission, I will give a short description of the location that is serviced by the SELB library service. In giving our responses to the Committee and to the consultation on the new library authority that will replace the five boards, we emphasise that our concerns are based on our widespread knowledge and experience of the SELB area and its needs.

The current population of the SELB area is approximately 364,000. The board area stretches from Ballyronan on the western shores of Lough Neagh, near Cookstown — the most northerly point — to Newry and Kilkeel in the south, and as far west as Fivemiletown. It encompasses all County Armagh and parts of County Down and County Tyrone. The area has a mixture of isolated rural communities and large urban areas such as Banbridge, Dungannon, Lurgan and Portadown.

A wide spectrum of economic circumstances is represented in the board area. That includes deprived wards in the council areas of Cookstown, Craigavon and Newry — in which average earnings are below the Northern Ireland mean — and a small number of affluent areas.

For many years, we have had the largest population of migrant workers and their families in Northern Ireland, particularly in the Southern Education and Library Board council areas of Dungannon and

Cookstown. Many migrant workers make heavy use of the library services; for example, they use the computer facilities to keep in regular contact with their families, perhaps in eastern European countries.

The concerns that we would like to discuss include proposals not to guarantee a free service to users, the geographical spread of members of the new library authority, and the proposed start-up costs.

Mr P Ramsey: You are very welcome. What are your specific concerns about the predicted savings mentioned in your submission? Do you believe that the holistic approach currently used by libraries for the provision of early-years literacy, outreach work and rural work can be achieved by a single library authority?

Ms Ryan: We have serious concerns about the savings that have been identified, because we are not sure how they have been identified, or whether account has been taken of the fact that savings are bound to lead to redundancy costs, as a large percentage of our budget comprises staffing costs. There can be savings in the long term; however, we are not sure that they can be made in the first two years, as proposed.

We hope that having a single library authority will enable the same quality of services across the board for early-years provision, outreach and rural services. Some boards have developed expertise in certain areas, and a single library authority will enable that expertise to be spread across the whole.

Mr P Ramsey: What is your current expenditure for the provision of staff and library services in the Southern Education and Library Board?

Ms Ryan: The total provision is between £5.2 and £5.5 million, depending on whether the figure is net or gross.

Mr P Ramsey: What part of that is staff costs?

Ms Ryan: Staff costs represent around 80% of that figure.

Mr Mayne: That figure reflects the rurality of the area, the number of small libraries, and the staffing issues that that entails. A large number of large libraries would be more efficient to run than the rural system.

The Deputy Chairperson: We appreciate that, Mr Mayne. Thank you.

Mr Brolly: What is your opinion on how a new library authority could keep in touch with the local structures that are so essential to the ethos of the library service?

Mr Mayne: The make-up of the new authority must reflect all sections and areas of society. As I come from a rural area, I have an interest in ensuring that the new authority reflects rural issues. There must be a mechanism of selection built into the appointment of members that reflects the needs of rural areas, as well

as the principles that we have already mentioned. Unlike the Belfast Education and Library Board, or other boards that are nearly all urban, we are very rural. Therefore, the needs of those west of the Bann must be represented by individuals who live and work there and who service those needs.

Mr Brolly: Do you think, therefore, that the maximum number of 14 for membership of the library authority board is much too small?

Mr Mayne: I do not think that it is too small, as long as the appointment process is carried out correctly, and the membership is a true reflection of everybody in the Province.

Mr Brolly: Are you concerned about the geographic spread?

Mr Mayne: Yes; that is our concern.

Lord Browne: In your submission, you state that you are extremely concerned that the Libraries Bill does not contain any provision for the strategic advice system for the new library board that is available in England, Scotland and Wales. How do you receive advice? Do you feel that we need to set up a body in Northern Ireland to provide you with advice? How would such a body be useful to you?

Ms Ryan: There is no form of strategic advice to public library services in Northern Ireland, as there is in the other three home countries.

We want to see a body in Northern Ireland similar to that which exists in the other three home countries; however, the cost would be prohibitive. One way around that might be to have a formal buy-in to one of the other bodies — a formal arrangement between the relevant Government Departments in two jurisdictions.

The biggest of the bodies is the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in England, which carries out a huge amount of research on public libraries, on training schemes, and so on. It welcomes us, informally, to make use of its website and publications. However, when pieces of research are being commissioned, there are no samples from Northern Ireland. It recently conducted a big training scheme for senior library staff, but it was available only to its members. Owing to the scale of running such a scheme in Northern Ireland, if we did it alone, would be very costly.

Mr K Robinson: Thank you for your presentation. As a former employee of the Southern Education and Library Board — three decades ago — I know exactly the problems that you face, with the geography west of the Bann, and the provisions that have to be made for rural schools and rural communities. You have stressed that some mechanism needs to be found to make sure that there is a geographical spread, and a spread of expertise in the board. Will you elaborate on that? If

you had the opportunity to do so, what sort of mechanism would you write into the Bill?

Ms Ryan: We have discussed that issue quite a lot. We want the new library authority to engage with local structures. We would like there to be local consultative forums that would have representation from the various education sectors — from pre-school through to higher education — health, adult education, the youth sector, the voluntary sector, the citizens advice bureaux, and so on. Those consultative bodies should exist in every council area.

Mr K Robinson: If such a mechanism existed, would you write into the legislation that a consultative body should be set up, and then allow the individual communities to respond to that?

Ms Ryan: Personally, I would not write that into the legislation, but I am not a legislative expert. However, if I were chief executive of the new body, that is what I would seek to do.

Mr K Robinson: That would be a strategic aim of yours?

Ms Ryan: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Marie, I am not sure whether questions are falling into your area of specialty, but feel free to chip in. We have two questions left, and if they are not in your area of specialty, I will allow you 30 seconds at the end.

Mr Mayne: To answer Mr Robinson's point, I have had experience of rural development issues and local strategic partnerships. Local strategic partnerships include a mechanism whereby the statutory bodies, the voluntary and community sector and the business sector work together. They have 50:50 representation of folk from the statutory sector, and from social partners, who know how to operate through local councils. Therefore, that might be an option of how to include the community and voluntary sector. Like Kathleen, I am not a legislative expert, but I know how those sectors can work when they are brought together. In my experience, when that happens, it works very well.

Mr K Robinson: The local strategic partnerships are a good model.

Mr D Bradley: Your submission states that you want to see the establishment of a public library advisory forum. What do you think should be the functions of that forum?

Ms Ryan: In the other parts of the UK, such forums advise the relevant Minister. In the Republic of Ireland, it does the same, and it is also a strategic advisory body and a grant-making body. The forums in Scotland and Wales have the same role.

We have talked further about that issue since we made our submission, and we feel that the local consultation bodies are even more important than the forums.

Mr McCausland: Do you envisage any advantages or disadvantages with two processes — the transfer to a single library authority, and the transfer to the education and skills authority — running in sync with each other, with respect to staffing issues, buildings, and so on?

Mrs Marie Donnell (Southern Education and Library Board): Our major concern is that parallel processes and equivalent schemes be put in place for both the Northern Ireland library authority and the education and skills authority. It is important that, whatever happens — whether it happens at the same time or at different times; whether the timescale is identical or not — the best outcome for both bodies is ensured.

Mr McCausland: Will there be any practical difficulties if the two do not run in sync with regard to transfer schemes, and so on?

Ms Ryan: The transfer scheme must be the same. I cannot envisage any practical difficulty whether the scheme applies to 10% of people now or 90% of people in six months' time. However, the Committee may need legal advice on that.

I have concerns about the delay. It is already difficult to maintain staff morale. The board is having considerable difficulty in recruiting staff. It is also difficult to plan in a strategic, long-term manner. The longer that continues, the more difficult it will get. At present, it is difficult for the board to make strategic, long-term decisions on future planning, buildings and major changes in service delivery when it does not know whether it must plan for a discrete area or for the entirety. That is the risk of delay, which applies to both the education side and the library side.

Mr Mayne: Ms Ryan has mentioned staff morale. The current recruitment process must be trawled internally as the board is not permitted to recruit from outside. That has a knock-on effect on libraries — their opening hours, and so on. Recently, there have been cases in which libraries have had to close because of staffing problems. That reflects back to the general public, who cannot get access to library services, and the number of books that are in usage is reduced. It has a snowball effect throughout the service. That must be managed carefully.

The Deputy Chairperson: Welcome back, Mr McCarthy.

Mr McCarthy: Deputy Chairman, was clause 6 mentioned in my absence? The board has pointed out — and the Committee agrees — that clause 6 does not guarantee the statutory provision of a free library

service. What wording would the board propose in order to guarantee that provision?

Mrs Donnell: The precise wording would need to be detailed on the advice of a parliamentary draftsman. However, the single greatest concern of the Southern Education and Library Board is that the legislation does not guarantee in statute the provision of a public library service that is free at the point of delivery. Making changes to a scheme of charges will require no input from the Assembly, only a decision by the board of the new body in consultation with the Department.

The board is concerned that, in the future, financial hard times could mean that changes are introduced. The board feels strongly that, in a democratic society, the legislative body should make provision to allow its citizens to have free access to books and information, and that decisions on any changes to that provision should be taken at Assembly level. The proposed legislation would make Northern Ireland the only area in the UK where citizens do not have a statutory right to free library services.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much for your time, attention, presentation, dedication and answers, which were excellent. I apologise again for the tight schedule. Please take with you the Committee's best wishes to all your staff. We wish them well for the future. If there are any additional matters that arise or evolve from today's meeting, feel free to contact the Committee staff, if you feel that that might be helpful. Safe home.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

20 September 2007

TAXIS BILL (NIA 4/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Patsy McGlone (Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr Ian McCrea

Witnesses:

Mr Andrew McCartney	}	North West Taxi
Mr Eamonn O'Donnell		Proprietors
Mr Eddie Lynch	}	Consumer Council
Ms Claire Toner		

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): I welcome Mr Eamonn O'Donnell and Mr Andrew McCartney from North West Taxi Proprietors (NWTP). It is good to see you. The Committee's standard format is quite informal: you will have about 10 minutes to make your presentation or to add to the submission that you provided to the Committee, and then Members will ask a few questions for clarification. Your written submission is concise, and you have put a lot of work into it. Your submission is highly focused on the Bill: if you wish to supplement it, you have 10 minutes.

Mr Eamonn O'Donnell (North West Taxi Proprietors): Before I begin our presentation, I wish to thank the Committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss the Taxis Bill. Our presentation will outline some background, examine the proposals and specify some of our concerns.

NWTP has been involved in the taxi review from the beginning and at every stage of its progress. We lobbied for the taxi review, responded to the key-stakeholder consultation, responded to the consultation on the regulation of taxis and private-hire vehicles, and we responded to the draft Order in Council. We

wrote a briefing paper for MLAs before the debate in June 2007, and we responded to the Environment Committee's recent request for submissions.

We were very pleased when the Assembly decided to introduce the Taxis Bill early in its mandate. We are impressed with local politicians for taking that decision, and we thank them.

We met the Department of the Environment (DOE), various taxi groups, the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac), the Consumer Council and many others in our quest to create a fair and regulated taxi industry for everyone. It is fair to say that we have been involved in the process from the beginning and at every level.

On 3 May 2002, I sat before the previous Environment Committee to lobby for a taxi review and to call for the Department to give proper priority to the taxi industry. It is worth revisiting the reasons behind our call for a review of taxi administration and the introduction of the Taxis Bill.

In 1992, the Sterling Report was completed and given to the Department. That report highlighted the inadequacies of the Department and the fragmentation of the taxi industry, but it was inexplicably shelved. NWTP discovered through research that poor working practices and attitudes existed in the local taxi industry. That was later confirmed by the Department's own research. It was widely accepted that the taxi industry's system of administration had failed and was inadequate for dealing with the problems of the industry.

In Derry, where I live, regulated taxi services were outnumbered by the unregulated providers by at least 2:1. The situation was dire. At the start of the legislative process, the taxi industry was heading for total collapse. The current legislative process has pulled that situation back. However, it is vital that you, our local representatives, complete that process and deliver meaningful change that impacts on community safety and proper working conditions for those in the taxi industry.

NWTP welcomes the proposals in the Taxis Bill. We are happy to finally see the taxi review being translated into legislation. In principle, we agree with almost all the content of the proposed Taxis Bill. The changes are necessary to bring the taxi industry into the twenty-first century.

I turn to the specific proposals in the Bill. Clause 1 deals with operator licensing for taxi businesses. That will make office owners more accountable and will put the taxi industry firmly into the mainstream economy. NWTP welcomes the introduction of operator licensing, because it is long overdue and should go some way to addressing many of the bad practices of some office owners. The industry needs

operator licensing, but, as in the past, if that measure is not enforced properly, all the good work will amount to nothing.

We agree that all taxi operators should be licensed. We see that as a central plank in the fight against the unregulated sector. Under the current system, sex offenders cannot be taxi drivers, but they can own and run taxi offices. That must change, and we would welcome such a change.

All taxi proprietors should be licensed. Owing to the loophole in the current regulations, standards in the taxi industry have fallen significantly. There is no accountability for taxi offices, and the Bill will introduce accountability and responsibility. That measure will be very effective in tackling the problem of unfair competition.

Clause 20 allows for taxis to pick up passengers on the street without them having booked. The structure of the taxi industry will change to a one-tier system. The Department intends to designate areas where only accessible vehicles will be able to pick up. We believe that a one-tier system is the best option for the local taxi industry. Regulation should maintain a safe standard for the industry, but market forces should dictate who services the different aspects of the diverse market. Regulation for the taxi industry in the North is undertaken by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) and is confined to the probity and health of drivers and vehicle suitability, roadworthiness and safety, including insurance cover. If the current position were enforced, it would regulate a safe standard for the industry.

Market forces should be allowed to develop and supply services, where there is a demand, and entrepreneurs in different localities could develop sustainable services that are tailored to that locality, covering the mix of urban and rural services. The taxi industry outside Belfast currently operates as a one-tier system, although on paper it is supposed to be a two-tier system. A two-tier system is not practical or enforceable. The law should not cover something that is not enforceable.

We want the taxi industry to be regulated to a safe standard. We want the marketplace deregulated and opened to allow the development of twenty-first-century services. If a taxi driver's medical and repute checks are in order and his vehicle is up to standard, he has earned the right to work in the taxi industry marketplace. There should be no monopolies.

The new proposals will make it safer for the general public by providing more taxis at key times to pick up on the streets. We do not accept the Transport and General Workers Union analysis that such a measure will cost 400 jobs in Belfast public-hire taxis. Rank designation will protect them. The claim made by the union was sensationalist. It was an attempt to grab

headlines on the day of the debate to protect what is an unfair monopoly in the city centre of Belfast. The union's claim should not deflect the Committee from establishing equity and endorsing the proposal.

Clause 16 of the Taxis Bill proposes that maximum fare rates are set for all taxis. The Department has agreed that it will commission a taxi cost index to establish what a fair fare is. The maximum fare will come from that report. At present, the economics of the taxi industry are wrong. It is imperative that the Department also sets a minimum fare. North West Taxi Proprietors believe that the taxi cost index will establish what a fair fare is; it should be initiated immediately, and maximum and minimum fares should be set. A multi-tariff system should be put in place to cover day, evening and night-time shifts. Holiday rates should also be built into the system. Once the taxi cost index is completed, the cost of taxiing will be officially established here for the first time ever. If the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) wants fair competition on fares, it is important that parameters be set at both the maximum and minimum ends. The minimum wage is currently set. If the taxi cost index sets out the cost of running a taxi, it will not be rocket science to set a minimum fare, equating to a minimum wage for taxi drivers, alongside the maximum fare.

Clause 18 requires all taxis to have taximeters. NWTP agree that all taxis should have taximeters. A taximeter is a measuring instrument for time and distance to set the cost. Taximeters are good for the taxi industry. They give the general public clarity, and, as they are standard in most European taxis, they are good for tourism. Taximeters are fundamental to the success, sustainability and growth of the industry. Implementation of the policy will increase fees for taxi drivers, so it is important that the Department moves at an early stage on two key issues for taxi drivers: improved enforcement and the early introduction of taximeters.

It is important to deal with unregulated taxis and offices that use them before we introduce taximeters. We believe that that will mean that operator licensing, at least in part, will be initiated within the next year. It is also important that the Department shows some understanding of taxi-driver issues and deals with costs by the early introduction of taximeters.

Clause 23(3) proposes that all new taxi drivers must pass a taxi-driving test. Existing taxi drivers will be required to complete one training day a year. The taxi driver's licence must be re-established as a vocational licence, and that will require the reinstatement of the taxi-driving test. Only new applicants should be required to sit the test and existing taxi drivers should have their grandfather rights respected as they have already invested significant sums of money in becoming taxi drivers.

Clauses 50 and 23(2)(a)(iii) require taxi drivers to complete vocational training at the same time as other vocational lorry and bus licence holders. We expect training in disability awareness, customer care, health and safety and other relevant areas. Cost is an issue for drivers. NWTP admits that the taxi industry has room for improvement in areas such as disability awareness, customer service, health and safety and new innovation. We agree with the proposal, but cost will be an issue for the industry.

The shared-fares scheme — in which taxi drivers are permitted to charge individual passengers separate, but less expensive, fares — is covered by clauses 5 and 6. Shared-fares schemes are to be introduced, where possible, and will provide for some diversity in the development of services. The scheme will also cover the current “black hack” services. Shared-fares schemes are aimed at peak periods when taxis are scarce, or they operate between entertainment centres or busy areas in a town or city centre. The schemes result in a person getting a taxi more quickly, saving money on the standard meter fare, and they may meet interesting fellow travellers. Such schemes help to reduce congestion and pollution and will enable the development of new urban and rural services.

As regards clause 2(5) and the issue of requiring operators to provide more taxis designed to meet the needs of older people and people with disabilities, Disability Discrimination Act requirements insist that each taxi operator provides more accessible vehicles. We expect this to be mandatory for a percentage of each fleet. We believe that the needs of people with disabilities should be addressed. However, it is important that the solution is balanced with the scale of the problem. Cost will be an issue, and it will be important for the Department to take a balanced approach when setting percentages for businesses and when designating areas.

With respect to allowing only accessible vehicles to use taxi ranks, it appears that in certain transport hubs and other designated areas only accessible vehicles will be allowed to ply for hire, and that, after a certain period, only accessible vehicles will be allowed on taxi ranks. Accessible vehicles are expensive to buy and more expensive to run than ordinary taxis. The Department is creating non-financial incentives for those who buy and operate accessible vehicles.

There are other issues covered in the Taxis Bill such as advertising, signage, enforcement, increased penalties, requirements for taxi drivers and operators, vehicle licenses. The main issues will be dealt with within the first three years. Other issues may take longer.

We have specific concerns relating to clause 55. We ask for clarification regarding article 66A of the of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, which

deals with car sharing arrangements and provides an exemption for people in the rural transport schemes run by DRD to transport people in a similar way to taxis. Has that exemption been written into the Taxis Bill? If so, that will enable people to abuse the scheme, as has happened on a wide scale in the past.

Taxi drivers have to undergo repute and medical checks; their vehicles undergo rigorous tests; they have to carry identification plates, and they will be required to undergo training under the new legislation. Why put us through all of that while providing an exemption that could become a loophole and be abused? Why not run voucher schemes in rural communities and other areas that require special services, and use local taxis to bolster the local industry? If that exemption is to be retained, enforcement will be important.

As regards clause 15(2), the Department has stated that a taxi driver could be fined £1,000 for failing to have proper identification on his taxi. Past inefficiency in the Department concerns us. We have an unwritten agreement with the Department that taxi drivers can work, once they acquire the vehicle inspection notice in the test centre, for a period of up to ten days, and they should then contact the Department to find out why their taxi plates have been delayed. If the Department is serious about fining taxi drivers for failure to display, we need a system that provides drivers with certificates or plates at the test centre.

Our preference is that the plates are replaced with roof signs containing the information. We agree with the principle of plating but would rather have the information displayed at eye level on roof signs. There is also an environmental impact to be considered in destroying more than 20,000 plastic plates annually. A disc, or certificate, could be issued at the test centre.

Changing vehicles is a vital issue for taxi drivers. The current process can keep a taxi driver off the road and losing earnings for two weeks to six weeks, except when the Department grants an amnesty through goodwill. We acknowledge that the merger between DVTA and DVLNI should improve the situation, together with the new legislation that will remove the criminal records office check from the vehicle. We would like to see the Department put a fast-track process in place for taxi drivers who are currently on the Department's records. The process needs to be speeded up, and provision needs to be written into the Bill.

The cost of change is going to be a massive issue for taxi drivers. That can be illustrated by examining clause 30. Under the legislation, taxi drivers will be charged additional fees. We accept that fees must increase so that the new system can be introduced, but we would like some understanding from the Department about taxi drivers' costs. We would like the Department of the Environment to spell out the

time frame of change in an action plan. With regard to clause 8, we do not want all the costs to be introduced to taxi drivers without the introduction of meters in all taxis.

We would like clauses 18 and 30 to be linked at the implementation stage. We are pleased that the Department and the Committee are bringing the administration of the taxi industry into the twenty first century. However, we are concerned that the taxi enforcement team consists of only five people for the whole industry. Although a bigger pool of 21 can be tapped into on occasions, that is not good enough. All the good work of the Department and the Assembly will come to nothing if the legislation is not properly enforced. We would like a new enforcement strategy that instils confidence and has a local element of enforcement or compliance. Given that the taxi review is five years old, what is the action plan for implementation? What resources will the Department put into that?

In the consultation, the Department was vague on designated areas. We need a common-sense approach and more detail before implementation. Our fear is that whole areas of city centres and towns will be designated out of bounds to non-accessible taxis.

In conclusion, NWTP welcomes the Taxis Bill. We are happy that the Department is taking steps to update policy and the administration of taxis. The taxi review and the Taxis Bill are long overdue. We agree, in principle, with almost all the proposed Taxis Bill. However, we have concerns because we do not have the detail. The legislation is enabling, but our main concern is that it is so open. Although we understand that more consultation will follow, it points up the inherent difficulty that we have in giving a complete welcome to the Bill.

The Committee for the Environment should endorse the Taxis Bill and do all that it can to ensure that it receives Royal Assent, so that the development of the taxi industry can move ahead as soon as possible and the Department can get on with planning the programme of change that will bring the taxi industry into the twenty first century. I thank the Committee for taking time to listen to us and for giving us the opportunity to express our opinion.

The Chairperson: Thank you for that well-constructed, cogently argued submission.

Mr I McCrea: I reiterate what the Chairperson said. It was a well put-together response that dealt with almost every clause, which helps the Committee to understand any potential problems with the Bill.

There is concern that a one-tier system may put sole operators out of business if large companies can come in and take business off the street. You also touched on the benefits that you have reaped from tourism.

Will there be room for everyone if a one-tier system is introduced?

Secondly, you mentioned setting meters at the maximum fare rate. There would be no obligation for anyone to discount if the meter was set at the maximum rate. I do not know how that discount would work, given that taxi drivers, quite rightly, want to make as much money as possible, as does any business. Obviously, it would be down to the individuals or the companies.

Mr O'Donnell: There is room for everyone in the one-tier system. Operator licensing is imperative because there is nothing in place to make operators accountable. Many of the industry's problems, including the growth of the unregulated sector, have arisen from the lack of operator licensing.

As with others, if the Department takes a common-sense approach to the sole-operator issue and if there is good consultation with the taxi industry, there is an opportunity. We hear, mainly from rural operators, that sole operators in each location could, together, cope with operator licensing under a percentage system. If not, in other words, a sole operator should be forced to provide the service. As long as a sole operator can contact someone in a village with access to a vehicle to provide the service needed, that is enough to cover that clause. Without sole-operator licensing, a loophole will be created that could be abused, and there has been massive abuse in the past.

The second issue is the maximum fare. Maximum fares and discounts are not the preference of the taxi proprietors. Our preference is a maximum and a minimum fare: the taxi cost index would set a fare for the region, and we would all work from that. However, a report by the Office of Fair Trading recommends competition, and the argument is that someone could go on a taxi journey, find at the end of it that the fare is the maximum, and argue the price. It was put to the Office of Fair Trading that someone filling a trolley with groceries in a supermarket would not negotiate the prices when their shopping came to be rung through at the checkout. Taxi proprietors also find that unacceptable, and our counter argument is that, if there is to be one rate, all meters must be set at that. They cannot be set at the lowest rate, because there would not be one.

Mr Boylan: Thank you for your presentation. You have outlined many issues, and I hope that they have all been noted. Could you expand on fast tracking and on designated areas?

Mr Andrew McCartney (North West Taxi Proprietors): Fast tracking is a big concern in the taxi industry. If a taxi driver writes off his or her car, or it is burnt, or, for whatever reason, the vehicle can no longer be used as a taxi, that situation is out of his or

her control. The driver has to buy a new car, and re-apply for a PSV licence, and the process can take up to six weeks. Even if the driver knows someone in the Department who can put it through more quickly, it can take two weeks. Therefore, a taxi driver is off the road from between two to six weeks, and there is absolutely no mechanism written into the Bill to fast track the process.

Every week, taxi drivers face the possibility of being off the road. If a driver forgets to apply for a PSV licence, that is his or her fault; however, if, for reasons that are out of the driver's control, the vehicle no longer works, provision should be written into the Bill to fast track that process. There would have to be very strict criteria, but there should be some mechanism whereby the vehicle could be presented at a test centre, tested, and the paperwork done in reverse. If there is a problem, the licence can then be revoked, as opposed to the current situation in which the Department takes the safe option of going through the bureaucratic process and issuing the licence six weeks later. No driver can afford to be off the road for six weeks, earning no money. That has not even been considered, but it must be. It is perhaps not too high on the scale, but, from a practical point of view, it is a possibility that taxi drivers face every week.

Mr O'Donnell: NWTP fears that the Bill is vague on designated areas. They work on a ranking space where accessible taxis are allowed to queue up, but saloon cars will be allowed to pick up at a designated distance. We are afraid that four or five places in a town or city centre will be chosen as designated areas and that the whole city centre will, therefore, be designated as out of bounds. I suggest that the departmental officials use their common sense and talk to representatives from the local taxi industry to work out what the designated areas should be.

Mr T Clarke: Mr O'Donnell referred to the test for new drivers, but he seems to be against the one-day training course for existing drivers. Perhaps I misunderstood him, but would that examination not surely be a good way of maintaining an excellent service in the taxi industry?

Mr O'Donnell: You picked me up wrongly. We are in favour of the training because we accept that there is room for improvement in the industry.

Mr T Clarke: Are you happy for existing drivers to do the one-day training course?

Mr A McCartney: We are opposed to the introduction of a driving test for existing licence holders; we are not against the one-day training course.

Mr T Clarke: In the past, some drivers — although others might call them cowboys — have been given taxi licences even though they have not received adequate training. In fact, it has been said that the

licences were given out like Guinness labels. If that is the case, the obligation on those drivers to do the complete test would iron out lots of problems in the system.

Mr A McCartney: The difficulty that I have with that might sound like a contradiction. Many people who have invested in taxiing as a job and a livelihood might not pass the test and would be out of work. We are trying to be all inclusive. Many people in the industry — even the operators — have played their part in destroying it over the past number of years. You called them cowboys, but I call them pirates. If they license themselves, they should be part of the process: they should not be excluded. The Department decided to do away with the driving test and give out licences. Existing drivers should not have to do the test, but drivers who join the industry hereafter should. However, every driver — existing and new — should be trained in disability and customer awareness.

Mr T Clarke: Mr McCartney's comments about drivers who have invested heavily in the industry but who might not pass the test make me fearful. For the sake of the industry, the Bill should enforce the test. I know that people have made heavy investments, but if those individuals are not of the standard required to transport the public, they should not be in the industry. I am almost afraid to say that, but that is why I agree with that part of the legislation. The Department was wrong to do away with the test.

Mr A McCartney: That is what I meant when I said that my comments might sound like a contradiction. However, it is about defending people's rights, and the Department has to make a decision on that. If it goes back on its decision, many people — not just one person — will be affected. The taxi industry has always been honest enough to say that there are gaps in its service — even with regard to disability awareness — but the Department has created those. Therefore, the Department must be careful when drafting the legislation, because some people might be put out of work. We may have to deal with a few contradictions to protect those who are working. There are worse things happening than taxis being driven by people who are not properly trained to drive; for example, people who do not even have licences are taxiing. We have to draw a line in the sand and get a fully regulated, professional service.

Mr O'Donnell: For instance, some people are capable of driving taxis, but they might be slow learners or have literacy problems, so they must be protected.

Mr Gardiner: I compliment the witnesses on their professional presentation; thank you for that. You have suggested areas that the Department can consider and hopefully amend.

The Chairperson: We could not finish on a finer point. Thank you for travelling from Derry to make your valuable presentation.

I welcome Claire Toner and Eddie Lynch from the Consumer Council. The Committee has limited time and a lot of business to do; nonetheless, the Consumer Council's contribution is extremely valuable in bringing the voice of the consumers to the Committee. The Committee hears similar and conflicting messages from the taxi industry.

Mr Eddie Lynch (Consumer Council): Thank you for the opportunity to come before the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to present the views of passengers on this subject, and I will try to keep my presentation brief. I will focus on the views of the Consumer Council and on why the Taxis Bill is important to consumers here. I will also focus on areas of the Bill where the council feels that there should be some amendment. Members should have copies of our presentation. I will outline the role of the Consumer Council in the process, the impact that the Taxis Bill could have on consumers and taxi users, the process so far and the need for changes.

The Consumer Council is a statutory body and represents passengers travelling to, from and within Northern Ireland. It has been involved with the Department and others in the review since 2002. Early in the review, the Consumer Council conducted consumer research and produced a report, 'Talking about Taxis', which fed into the review of taxis and outlined the key issues and concerns faced by consumers who use the industry. Throughout the process, the Consumer Council felt that the consultation was very well handled by the Department and officials. It has always had an opportunity to speak to the Department during the various stages and put its views across. Indeed, several areas that caused concern have been addressed, and I will refer to them later.

What does the taxi industry need? The Consumer Council strongly supports the key objectives of the Taxis Bill because it believes that the current standards are not high enough for consumers and must be raised across the industry. More legal taxi operators must be introduced, and we need to tackle and remove illegal operators. We need improved consumer protection, awareness to enable passengers to make informed decisions and choices and a framework for competitive and reasonable fares for all, both for the industry and for the passenger.

Why is change needed? Over one million passenger journeys are made annually. Research carried out by the Consumer Council a few years ago showed that 5% of consumers use taxis as their main mode of travel, which is significant when compared to the 4% who use

buses and the 1% who use trains. Taxis have a key role in transporting people about their business.

The research also highlighted real concerns about charging. Around 51% of consumers believed that public-hire taxis may have overcharged them at least once, and 37% of consumers believed that they had been overcharged by private-hire taxis. That highlighted not necessarily that taxis were overcharging, but real consumer confusion over what is a fair price. The Bill is needed to ensure a proper and fair system of charging and to ensure that consumers know what they have to pay and how to take action if they believe that they have been overcharged.

There is a lack of consumer knowledge about rights and protection. More than half of the consumers who made a complaint were unhappy about how that complaint was received. Many felt that there was no avenue to progress it.

Some key issues emerged from the consultation process. Initially, it was proposed that roof signs should be removed from taxis. We strongly opposed that, believing that they are vital for passenger information and safety. We are pleased that the Department of the Environment has changed its mind on that issue, and we welcome the new suggestions. Roof signs could be used more effectively and could include licence plates, making them more visible. We are keen to work with the Department on that proposal.

Accessibility is another key issue. We argued that Northern Ireland consumers require a mixture of fleets and vehicles to meet various needs and disabilities. A single solution would not meet all of those requirements. Accessible taxis, or "wheelchair taxis", would not meet the needs of all consumers. We agree with the Department's approach that a proportion of taxi operators' fleets should be wheelchair-accessible, leaving other taxis to meet other needs.

We have some concerns about operator licensing, particularly in regard to sole operators in rural areas. I will touch on that issue later.

In general, any concerns that we raised with the Department have resulted in safeguards being put in place throughout the Bill. Although the Taxis Bill provides a framework for change, the devil will be in the detail. Many issues still need to be teased out to get it right.

In summary, the status quo is not an option. There must be a more passenger-focused system that meets the three principles of accessibility, or the three As: accessible vehicles that meet the needs of all passengers; vehicle availability when passengers wish to travel; and affordability. In the future, we want consideration to be given to how concessionary fares could be extended to the taxi industry.

Taxis must be available at the point of need. We must work to ensure that, for every passenger, a vehicle that meets requirements is available when it is wanted and at a fair price.

I have some specific points about the Bill itself. In the area of operator licensing, consideration must be given to the needs of sole operators — particularly in rural areas. That matter is addressed in the Bill; however, we want reassurances that the Department will ensure that those operators are not overburdened by huge costs, which would have a negative impact on consumers in such areas.

Although passenger complaints are mentioned in regard to the operator licence, a robust complaint system must be put in place. In addition to operators having to have a complaints procedure, it is essential that there be a further avenue to pursue if passengers are unhappy with the taxi company's initial response. In other areas, that is a role for the Consumer Council. It is vital to ensure that passengers are adequately protected.

We welcome clause 10(4), which states that:

"The Department shall take into consideration ... any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland."

That is an important initiative. However, recourse to the Consumer Council should be embedded in other parts of the legislation, and its role enshrined. In particular, the Bill should state that the Consumer Council should be consulted in relation to fare-setting and maximum fares; passenger information; accessibility standards; and the handling of passenger complaints. Currently, that happens in many of those areas. We have close links and discussions with the Department of the Environment; however, if the Bill is to be passenger-focused, the passenger representative must be enshrined in it.

Ms Claire Toner (Consumer Council): We are aware that there has been a separate consultation on taxi-driver training, and we have responded to that.

The Consumer Council welcomes the additional training proposed for drivers and believes that it will help to raise standards in the industry, as well as meet the needs of passengers. Disability-awareness training is a particular issue for those passengers and will help to address their needs. The Consumer Council has recently received feedback from passengers with disabilities, regarding driver attitudes, so disability-awareness training is vital. However, the Consumer Council recognises that a balance needs to be struck, so that the costs of that training are managed and the benefits of the system to passengers are not outweighed by increases in fares.

Mr Lynch: To finish, there are two points. First, enforcement — which has been mentioned already —

is central to the success of the Taxis Bill. The Department needs sufficient resources to ensure that there is compliance and that standards are met across the industry. Raising standards is very important for the industry, but we recognise that it is a challenge. Therefore, as they move to improve service for passengers, those working in the industry need protection from damage by illegal operators. The Consumer Council urges that the Department be given the necessary resources to ensure that the Bill is implemented fully.

Secondly, to date, the Consumer Council has welcomed the implementation and monitoring of the process by the Assembly, and it welcomes the Committee's role in overseeing progress on the issue. As the current system does not meet the needs of passengers, the Consumer Council urges the Committee to take an active role in setting timescales and in the monitoring process, so that passengers can benefit from the changes as soon as possible.

Consumers must have feedback; they have played a part in the whole review and given their views, so communication with them is vital. We would like to see the "what", the "when" and the "why" addressed; consumers must be told what key changes they can expect, when they can expect them, and why they are happening and what their impact will be. The Consumer Council looks forward to working with the Department and other stakeholders, to ensure that the Taxis Bill meets its objectives.

We thank members for their attention and are happy to answer any questions that they may have.

(Mr Deputy Chairperson [Mr Boylan] in the Chair)

Mr Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. Does anyone have any questions?

Mr Ford: The Committee has heard a lot about accessibility in the earlier presentation, and the Consumer Council talked about regulating the one-person operator. If there is a situation such as that, and we accept the idea that only a proportion of taxis should be fully accessible, how do you decide what the necessary proportion is? Furthermore, could that proportion vary between the single operator — or possibly two or three operators sharing in a type of partnership — in a rural area, and the big Belfast firms? How can a reasonable balance be produced in a situation where not every operator has to be fully accessible?

Mr Lynch: That is a very good question, and one with which we have struggled. Initially, we thought of exemptions for sole operators, in relation to providing fully accessible taxis. After speaking to the Department, we had concerns that that route could open up a loophole for the industry to register a number of drivers as sole operators. We felt that it

would have a negative impact on efforts to increase accessibility standards across the industry. Further discussion is needed on that issue, and we are happy to work with the Department on it.

The question of proportions has to be looked at on an area-by-area basis, to see what is needed. Again, referring to our principles about accessibility, what is important is that a taxi that meets the needs of the passenger is available when he or she wants to travel. That is where the level of proportion is vital. The situation in Belfast must be viewed differently to that in rural areas. We must examine the system again to see how it will operate.

There is no easy answer. There must be incentives that encourage the industry to provide accessible taxis. We welcome the proposals to develop taxi ranks and to establish interchanges at such strategic points as public transport stations, which only accessible taxis will be able to enter. The industry must be offered business benefits and incentives to encourage it to go down that route, so that it considers the provision of accessible taxis worthwhile.

Mr Ford: That leads us to regulation. Last week, we heard significant complaints from Belfast public-hire drivers that taxi ranks do not work, because there is no enforcement and because ordinary private-hire saloon cars hover around — if not use — the ranks. Without a proper regulatory regime, how can one achieve a balance and offer incentives? It appears that the Department is failing — at least, according to the Belfast public-hire drivers.

Mr Lynch: The current system is failing and in no way meets the general needs of passengers, including those who require wheelchair access to taxis. We are trying to develop a public transport network that is accessible to everyone. We are introducing fully accessible trains and buses, and our focus is on connectivity. We want people with disabilities and older people with reduced mobility to be able to get from A to B. Many journeys involve more than one bus or train service; people are required to use more than one mode of transport. We recognise that unless all links in the chain are accessible, some journeys cannot be completed.

I agree that the current situation does not meet the needs of passengers, particularly those with disabilities.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. It is important that the Consumer Council has a major input in the discussion.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Thursday 20 September 2007

HEALTH (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL (NIA 2/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Iris Robinson (Chairperson)
Mrs Michelle O'Neill (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr John Farrell	}	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Ms Christine Jendoubi		
Mr Robert Kirkwood		
Mr Kevin Shiels	}	Northern Ireland Assembly Bill Office

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Christine Jendoubi, John Farrell and Robert Kirkwood, who are here to provide clarification and answer questions as the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety continues its clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. This is becoming a habit; I feel that we have adopted you.

Members of the Committee will use notes on the clauses that have been prepared and circulated by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

At our meeting on 13 September, clauses 4, 9 and 10 were referred for further consideration. I intend to commence by scrutinising those clauses and, thereafter, resume from clause 15.

Clause 4 (Charges for dental services)

The Chairperson: At our previous meeting it was noted that the Western Health and Social Services

Board and the health and social services councils had called for people over the age of 65 and other categories to be exempt from charges for dental services. The issue was raised with officials, who agreed to consider it further and report back to the Committee. I invite comments from officials and further questions from members on the issue of charging for dental services.

Ms Christine Jendoubi (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): We have prepared some figures for the Committee to consider. Those figures outline the estimated costs of providing free dental treatment for those over the age of 65.

The Chairperson: Yes, we asked how many people over the age of 65 the proposal would affect. Christine, will you talk us through the figures?

Ms Jendoubi: Estimated population increases between 2004-05 and 2013-14 are based on assumptions by the Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA). We have assumed that there will be a 3% uplift per annum because that is what normally happens.

The estimated cost of treatment for people aged over 65 is based on actual figures and incorporates fee payers and those who are exempt from charges. Adding the figures for fee payers and those who are exempt from charges gives the total spend on dental treatment.

All figures given are based on the number of people who are registered with a dentist, which is 31% of people over the age of 65. The total number of people over the age of 65 in each year is also shown.

The proposal is that those who pay fees be given free dental treatment so that everyone will be exempt from charges. In 2007-08, it would cost £3.8 million to provide free dental treatment for those who pay fees. Fee payers are included in the 31% of those over the age of 65 who are registered with a dentist. If dental treatment were free for everybody over the age of 65, a significant increase in cost could be expected, because many of the 69% of people who are not registered would register. However, a proportion of older people in the over-65s category does not have any teeth. Therefore, dental treatment would not be an issue for them, unless they wanted to get dentures. The fee-payers column shows the estimated cost of giving free dental treatment to those over the age of 65 who are currently registered with a dentist; however, the figure could be anything up to three times the statistics listed in that column.

Moreover, the exempt column shows the estimated cost for those over the age of 65 who are exempt from paying dental charges because they are on low incomes. The fee payers are those who have already been deemed able to pay. They, therefore, would be the beneficiaries of free dental treatment.

The Chairperson: Can we distinguish between those fee payers? The way in which many people have been raised means that, like those on a better income, they will pay their way regardless of whether they can afford to. Is there a way in which to dissect the information in the fee-payers column to identify those who are in the low-income bracket?

Ms Jendoubi: No.

The Chairperson: Does anybody wish to comment or ask a question?

Ms Ní Chuilín: For only 31% of people over the age of 65 to be registered with a dentist is quite a low percentage.

Ms Jendoubi: It is. Less than 50% of adults, and about 60% of children, are registered with a dentist in Northern Ireland. That percentage is clearly lower for the older population.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is quite a low percentage. If people over the age of 65 were exempt, would you anticipate an increase in the registration rate?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Is a projected percentage available?

Ms Jendoubi: No, and I could not guess what the percentage increase would be.

Mr Easton: The figure of 35% is very low. Theoretically, if those over the age of 65 were exempt from paying dental charges, and if all those who were eligible to register with a dentist did so, the cost of providing free dental care for them could rise to about £10 million.

Ms S Ramsey: Do the figures mean that, are you saying that, out of the 31% of people over the age of 65 who are registered with a dentist, roughly half are already exempt from paying?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes, slightly less than half are exempt.

Mr Buchanan: Is the exemption based on means testing?

Ms Jendoubi: It is based on the benefits that a person is entitled to, such as income support.

Ms Ní Chuilín: People who get pensions are also exempt.

Mr Buchanan: It seems that, of the 31% who are registered with a dentist, more than half already receive free dental treatment.

Ms Jendoubi: It is less than half. Approximately 35% of people over the age of 65 who are registered receive free dental treatment.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Local optical committees)

The Chairperson: Members will recall that Optometry Northern Ireland argued that it was anomalous for dispensing opticians not to have a statutory right to membership of local optical committees, and it proposed an amendment to clause 9 to rectify that anomaly. Officials agreed last Thursday to consider the proposed amendment and to provide further clarification of the role of a dispensing optician. Christine, may we have your comments?

Ms Jendoubi: I have another piece of paper to distribute.

The Chairperson: Why am I not surprised? That is another rainforest gone.

Ms Jendoubi: The piece of paper explains the difference between an optometrist and a dispensing optician.

The Chairperson: We are all on a learning curve.

Ms Jendoubi: Committee members can take away the information to read.

The Department was almost surprised to learn that the definitions are almost exactly the same as those that we gave the Committee last week.

An optometrist conducts eye tests and examinations and prescribes eye drugs. A dispensing optician makes up the prescription that the optometrist has prescribed, fits the lenses and frames, or contact lenses, and dispenses them. Clause 9 is designed to reflect the fact that ophthalmic opticians, who are now called optometrists, are listed and can have a contract with the board to provide ophthalmic services. They appear in the Central Services Agency (CSA) list, which makes them contractors.

Clause 9 now incorporates ophthalmic medical practitioners. They are doctors who are also qualified to conduct eye tests and prescribe glasses and contact lenses. Article 55(3)(a) of The Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 did not originally include dispensing opticians because they cannot hold contracts, conduct eye tests or prescribe. Therefore, dispensing opticians cannot enter into the same kind of relationship with the board.

In the past week, we have discovered that dispensing opticians can hold a contract with a health and social services board if they own a practice in which they employ an optometrist to conduct eye tests and prescribe. There are few, if any, dispensing opticians who do that in Northern Ireland; they could be counted on the fingers of one hand. If it is accepted that the role of a local optical committee is to reflect the interests of those who are on the list and hold contracts, it is up for consideration whether the clause needs to be extended to include provision for those

dispensing opticians who can enter into contracts because they employ an optometrist.

Mrs Hanna: Would those dispensing opticians who employ optometrists and can be counted on the fingers of one hand go out of business were they not to be included in the provisions?

Ms Jendoubi: No.

Mrs Hanna: What effect does it have on them not to be included?

Ms Jendoubi: The optometrists who they employ are already on the CSA list, because they must be listed in order to practise. The clause as it stands will have no effect on them at all, nor will it have any effect on dispensing opticians; it simply allows ophthalmic medical practitioners to sit on the local optical committee.

The Chairperson: Are you satisfied with that answer, Carmel?

Mrs Hanna: Yes.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Pharmaceutical services)

The Chairperson: The Committee will recall that the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland (PSNI) argued in Committee on 28 June 2007 that clause 10 adds further confusion to the regulation of pharmacists in Northern Ireland. A transcript of that meeting can be found in the members' pack. The clause was referred for further consideration last Thursday. Christine will now talk us through the clause.

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 10 makes the same provision for pharmacists as previous clauses make for dentists and as clause 1 makes for general medical practitioners. It allows for the existence of one performers' list for pharmacists instead of four — one in each board area — and includes provisions for the conditional inclusion, and contingent removal and suspension, of pharmacists from the list.

Ms Ni Chuilín: You mentioned suspension of pharmacists from the list. I apologise for not having a copy of the Bill in front of me, but I recall the notes on the clause.

When a pharmacist is deemed unfit to practise, does suspension follow directly? No intermediate stage, during which problems might be discussed, is implied in the clause. Is removal mandatory until a suspended person is considered fit to practise again?

Ms Jendoubi: The situation is the same for all practitioners. A board will contemplate suspending a pharmacist only in exceptional circumstances; suspensions must be considered case by case. Boards do not suspend pharmacists lightly. If there is a problem with a pharmacist,

a board will want a pharmacy to continue operating, as it provides a service to an area. It will work through the problem with a pharmacist as far as it considers that appropriate in the interests of patient safety. That is one of the key considerations for a board in deciding whether a pharmacist should be suspended.

Mr Easton: I am unsure as to how relevant this question is, but if a pharmacist who owns a practice is suspended, is he or she allowed to employ another pharmacist who meets all the criteria to run the business?

Ms Jendoubi: Yes.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clause 15 (Smoking: exemption for performers)

The Chairperson: I remind members that the Minister has indicated that he will not support clause 15 at Consideration Stage. The Committee heard the arguments for and against the exemption at our meeting on 5 July, a transcript of which is in the members' pack. I invite officials to outline the meaning of the clause, and I will invite questions from members afterwards.

Ms Jendoubi: Clause 15 provides for an exemption from The Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to allow for smoking by an actor in a theatrical performance, where the integrity of the performance requires it. That includes in rehearsal.

The Committee received representations from the Theatrical Management Association about the possibility of using herbal cigarettes as a substitute. That is something that the Committee will want to take into account; however, the Minister is not impressed by the argument.

The Chairperson: If memory serves, members were sympathetic to the Minister's stance that there should be no exemption.

Mr Easton: I want this clause removed.

Ms Jendoubi: That is also the Minister's wish.

Mrs Hanna: We are unanimous.

The Chairperson: Ms Jendoubi, will you explain how a clause is removed from a Bill?

Ms Jendoubi: Kevin Shiels explained the process for doing so a couple of weeks ago.

Mrs Hanna: He is behind you.

Ms Jendoubi: He will explain it again if the Committee so wishes.

Mr Kevin Shiels (Northern Ireland Assembly Bill Office): Technically, to remove a clause at Consideration Stage does not require the tabling of an amendment. The Bill, including clause 15, is will become the property of the Assembly, not just of the Minister. The

Minister will remain the Bill's sponsor of, but it will be in the hands of the Assembly. Only the Assembly, in a plenary sitting at Consideration Stage, can vote to include or exclude a clause from the Bill.

If the Minister is still minded to have the clause removed, he will get the draftsman to put to the Bill Office his intention to oppose clause 15 when the Speaker puts the Question that it stand part of the Bill.

Likewise, if the Committee, having taken evidence, is of the same mind, it can, through your name, Chairperson, convey the same decision to the Bill Office, and it would appear on the Marshalled List thus:

"The following Members have indicated their intention to oppose the Question that clause 15 stand part of the Bill."

The Marshalled List would then probably show the Minister's name, and, below that, the Committee's name would appear.

Clause 15 of the Bill would then be treated as if it were an amendment. The Minister would be asked to speak to his intention to oppose the clause. You, Chairperson, and any other Members who so wished would then have an opportunity to speak. The Speaker would then put the Question that clause 15 stand part of the Bill. At that stage, Members need to be very careful that they vote against the Question that the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairperson: Of course, but closer to the time, if that is the route that we choose to take, we will obtain further assistance on establishing the correct procedure for the passage of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negated.*

Clause 15 disagreed to.

Clause 16 (Interpretation)

Ms Jendoubi: This is a standard clause that will be found in any Bill. In some Bills, and certainly in regulations, it will appear as the first provision. In this Bill, the definition of some terms used appears in clause 16 because that is where the draftsman inserted it.

The Chairperson: This is a fairly simple and non-contentious issue.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 16 agreed to.

Clause 17 (Supplementary provision)

Ms Jendoubi: Again, this is a standard clause that will be found in any Bill. It is a catch-all clause, designed to cover unforeseen circumstances.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 17 agreed to.

Clause 18 (Repeals)

Ms Jendoubi: This is a covering clause. Every schedule to a Bill or an Order in Council must contain a clause in the body of the Bill that introduces the schedule. Clause 18 introduces schedule 2.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 18 agreed to.

Clause 19 (Commencement)

Ms Jendoubi: This clause provides for the times at which the sections of the new Act, and the schedules to it, will come into operation.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 19 agreed to.

Clause 20 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (Amendments of Schedule 11 to the 1972 Order)

Ms Jendoubi: Schedule 1 provides for changes to the operation of the tribunal, on foot of amendments to the 1972 Order that appear earlier in the Bill that pertain to opticians, pharmacists, dentists and GPs. Specifically, the main changes are that schedule 11 to the 1972 Order will now include applicants to a performers' list as well as those who are already on that list. It will include locums, deputies and employees as well as principal practitioners. It will extend the grounds on which a tribunal can consider a case that has been referred to it to include unsuitability by reason of professional or personal conduct.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Repeals)

Ms Jendoubi: Schedule 2 contains consequential repeals made on the foot of provisions that the Bill will introduce.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 2 agreed to.

The Chairperson: The clause-by-clause consideration of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has been completed. No clauses remain referred for further consideration. I advise members that a draft Committee report to the Assembly will be prepared for consideration and agreement at a future meeting.

I thank Christine, Robert and John for all the time and energy that they have put into briefing us. The Bill's Committee Stage was completed very quickly, and I am sure that you are even happier than I am that it was so quick. Thank you very much for your attendance.

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 process or changed in any way.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 29 June 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Invitations to Devolution Day

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide a list of invitations issued by the department to individuals and groups, to attend the Devolution Day event at Parliament Buildings on 8 May 2007. (AQW 244/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): The following people were invited to attend the Devolution Day event at Parliament Buildings on 8 May 2007.

Dr Ian Adamson	Maura McDonnell
Bobby Ballagh	Mrs Bertha McDougall
Rev Stanley Barnes	Bronwyn McGahan
Mr and Mrs J Beggs	Bernie McGuinness
Fr Michael Canney	Emmett McGuinness
Ms Wilma Carson	Fiachra McGuinness
Mr Stephen Cassells	Fionnuala McGuinness
The Rt Rev Dr David Clarke	Geraldine McGuinness
David Cullinane	Grainne McGuinness
Dr David Dobbin CBE	Peggy McGuinness
Michael Doherty	Enda McLaughlin
Lord Robin Eames	Padraig McLochlann
Cllr John Finlay	Gerard Lynch
Mr Brian Foster	Mr Maurice Mills
Rev Harold Good	Mr Gary Mitchell
Professor Peter Gregson	Mr Drew Nelson
Walter & Adelaine Hain	Niall O'Dowd

Alderman Sam Hanna	Mr and Mrs William O'Neill
The Most Reverend Alan Harper OBE	Baroness Eileen Paisley
Mrs Reatha Hassan OBE	James Quinn
Mr John Huddlestone	Mr Eric Read
Miss Lydia Huddlestone	Mr Samuel Ross Reed
Mrs Sharon Huddlestone	Fr Alex Reid
Sean Hughes	Albert Reynolds
Ambassador Priscilla Jana	Cllr Gareth Robinson
Reverend Ron Johnstone	Mr Robert Salters
Minister Ronnie Kasrils & Mrs Eleanor Kasrils	Mr Lawrie Sanchez
Declan Kearney	Adnan Shahab
Rt Hon Sir Brian Kerr	Mr Kenneth Sharkey
Bridie Lynch	Mr Neil Shawcross
Mr Andrew MacKinlay MP	Rosaleen Stagg-Doyle
Mary McArdle	Ms Victoria Taylor
Mr J McClure OBE	Mr Mark Thompson
Theresa McComb	Fr Aidan Troy
Mr Noel McCurdy	Brian Tumelty
Mary Lou McDonald	Mr Trevor Turkington OBE
Bernadette McDonnell	Sir Nicholas & Rt Hon Rosie Winterton
Eilis McDonnell	

Child Poverty

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many children live in severe poverty in Northern Ireland; and what strategies are in place to reduce child poverty. (AQW 317/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: There are no official statistics that reflect a measure of severe poverty. The measurement of child poverty in Northern Ireland, which is consistent with United Kingdom and European measures, is derived from the proportions and numbers of children who live in households whose income is less than 60% of median household income.

Government departments already deliver a wide range of initiatives and programmes that positively impact on child exclusion and poverty issues.

Some of these policies are reserved matters in relation to financial support through Child Benefit, Working Tax Credit and Childcare Tax Credit and parental employment. Other measures include those

set out in the ten year strategy for Children and Young People action plan as well as initiatives in health, education and for lone parents for example.

'Lifetime Opportunities' Governments Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy outlines many of the current policies and strategies which will contribute to the reduction of Child Poverty.

In the current Comprehensive Spending Review the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy has been identified as a key cross-cutting priority. This means that Departmental spending plans and resources will be directly linked to the delivery of commitments within an Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy. A copy of Lifetime Opportunities has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The two Junior Ministers in OFMDFM have a particular responsibility agreed by the Executive for children and young people, and tackling child poverty will be an urgent priority for the Junior Ministers and for the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Child Poverty

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister whether Northern Ireland is on target to halve child poverty by 2010. (AQW 320/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Accurate data on child poverty is available only from 2002/03.

The percentage of children in relative income poverty in;

- 2002/2003 was approximately 26% (114,000),
- 2003/2004 was unchanged

The latest available figures for the number of children in relative income poverty for 2004/05 indicate approximately 24% (101,000).

It is not possible, on the basis of the available data to determine reliably if we are on target to half child poverty by 2010.

Tackling child poverty is an urgent priority for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Junior Ministers in line with their responsibility for children and young people, will bring an early focus to this issue.

Shared Future Strategy

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to set out the operational responsibilities of the department, arising out of the 'Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan', to ensure that all government departments take into

account within future public expenditure plans the content and conclusions of the OFMDFM-commissioned research report, 'Cost of Division - Shared Future Strategy'. (AQW 539/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Good Relations and Reconciliation Division of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister remains responsible for taking forward the policy on A Shared Future.

In regard the research undertaken by Deloitte we made it clear during question time on 11 June that this research is extremely important. We also made the point that how we deal with the issues in the report is even more important.

As we said on 11 June in this House our colleague, the Finance Minister, cautioned against plucking a figure out of the air. The issue is far more complex than simply reducing the research to a figure whatever that figure or range of figures might be.

We are starting a journey, a long journey that will take time to overcome all of our problems and consign them to history. It is clear as we have said that division costs us all, socially, economically, physically.

The Executive will consider the Cost of Division report carefully and fully along with this House and the Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister.

We will publish the research shortly.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will ensure that resources allocated to the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland will help to change the patterns of disadvantage and tackle inequalities; and, in particular, if he will comment on the extent to which the Strategy will address the needs of the ten most deprived wards in Northern Ireland. (AQW 667/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Executive will decide on the allocation of resources in the Investment Strategy in accordance with its agreed priorities, taking account of the Regional Development Strategy, identified need, access to services and statutory obligations. The Strategy will reflect the spending priorities agreed by the Executive in the Programme for Government. It will encompass the levels of investment directed at social transformation, economic development and other areas that the Executive agrees. As a high level strategy, the Investment Strategy will not identify expenditure within individual wards but it will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.

Gloria Choir

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it has received an invitation to the Gloria choir concert at the National Concert Hall in Dublin, on Saturday 16 June 2007, and if the Junior Ministers will be in attendance at this event.

(AQW 678/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: An invitation to a concert by the Gloria Choir in the National Concert Hall in Dublin on Saturday 16 June 2007 has not been received by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. No ministers from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are planning to attend this concert.

Victims' Commissioner

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the process for the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner; and to detail the number of candidates that have applied for the position.

(AQW 740/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Article 4 of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 makes provision for the Commissioner to be appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly. This is a regulated appointment falling within the remit of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland (OCPANI).

Following public advertisement in January 2007, 46 applications were received. An initial eligibility sift process was applied to all applications to determine if sufficient evidence was provided against each of the essential criteria. As a result of that exercise, 14 applicants were invited for interview by a selection panel, consisting of two senior civil servants and an independent assessor appointed by OCPANI. The interviews were conducted over a three day period in March of this year.

Following the interviews the panel prepared a list of candidates, who were considered suitable for appointment. This list was subsequently forwarded to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their consideration. The complete process was overseen and certificated by the independent assessor.

An announcement is expected to be made before the Assembly rises.

Children's Issues

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail which Minister is responsible for children's issues.

(AQW 892/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We would refer the member to the reply given to Mr McGlone, the Member for Mid-Ulster, on 11 June 2007. [Official Report Vol 22, No 10 p374 Col 2].

Salaries Paid to OFMDFM Staff

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is the total annual amount paid in salaries to (a) full-time employees; (b) part-time employees; and (c) special advisers.

(AQW 946/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The total annual amount paid in salaries to OFMDFM staff in 2006/07 was £14.4 million.

Data on the total amount paid in salaries split between full-time and part-time staff is currently not held. The calculation of these figures would be a lengthy process and the cost of doing so would be disproportionate.

There were no salaries paid to special advisers in the 2006/07 financial year. The total amount paid in salaries to OFMDFM staff in 2005/06 was £14.1 million. This included £61,000 for Special Advisers.

Prioritising Issues of Children, Young and Older People

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline what steps junior Ministers have taken to prioritise the cross-cutting issues of children and young people, and older people, since their appointment.

(AQO 140/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The First Minister set out the roles of the Junior Ministers in the response to the member for Mid-Ulster during question time on Monday 11th June. As well as assisting us they have particular responsibility for liaising with the Assembly on Executive business, for co-ordination of policy for young people and children's issues, and for older people's issues.

We can assure you of our commitment to the rights and needs of our children and older people and that the co-ordination of issues for children and young people and older people will be a priority matter for both Junior Ministers following their recent appointment.

Last week the Junior Ministers accompanied us in meeting the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The Junior Ministers also launched recently the Super Six comic as part of the 10 year strategy for Children and Young People. The Junior Ministers will also take the lead in reviewing and revising as necessary the 10 year strategy for Children and Young People.

Finally, promoting the rights of children and young people and older people and addressing their needs will be key issues for both Junior Ministers.

Revitalisation of Omagh

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if Ministers will visit the Community House in Omagh; and if they will meet with local representatives of the community, business and voluntary sectors to discuss the ongoing revitalisation of Omagh. (AQO 171/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The deputy First Minister was in Omagh recently (30 May 2007) for the official opening of Omagh Further Education College with the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey. He saw for himself this significant investment which is a key location for future education and economic confidence. It is one of the important developments which have taken place in Omagh since the tragic bomb.

Our colleague, Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, was in Omagh on 13 June to celebrate the achievements of the Omagh 2010 Task Force and Michael McGimpsey, Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety visited the site of the new Omagh hospital on 14 June.

We would like to put on record our personal tribute to all those involved in the Omagh Task Force. We have seen at first-hand the remarkable work of this partnership - a partnership between the community, business, elected representatives, local and central government. Their achievements are extremely impressive. They have succeeded in bringing £100m of new investment to Omagh, 500 new jobs created and a doubling of retail floor space.

The new college, which the deputy First Minister had the pleasure of opening; the new arts centre and very significant environmental improvements to the town centre are also a fine testament to their exemplary dedication and commitment.

We hope to visit Omagh and view all these commendable developments which are revitalising Omagh and building a future for this community.

Study of Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide an update on the recommendations of the 'Study of Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility'; and to detail the recommendations that have been implemented to date, and those which are outstanding. (AQO 138/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness:

Significant progress has been made on the implementation of the recommendations of the "Study of Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility." In particular, work has progressed well on the development of a website, dedicated to providing information on cross border mobility issues and this will be operational in the Autumn. This is a joint project with the Irish Government and is being taken forward in the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). A report on progress will be provided to the next meeting of the NSMC and, following this to the Assembly. We will then write to you providing further details.

Staffing in OFMDFM

Mr Samuel Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many staff are employed within the department; and how this compares with the Office of the Prime Minister; the Office of the First Minister of Scotland; the Office of the First Minister of Wales; the Office of the Taoiseach; and the President of the United States of America. (AQO 149/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: It is important to recognise that, as the responsibilities of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister extend beyond those of the other Offices mentioned, a comparison of the numbers of staff is not appropriate.

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is a Department with a wide range of functions, many of them conferred on it by statute.

Of the 415 staff currently working in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, 37 work in our joint private offices, providing advice and administrative support us and to our Junior Ministers.

Most staff are engaged in other Departmental business areas; indeed, much of our work facilitates the business of the other Ministers and their Departments; for example, through the Office of the Legislative Counsel, the Executive Information Service, the Economic Policy Unit, our offices in Brussels and Washington, and through our support of the work of the Executive including the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council.

It is worth pointing out that the number of staff currently working in our Department is very much in line with the number employed under the previous administration.

Lifetime Opportunities

Mr Fra McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will confirm

that consideration will be given to the evidence provided by Lifetime Opportunities, taken at meetings of the Committee on the Programme for Government, and if it will give a timescale within which this consideration will be undertaken. (AQO 137/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Executive Committee, in formally considering 'Lifetime Opportunities' Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy will have regard to the Conclusions and Recommendations issued by the Transitional Assembly's Programme for Government Committee following its assessment of the strategy document.

The process to obtain Executive Committee agreement on an anti-poverty strategy has begun. Proposals are currently being cleared at official level, with a view to Executive consideration over the summer period.

Departmental Expenditure on Equality

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what are the annual expenditure levels currently available to all departments, for equality programmes and measures. (AQO 139/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Equality is mainstreamed through a range of departmental spending programmes including through screening and equality impact assessment of policies. It is, therefore, difficult to identify separate expenditure lines across the range of departmental programmes and measures or to separate out expenditure that is unique to equality from overall programme expenditure. In the case of the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister it is more straightforward as there is a dedicated Equality Directorate with a budget for 2007/2008 of £32,675,000.

Linkages to Third World Countries

Mr John Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline its plans to encourage linkages with third world countries. (AQO 162/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: This is an issue that is being considered by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as they look at how best to develop the international relations role of their Office.

Victims' Commissioner

Mr David Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what role it will have in the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner. (AQO 195/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The appointment of the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors will be made by us as provided for under Article 4 of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Discussions with First Minister of Scotland

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with the First Minister of Scotland. (AQO 131/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We met the First Minister of Scotland on 18 June during his visit to Belfast. Following the meeting we issued a joint statement announcing our commitment to work together to enhance mutual understanding and friendship, to strengthen co-operation between the devolved administrations and to work together in a number of areas, including higher education, tourism and renewable energy.

New-Build Government Offices

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what proposals it has to maximise sustainable development within new-build government offices. (AQO 172/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We are committed to sustainable development for which we have lead responsibility. The Sustainable Development Strategy includes a target of achieving carbon neutrality on the government estate. The associated Implementation Plan commits Government to achieving a design standard BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) rating of 'Excellent' for new government buildings. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will take the lead on issues in relation to the government estate.

Independent Monitoring Commission

Mr David Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what liaisons it has had with the Independent Monitoring Commission, since the formation of the new Northern Ireland Executive. (AQO 145/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We have had no liaisons with the Independent Monitoring Commission in this period.

Maze / Long Kesh

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, with reference to statements made by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to this Assembly on 11 June 2007, if it will confirm that it ‘would not wish to establish a shrine at the Maze site or support any proposal that would be offensive to victims of the Troubles’. (AQO 185/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We can confirm that there are no proposals to establish a shrine at the Maze/Long Kesh. This is no part of our intention. The Masterplan proposals for the regeneration of the site envisage a wide range of uses, including a multi sports stadium, an International Centre for Conflict Transformation, as well as provision for employment, leisure and housing – in addition to key transport and other infrastructure.

The Masterplan proposals for the International Centre for Conflict Transformation reflected the unanimous recommendations of a multi-party consultation panel. The panel recommended that the Centre should provide a facility for research and education, and create the opportunity to contribute to the management, resolution and transformation of conflict on an international level.

Fair Employment Monitoring

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is its understanding of the terms ‘Protestant community’ and ‘Catholic community’, in the context of Fair Employment Monitoring, where they are used in a mutually exclusive way. (AQO 174/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Monitoring under the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 enables employers to determine whether those who belong to either the Protestant or Roman Catholic community enjoy fair participation in the workforce and is an essential step in implementing equal opportunities practices.

The Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations (NI) 1999 require employers to determine the community background of their employees by reference to their answer to a direct question. This requires the employee or applicant to state in writing whether they belong to the Protestant or Roman Catholic community or belong to neither.

Where persons state they belong to neither community, employers may make a determination of community background for monitoring purposes only. The Regulations set out a number of ways in which community background can be established. This entails consideration of any relevant information which

employees or applicants have provided, in writing, about themselves. If the information tends to show that they have a connection with both communities, they are treated as belonging to the community with which, in general, it tends to show they have the stronger connection. Where neither method ascertains the community background, the employer shall treat a person as if the community background to which they belong cannot be determined.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Reintroduction of the Fox Bounty

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will consider reintroducing the ‘fox bounty’, to control the rise in fox numbers and their impact on wildlife. (AQW 627/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The fox bounty, which ended in the mid-seventies, had been introduced in circumstances which suggested that the culling of the fox population was necessary to reduce the levels of predation by foxes of farm stock. The measure proved to be ineffective in reducing numbers as evidenced in Dr James Fairley’s 1968 Report on the impact of bounty schemes, which noted that there is no case where bounty schemes have successfully controlled fox numbers. During the lifetime of the previous scheme, numbers were maintained at a constant level while in certain counties when the bounty was withdrawn, there was no indication of an increase. The conclusion drawn from the study was that fox mortality attributable to the bounty scheme failed the basic test for the control of any wild animal population in that the activity did not exceed natural mortality and thus was not having any impact on the standing population. It recommended that the bounty scheme be withdrawn.

The question of reintroduction of the bounty scheme was raised in 2000. At that time my predecessor considered that she would not be justified in reintroducing a further scheme having considered the necessity, the probable level of effectiveness, the level of payment needed to encourage participation and the cost of resources required to ensure proper monitoring of the operation.

Since 2000 the question of rising fox numbers has not been raised, either in the context of farm stock or of wildlife, so I conclude that there is no overriding need to reintroduce the “fox bounty”.

Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances Scheme

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what steps she is taking to ensure that the aid to hill farmers encourages the adoption of environmentally beneficial farming practices. (AQW 685/07)

Ms Gildernew: The Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances Scheme requires farmers to maintain their land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). GAEC measures ensure that land is farmed according to good agricultural practices that do not damage the environment. There are six GAEC measures in relation to Soil Management, Supplementary Feeding, Overgrazing, Undergrazing, Field Boundaries, Protection of Habitats (Wildlife Areas), Archaeological Sites and Permanent Pasture. Inspections are undertaken on 5% of applications each year and Breaches of GAEC identified can result in a penalty reduction in the payment.

Flooding Task Force

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will (a) establish a permanent task force to identify flooding hotspots; (b) assess the impact of continuing development upon these areas; and (c) undertake to ensure that proposals regarding surface water run-off from roads are fully consulted upon, with particular reference to the impact on streams and salmonid rivers. (AQW 748/07)

Ms Gildernew:

- a) DARD Rivers Agency already chairs an inter-Agency Flood Liaison Group which is supported by 2 regional Flood Liaison Groups, and includes representatives from Roads Service and NI Water. A main objective of these Groups is to identify flooding hotspots and allocate a lead Agency to investigate the cause and possible solutions to the flooding problem at each location. The lead Agency also takes lead responsibility for dealing with emergency response at each hotspot.
- b) As part of the overall planning consultation process the Agencies and NI Water assess the impact of continuing development including that impacting on identified flooding hotspots.
- c) Department of Regional Development, Roads Service consults with, and informs the public, at various stages of the design of major road improvements. This includes an environmental assessment and an Environmental Statement if considered necessary. In relation to all private street developments, Roads Service require developers to seek consent from NI Water for surface run-off

into storm drainage systems. Also Department of Environment, Environment and Heritage Service is consulted at the design stage of road schemes in order to ensure pollution prevention.

Watercourse Maintenance

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how often the covering metal grids for water-courses are checked and cleared in (a) Ards Borough, and (b) Strangford. (AQW 819/07)

Ms Gildernew: The grid or grille structures at the inlets to designated culverted sections of watercourses in Ards Borough and Strangford Council areas are generally inspected and maintained by DARD Rivers Agency on a weekly or monthly basis depending on their criticality in the context of the risk to life and property in the event of a flood. Grilles are also inspected and cleared if necessary during periods of continuous wet weather or on receipt of heavy rain warnings.

Responsibility for clearing inlet grilles on undesignated watercourses rests with riparian landowners.

Farm Map Correction Letters

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of farm map correction letters sent to the farming community, requesting that farmers ensure that any land on which there is a building or other permanent feature is not depicted as a field on maps; and (b) the total cost of sending these letters. (AQW 1046/07)

Ms Gildernew:

- a) The number of correction letters issued was 15,307.
- b) The cost of sending the letters was £9,006.39

Single Farm Application Packs

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why it was considered necessary to contact members of the farming community to ensure that any land on which there is a building or other permanent feature is not depicted as a field on current maps, given the fact that they were already made aware of this through the Single Farm Application Packs, which were issued in April. (AQW 1047/07)

Ms Gildernew: It was necessary to contact those farmers on whose land full planning permission for a dwelling had been approved in the last six years. On the basis of a sample of such approvals, the Department estimated that maps had not been adjusted for a quarter of such dwellings. The response to the forms in the application packs was not sufficient. There was a need

to target the relevant cases so as to help reduce the number of mapping variances being found during inspections. My objective in this exercise has been to help farmers reduce queries on their claims and to help speed their payment.

Inspection Process

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain the reasoning behind confining inspectors to departmental offices until 27 June 2007 and how this will help expedite the inspection process, given that the inspectors' workload in relation to visits has increased by 50%, but no additional staff have been recruited. (AQW 1048/07)

Ms Gildernew: Providing a farmer corrects his 2007 Single application for an irregularity, before that is identified and advised to him by the Department, no penalty need be applied to his 2007 application. Consequently inspections were held back so that farmers had the opportunity to make such corrections before being exposed to inspection and possible penalty. The Department is mindful of the pressure of increased inspections and is seeking to redeploy resources to meet that challenge.

Integrated Area Control System

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of departmental counter staff that were made available during the period 10-26 June, to assist farmers wishing to seek advice on maps or the 2007 Integrated Area Control System Single Application Form. (AQW 1049/07)

Ms Gildernew: In addition to the normal administrative staff working in local offices, 33 Inspectors were available to deal with queries. This period also provided an opportunity for Inspectors to complete pre-inspection checks in relation to forthcoming inspections.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Civil Service Bonuses

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how many non-pensionable bonuses were paid to staff in his department in each of the last three years; and what steps he has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 639/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Non-pensionable bonuses can be paid to staff

at all grades to reward performance in two ways: as part of the annual pay round, or under the NICS special bonus scheme. The number of payments made under each scheme in the last three financial years is as follows:

Year	Performance-related	Special Bonus Scheme
2004/2005	225	24
2005/2006	248	51
2006/2007	321	47

Performance-related bonuses are an important and integral element of the NICS reward strategy and are used as part of the annual pay round to acknowledge and reward higher performing staff.

The special bonus scheme is designed to reward members of staff for exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks.

The award of bonuses is therefore regarded as being complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the award of consolidated pay increases.

Please note that information can be provided only in relation to staff currently employed by the Department.

Funding for Irish League Football

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to (a) outline when the £8 million fund which was made available for the further development of Irish League football will be distributed, (b) detail how much of this money has been spent to date, (c) list the projects which have benefited from this fund, (d) detail the sums spent on each project, and (e) to detail all other expenditure from this fund. (AQW 679/07)

Mr Poots: The up to £8 million set aside under the Soccer Strategy for the development of football at all levels, including Irish League football, is currently being distributed by the Irish Football Association (IFA) with assistance from Sport Northern Ireland (SNI). Up to 31st March 2007 SNI has provided a total of £2,575,258 to the IFA from Soccer Strategy monies. The projects which have benefited from this fund to date are Governance and Administration, UEFA Under-19 Championship Finals 2005 and Youth Football development. The sums spent on each project and expenditure is as follows:

Project	Expenditure (£)
Governance & Administration	1,098,988
Youth Football Development	866,270
UEFA U19 2005	610,000
	£2,575,258

Promotion of Gaelic Games

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a commitment to the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) that he will provide the necessary funding and support for the promotion of gaelic games in the 2008-2009 financial year.

(AQW 682/07)

Mr Poots: Responsibility for the promotion of Gaelic Games rests with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) which is the governing body of Gaelic sports. Sport NI (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, has made a commitment to invest £60,142 to assist the GAA promote Gaelic Games in NI in 2008/09. SNI also proposes to carry forward a projected underspend of approximately £249,000 from the £4.5m made available to GAA for the 3-year period 2005-2008.

Promotion of the Irish Language

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much money the department has spent on the promotion of the Irish language in each of the last five years.

(AQW 691/07)

Mr Poots: DCAL's expenditure on the promotion of the Irish language is via organisations and projects such as Foras na Gaeilge, Colmcille and the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund. The amount of funding paid to these organisations by DCAL over the past five years is shown in table A below:

TABLE A

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Comments
Foras na Gaeilge	£2.64m	£2.85m	£3.09m	£2.97m	£3.26m	DCAL payments to Foras na Gaeilge in each calendar year
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	
Colmcille	£177k	£180k	£180k	£180k	£180k	Colmcille funding is not solely for the promotion of Irish language projects.
Irish Language Broadcasting Fund	£63,394*	£11,730*	Nil	£2,999,874	£3,057,242	* Figures shown are for Pilot Broadcasting Training Courses

TABLE B

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Comments
Ulster-Scots Agency	£1.44m	£1.67m	£1.81m	£1.94m	£2.23m	DCAL pays to the Agency in each Calendar year
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	
Arts Council for N.I	£914k	£650k	£846k	£365k	£357k	

Promotion of Non-Language Ulster-Scots Culture

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much money the department has spent on the promotion of non-language Ulster-Scots cultural traditions, including highland dancing and pipe bands, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 692/07)

Mr Poots: DCAL's expenditure on the promotion of Non-Language Ulster-Scots Cultural traditions is via organisations such as the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Events Company. The amount spent by these organisations over the past 5 years is shown in table B below:

Northern Ireland Events Company – For events offered funding as part of the Community Festivals Fund, these are projects which included elements of Ulster Scots entertainment and celebration. Payments made in tranches 1 and 2 equates to £50k (2006-07) and £41k (2007-08).

Promotion of Non-Language Irish Culture

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much money the department has spent on the promotion of non-language Irish cultural traditions, including gaelic games and St. Patrick Day celebrations, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 693/07)

Mr Poots: Tables 1 and 2 below details funding provided by the Northern Ireland Events Company to Irish cultural festivals from the Community Festivals Fund in 2006/07 and 2007/08.

TABLE 1 – COMMUNITY FESTIVAL AWARDS – 2006/07

Festival Name	Amount offered
Armagh Festival of Traditional and Folk Song 2006	£12,000.00
Carlingford Lough International Currach Championships	£2,000.00
13th William Kennedy Piping Festival	£9,000.00
Rathlin Aírs Annual Traditional Music Festival	£2,000.00
Fiddlers' Green Music and Arts Festival 2006	£9,000.00
Total	£34,000.00

TABLE 2 – COMMUNITY FESTIVAL AWARDS - 2007/08*

Festival Name	Amount offered
Fiddlers' Green Music and Arts Festival 2007	£11,800.00
Belfast Traditional Singing Festival	£3,000.00
Total	£14,800.00

* N.B. This does not include Tranche 3 awards which have not yet been determined – closing date for applications is 22nd June 2007.

Tables 3 and 4 below details funding provided by the Northern Ireland Events Company from the Community Festivals Fund to festivals which contained elements of Irish cultural entertainment and celebration.

TABLE 3 - COMMUNITY FESTIVAL AWARDS – 2006/07

Festival Name	Amount offered
Ardoyne Fleadh Cheoil 2006	£17,000.00
Feile an Phobail 2006	£45,000.00
Gasyard Wall Feile 2006	£8,000.00
Golden Link Festival 2006	£10,000.00
Greater New Lodge Community Festival	£13,000.00
Total	£93,000.00

TABLE 4 - COMMUNITY FESTIVAL AWARDS - 2007/08*

Festival Name	Amount offered
Ardoyne Fleadh Cheoil 2007	£25,000.00
Chaine Folk and Blues of Larne	£1,500.00
Feile an Phobail 2007	£65,000.00
Gasyard Wall Feile 2007	£10,242.00
Greater New Lodge Community Festival	£10,000.00
Heart of the Glens Festival 2207	£3,000.00

Festival Name	Amount offered
Roe Valley International Folk Festival	£5,000.00
Total	£119,742.00

* N.B. This does not include Tranche 3 awards which have not yet been determined – closing date for applications is 22nd June 2007.

Table 5 details funding provided by the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure to Irish cultural festivals in each of the last five years.

TABLE 5 – DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS & LEISURE FUNDING

Festival	Funding Provided (£)		
	2004/05	2005/06*	2006/07*
Feile an Phobail	20,000	20,000	75,000
Ardoyne Fleadh Cheoil	10,000	9,013	12,500
Greater New Lodge Community Festival	10,000	7,500	19,050

* This may not be the final amounts as the accounts have not yet closed

Table 6 details funding provided by the Arts Council for Northern Ireland to Irish cultural projects in each of the last 5 years.

TABLE 6 – ARTS COUNCIL FUNDING

Financial Year	Funding Provided (£)
2002/03	747,976
2003/04	1,552,739
2004/05	811,400
2005/06	1,219,732
2006/07	860,825

Table 7 details funding provided by Sport Northern Ireland to Gaelic Games in each of the last five years.

TABLE 7 – SPORT NORTHERN IRELAND FUNDING

Financial Year	Funding Provided (£)
2002/03	568,559
2003/04	217,111
2004/05	140,839
2005/06	1,004,081
2006/07	2,701,488

Funding for Promotion of Ulster- Scots Language

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much money the department

has spent on the promotion of the Ulster-Scots language in each of the last five years. (AQW 694/07)

Mr Poots: DCAL's expenditure on the promotion of the Ulster-Scots language is via organisations such as the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group. The amount spent by both these organisations on language promotion over the past 5 years is shown in the table below:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Ulster-Scots Agency	£100k	£500k	£103k	£198k	£345k
Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group				05-06 £134k	06-07 £392k

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the members of the Ulster-Scots Agency; (b) when they were appointed; (c) how many meetings have been held since their appointments; and (d) how many meetings attended by each member. (AQW 810/07)

Mr Poots: The table below shows the members of the Board of the Ulster-Scots Agency; the dates they were appointed; the number of meetings held since their appointments and how many meetings each member has attended.

Members Name	Date of Appointment	Number of Meetings since Appointment	Number of Meetings Attended
Jim Devenney	13.12.1999	65	60
Pat Wall	13.12.1999	65	54
Linde Lunney	13.12.1999	65	57
Eddie O'Donnell	07.12.2001	50	45
Alistair Simpson	13.12.2002	38	33
Ian Adamson	13.12.2002	34	30
Robert Stoker	01.09.2003	39	13
Mark Thompson	20.06.2005	19	18

International Matches at Windsor Park

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he or any of his officials have held discussions with Linfield Football Club or the Irish Football Association regarding the agreement between Linfield Football Club and the Irish Football

Association for the use of Windsor Park for international matches. (AQW 864/07)

Mr Poots: My officials, in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), are currently facilitating discussions between both Linfield Football Club and the Irish Football Association (IFA) regarding the agreement between the two organisations for the use of Windsor Park for international matches. These discussions are still on-going.

Upgrading of Sports Venues

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department has carried out an appraisal of the cost of upgrading (1) Windsor Park (2) Ravenhill and (3) Casement Park and if so, what are those costs likely to be. (AQW 866/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has not carried out an appraisal of the cost of upgrading (1) Windsor Park (2) Ravenhill and (3) Casement Park as this is primarily a matter for the owners of the venues, ie Linfield FC/Irish Football Association (IFA), the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU)/Ulster Rugby and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) respectively. However, DCAL, together with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), is currently in discussion with the owners of these stadia about their future facility requirements and the related cost implications.

Potential Investment in Windsor Park

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he or any representative of his department has held discussions with representatives of Linfield Football Club regarding potential investment in Windsor Park and will he make such information available. (AQW 867/07)

Mr Poots: To date neither I nor any representative of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has held discussions with Linfield Football Club regarding potential investment in Windsor Park. DCAL officials are, however, currently facilitating discussions between Linfield Football Club and the Irish Football Association, in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland, regarding Windsor Park as part of on-going negotiations between the two organisations on the contract for staging international football games at the stadium.

Potential Investment in Windsor Park

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he or any representative

of his department held discussions with the Irish Football Association regarding potential investment in Windsor Park and will he make such information available.

(AQW 869/07)

Mr Poots: To date neither I nor any representative of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has held discussions with the Irish Football Association (IFA) regarding potential investment in Windsor Park. DCAL officials are, however, currently facilitating discussions between the IFA and Linfield Football Club, in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland, regarding Windsor Park as part of on-going negotiations between the two organisations on the contract for staging international football games at the stadium.

Rally Ireland

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money his Department (i) offered, and (ii) paid to Rally Ireland for the following years: 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007.

(AQW 870/07)

Mr Poots: No funding was offered or paid to Rally Ireland for 2004, as the initial pilot events in the bid for World Rally Championship status were held in October 2005 and March 2006.

The Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC) offered Rally Ireland up to £368,931.13 for its 2005 event and up to £647,953.20 for its 2006 event. NIEC is currently finalising payments to Rally Ireland for 2005 and 2006. To date Rally Ireland has received £321,869.75 for 2005 and £570,004.21 for 2006.

No final decision has been made on the level of funding which will be offered for the 2007 World Rally Championship Rally Ireland event. However, the Department has so far made payments to Rally Ireland amounting to £200,000 for the 2007 event.

Rally Ireland

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his department is satisfied that both the Rally Headquarters and Rally Service Park for Rally Ireland 2007, is based in the Republic of Ireland, and not Northern Ireland.

(AQW 871/07)

Mr Poots: It is anticipated that the cross-border 2007 World Rally Championship event will have both its Headquarters and Service Park in Sligo, but that Northern Ireland will host a Super Special Stage in the grounds of Stormont to open the Rally, with significant worldwide television coverage. Rally Ireland has also confirmed its commitment to a 50/50 split of the event either side of the border.

A final decision on the amount of government funding to be provided for the 2007 event will be based on the

potential benefits to Northern Ireland demonstrated through a fully-costed business case.

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm that, prior to the formal establishment of the Ulster-Scots Academy, the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group will have the role of standardising Ulster-Scots spellings, and that these should be used across the public sector.

(AQW 911/07)

Mr Poots: The remit given to the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group in 2005 included the resourcing without delay of specified projects within a Language Development Programme, including a spelling standardisation programme. It is intended that this spelling standardisation when completed and agreed should be used across the public sector.

Upgrading Windsor Park

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with Linfield Football Club regarding upgrading Windsor Park, with reference to its use as a national stadium.

(AQW 963/07)

Mr Poots: To date neither I nor any representative of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has held discussions with Linfield Football Club regarding the upgrading of Windsor Park. DCAL officials are, however, currently facilitating discussions between Linfield Football Club and the Irish Football Association, in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland, regarding Windsor Park as part of on-going negotiations between the two organisations on the contract for staging international football games at the stadium.

Funding for Repairs at Windsor Park

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether he has been approached to provide financial assistance towards repairing the roof of the north stand at Windsor Park.

(AQW 964/07)

Mr Poots: To date I have not been approached to provide assistance towards repairing the roof of the north stand at Windsor Park. The Irish Football Association (IFA), however, is currently developing a programme to help improve football grounds in Northern Ireland, including Windsor Park. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in NI including the distribution

of funding, is assisting the IFA with the development of this programme.

Ulster Scots

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what engagement the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group had with representative organisations, such as the Ulster-Scots Language Society and the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council, in preparing the last periodic report for the Committee of Experts (COMEX) for the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 969/07)

Mr Poots: My Department provided a list of non-governmental organisation contacts to the European Charter Secretariat who issued invitations to all interested parties wishing to meet with the Committee of Experts (COMEX). According to the timetable for the visit both the Ulster Scots Language Society and Ulster Scots Heritage Council were scheduled to meet with COMEX on 5th December 2005.

North-South Committee of the Arts

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure who are the members of the joint North-South committee of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon; and from which of the two organisations are they nominated. (AQW 970/07)

Mr Poots: The members of the joint North-South Committee of the Arts are: Tony Kennedy, Gearóid Ó hEara, Sharon O'Connor, Jaki Irvine, Noelle Campbell Sharpe and Rosaleen Linehan.

Tony Kennedy, Gearóid Ó hEara and Sharon O'Connor were nominated by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Jaki Irvine, Noelle Campbell Sharpe and Rosaleen Linehan were nominated by An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

EDUCATION

Pre-School Expansion Programme

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education if she will provide details, for each Education and Library Board, of (a) the number of children who have not received a funded place under the pre-school expansion programme; and (b) her plans to address the shortage in funded places. (AQW 415/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The position is as recorded in my answer to Mr Bradley's AQW 272/07, answered in the official record on 8th June 2007.

Education and Library Boards, who operate the admissions process, are now going through the re-allocation process. It is hoped that they will be in a position to confirm any shortfall in funded places in their respective areas by mid to end June.

The Early Years Team in the Department is liaising closely with Education and Library Board officers to ensure that any shortfall is identified and appropriate action taken as soon as possible

Saintfield High School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to address the over-subscription of pupils in 2007 for Saintfield High School. (AQW 419/07)

Ms Ruane: There are no plans to increase the admissions and enrolment numbers of Saintfield High School beyond the long-term enrolment number of the school. The Department is in the process of incrementally increasing the school's enrolment number to the long-term enrolment number of 340. The school's admissions number of 68 is already in line with this. Saintfield High School is a popular school but there is no shortage of places available at alternative controlled post-primary schools within a reasonable distance of the Saintfield area.

Saintfield High School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she will give an update on plans for a greenfield site to be identified for a new build for Saintfield High School. (AQW 420/07)

Ms Ruane: A scheme for Saintfield High School was announced in 2003. In considering the appraisal options at the time, the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) considered a Greenfield site option but no suitable sites were identified.

The approved scheme was for the extension and refurbishment of the school building to replace sub-standard permanent accommodation and mobiles. Work is currently on site and is expected to be completed later this year.

The SEELB had also submitted an addendum to the appraisal for the provision of a sports hall as part of the overall building project. Several site options were considered for this facility including Greenfield sites. The SEELB are now proposing to build the sports hall on

the existing school site and the Department is considering the plans and costs associated with this option.

Conlig Primary School

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what are her plans to meet a delegation of parents from Conlig Primary School to discuss its potential transformation to integrated status, following the recent successful ballot of parents. (AQW 445/07)

Ms Ruane: I have received an invitation from the Acting Principal of Conlig Primary School for a meeting with a group representing the school to discuss a proposal to transform to controlled integrated status. I have responded that once a development proposal is published, I would be happy to meet with the group as part of the consultation process, to hear their views.

Integrated Education in North Down

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to address the increased demand for integrated education at primary level within the North Down area. (AQW 446/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education and also to have regard to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. Proposals to increase places at integrated schools either through expansion of intakes at existing schools, or the establishment of new schools, are the subject of a statutory development proposal consultation process. Each such proposal is considered on its individual merits

Donemana Primary School

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister of Education if she will detail her plans for the replacement of Donemana Primary School. (AQW 458/07)

Ms Ruane: An Economic Appraisal for a replacement for Donemana Primary School was prepared by the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) last year. The Department of Education has requested that it be reviewed to confirm that the scheme is required for the area.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many classroom assistants are employed in (a) controlled; (b) maintained; (c) integrated; and (d) Irish medium secondary and primary schools in the Western Education and Library Board; and to state the pupil/classroom assistant ratio within each of these sectors. (AQW 475/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of classroom assistants in each sector is detailed in the attached table and is based on information provided by the Western Education and Library Board (WELB). It relates to assistants employed by WELB in mainstream schools and therefore excludes those employed in special schools and those employed by the Boards of Governors of Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.

There is no recommended pupil/classroom assistant ratio. The allocation of a classroom assistant to support children with special needs depends on the assessed needs of individual children and can range from a full-time assistant for one child to a part-time assistant providing support to a group of children within a class or school. In addition, the Department's Making a Good Start Initiative provides funding directly to schools to provide a minimum of 10 hrs classroom support for all P1 classes and for P2 classes in schools with the lowest proportion of their pupils achieving the expected level for their age at Key Stage 2 Assessment. The information provided by WELB also includes details of the total pupil enrolment for each sector, the total number of classroom assistants employed and the full-time equivalent figure.

Sector	Total Enrolment	No of Classroom Assistants	Full Time Equivalents
Controlled Primary	9374	328	205
Maintained Primary	19757	625	391
Controlled Integrated Primary	43	1	1
Irish Medium Primary	429	13	9
Controlled Post Primary	3834	60	51
Maintained Post Primary	11033	162	148
Total	44470	1189	805

Magherafelt High School

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the start date of the new build for Magherafelt High School. (AQW 479/07)

Ms Ruane: The North Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that they expect construction

work on the proposed new school should start on site in spring 2008.

Rainey Endowed Grammar School, Magherafelt

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the start date for the new build for Rainey Endowed Grammar School, Magherafelt. (AQW 480/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education is currently examining an Outline Business Case (OBC) for the project which will confirm the appropriate procurement route, based on a value for money assessment. Once the outcome of the OBC has been established, planning of the scheme will be taken forward with the school. It is not possible to detail a start date at this stage until the work on the OBC has been completed.

Security and Personal Safety in Schools

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Education what steps will be taken to ensure that teaching and non-teaching staff in schools are adequately protected from, and supported when subject to physical assault and abuse from pupils and parents; and whether consideration has been given to adopting a similar approach and protocols, as are now operational in the health service. (AQW 487/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department is currently reviewing existing guidance on security and personal safety in schools and the support available to staff. The Department has received representations from education stakeholders on this issue and, in continuing with this review, intends to examine the protocols of other organisations including those of the health service.

Donaghadee High School

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education what discussions have taken place regarding the closure of Donaghadee High School, with (a) teachers and classroom assistants; (b) the Board of Governors; and (c) pupils and their parents; and if she will detail the outcome of these meetings. (AQW 494/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (the Board) has commenced preliminary consultations with Governors, staff and parents at Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School, Newtownards, in relation to a potential rationalisation between the two schools. The Board advise that pupils were not specifically invited to the meeting with parents but were not excluded if they wished to attend. A

formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term.

The Board has advised that as of 12 June 2007 meetings have taken place as follows:

	Movilla High School	Donaghadee High School
Teachers and Classroom Assistants	6th June 2007	16th May 2007
Board of Governors	15th May 2007	15th May 2007
Parents	22nd May 2007 (2 meetings)	29th May 2007

The Board has advised that the meetings raised a variety of issues and that these will be considered fully as part of the consultation process.

Public Private Partnership Scheme

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to extend the Public Private Partnership scheme; and to detail which schools in each of the Education and Library Boards are currently engaged in the scheme. (AQW 496/07)

Ms Ruane: In accordance with the requirements of public expenditure decisions, the procurement routes for capital projects are determined on the basis of value for money.

Details of schools in each Education and Library Board area currently engaged in a PPP procurement phase are detailed in the table below.

Education and Library Board Area	School Cluster
Belfast Education & Library Board	Ashfield Girls' High
	Belfast Boys' Model
	Belfast Model School for Girls
	Grosvenor Grammar
	Orangefield Primary
	-at Preferred Bidder Stage
Western Education & Library Board	St Cecilia's College
	St Mary's College
	- at Final Business Case stage
Western Education & Library Board/Southern Education & Library Board	Loreto College
	Holy Trinity College
	- at Outline Business Case stage

Education and Library Board Area	School Cluster
North Eastern Education & Library Board	Coleraine College – scheme temporarily on hold following capital review earlier this year
	Ballymoney High School
	Rainey Endowed School
	– at Outline Business Case stage
North Eastern Education & Library Board/ South Eastern Education & Library Board	St Mary's Primary School, Portglenone
	Our Lady & St Patrick's College
	St Patrick's Grammar School
	St Joseph's Primary School
	- at Final Business Case stage
South Eastern Education & Library Board	Tor Bank School
	Lagan College
	- awaiting bids from bidders

Attacks on Teaching Staff

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to ensure that attacks on teaching staff are stopped. (AQW 505/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department is currently reviewing existing guidance on security and personal safety in schools and the support available to staff. The Department has received representations from education stakeholders on this issue and, in continuing with this review, intends to examine the protocols of other organisations including those of the health service.

Review of Irish-Medium Education

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of Education if there is an indicative timeline for the department's review of Irish-medium education. (AQW 519/07)

Ms Ruane: I intend to publish a report and recommendations for consultation in the late autumn of 2007.

Homophobic Bullying

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what percentage of secondary-level schools in Northern Ireland have policies in place to deal with homophobic bullying. (AQW 532/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not hold the information requested.

All grant-aided schools are required by law to have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The Department has issued guidance to schools on measures to address bullying for whatever reason, including homophobic bullying. The effectiveness of an individual school's discipline policy is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Disparity in Funding of Schools

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of Education to explain the disparity in funding between primary and secondary schools in relation to (a) the controlled sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector. (AQW 554/07)

Ms Ruane: Under the Local Management of Schools Common Funding Formula, schools with similar needs or characteristics receive similar funding, regardless of their location or management type.

Grant-maintained integrated schools, together with voluntary grammar schools, face additional responsibilities and costs which, for controlled and maintained schools, are met centrally by Education and Library Boards. The funding formula therefore includes some factors specifically to meet the needs of those schools.

The differential in funding for primary and post-primary schools reflects in large part the additional costs associated with delivery of the post-primary curriculum. I do intend, however, to look further at the opportunities for reducing the scale of the current differential in a way that would allow additional funding to go into primary schools without presenting difficulties for their post-primary counterparts.

Pre-School and Primary School Education in Derry/Londonderry

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Education what future provision is being made for pre-school and primary education in the controlled sector for the Derry/Londonderry City Council area. (AQW 564/07)

Ms Ruane: A new-build replacement school for Lisnagelvin Primary School was announced in 2004 and planning is well advanced. New schools to replace New Buildings, Eglinton and Ebrington Primary Schools were announced in 2006. The scheme for Ebrington includes the replacement of the existing nursery unit.

A development proposal to establish Learning Support Centres within Foundation Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 at Lisnagelvin Primary School from 1 September 2007 or as soon as possible thereafter was published by the Western Education and Library

Board on 25 May 2007. A decision on the proposal will be taken following the statutory 2-month consultation period which ends on 26 July 2007.

Sure Start Children's Centre

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Education what plans are there for securing a SureStart Children's Centre in the Drumahoe area of Derry/Londonderry City Council to respond to local needs. (AQW 565/07)

Ms Ruane: Sure Start works with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children - particularly those who are disadvantaged - to ensure they are well prepared for school and later life. In the North of Ireland, Sure Start currently covers the top 20% most disadvantaged wards. Drumahoe falls within the Altnagelvin ward which is ranked in the top 33% Most Deprived Wards and therefore it falls outside of the catchment area of the nearest Sure Start project in the Waterside.

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in the establishment of the All-Ireland Centre for Excellence for Autism at Middletown, Co. Armagh, announced in 2002 by the two education Ministers, for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 615/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science, is taking forward the arrangements needed in order to enable the Middletown Centre for Autism to begin offering services later this year. Considerable progress has been made in the last 6 months.

A Holding company was set up in 2004 to purchase the property. A second company to operate the Centre, the Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd was incorporated as a company on 16th March 2007. The appointments of the Board of Directors and the Chief Executive Officer for the Centre were announced in January 2007 and a recruitment process is currently underway for further senior management posts.

An Integrated Design Team led by the two Departments is taking forward the refurbishment project, which includes a new building for the Learning Support Centre.

It is planned that services will start to be phased in from late 2007, beginning with the training/advisory and information/research services. The educational assessment and learning support services will come on stream on a longer timescale when building works are complete at the end of 2008.

Primary School Enrolment in Coleraine Borough Council Area

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils on the roll in each of the primary schools in the Coleraine Borough Council area, in (a) 2001/02; (b) 2002/03; (c) 2003/04; (d) 2004/05; (e) 2005/06; and (f) 2006/07.

(AQW 619/07)

Ms Ruane: The enrolment at primary schools in the Coleraine Borough Council area from 2001/02 – 2006/07 was as follows:

School Name	Enrolment in					
	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Ballyrock PS	24	20	12	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Portrush PS	317	315	308	288	268	246
Ballytober PS	63	56	67	70	75	70
Carnalridge PS	215	221	220	209	209	209
Culcrow PS	41	43	37	34	37	45
Cullycapple PS	54	42	43	42	44	45
Damhead PS	130	139	143	162	173	167
Hezlett PS	232	243	253	273	272	268
Killowen PS	197	196	200	196	188	169
Portstewart PS	369	347	326	312	298	295
Millburn PS	421	415	419	412	420	421
Kilrea PS	101	104	101	102	93	93
D H Christie Memorial PS	428	414	415	430	423	423
Castleroe PS	80	79	81	79	78	77
Macosquin PS	110	125	124	126	135	141
Harpurs Hill PS	218	208	205	195	196	189
Gorran PS	91	102	105	103	109	109
Garvagh PS	152	157	151	141	135	136
Ballysally PS	232	226	231	228	222	198
Irish Society's PS	452	448	449	440	434	420
St Patrick's PS	101	106	106	106	110	107
Ballyhackett PS	49	47	55	54	54	57
St Columba's PS	98	99	104	101	95	93
St Colum's PS	189	184	189	195	195	196
St Mary's PS	29	28	28	20	19	n.a.
St Patrick's and St Joseph's PS	105	119	113	121	134	142
St Malachy's PS	253	243	239	242	254	250

School Name	Enrolment in					
	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
St John's PS	238	225	215	209	196	185
St Columba's PS	183	210	223	213	209	216
Carhill Integrated PS	48	43	41	45	43	44
Millstrand PS	208	209	180	184	184	190

Note: 'n.a.' means school not open in that year.

Compensation Claims for Injuries

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education how much has been paid in compensation claims for injuries received by (a) pupils; and (b) teachers, (i) on school field trips; and (ii) while at school, in the last year. (AQW 644/07)

Ms Ruane: I have been advised that £639,183k was paid out in compensation claims for injuries during the 2006/07 financial year. A breakdown of the amount paid out to pupils and teachers on school field trips and whilst at school is provided in the table below:

		2006/07 £
Pupils	Field Trip	21,933
	Injuries at School	503,000
Teachers	Field Trip	0
	Injuries at School	114,250

Special Needs Units at Secondary Schools

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the current provision of special needs units in the secondary sector in Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle. (AQW 651/07)

Ms Ruane: I am advised by the Chief Executive Officer of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board that the current provision of special needs units in the secondary sector in Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle is as follows:

Donaghadee High School – 4 special units for pupils with moderate learning difficulty:

Year 8	8 pupils
Year 9	23 pupils
Year 10	18 pupils

There are no special needs units in the secondary sector in Bangor or Millisle.

Special Needs Unit at Donaghadee High School

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what provision will be made for the pupils currently catered for by the special needs units in Donaghadee High School. (AQW 657/07)

Ms Ruane: I am advised by the Chief Executive Officer of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board that there are presently 4 special units located at Donaghadee High School catering for pupils with moderate learning difficulties in Years 8-10. That provision will remain in place for the 2007/08 academic year. The parents of pupils in the units have been advised accordingly.

A preliminary consultation is underway regarding the possible amalgamation of Donaghadee and Movilla High Schools with effect from September 2008. Formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term. Any proposals the Board bring forward for the rationalisation of existing post-primary provision in the area will require the publication of a statutory development proposal.

The Board is writing to post-primary schools in the North Down/Ards area to seek expressions of interest to locate a special unit(s) at their school in the event of Donaghadee High School closing/amalgamating.

I have been assured by the Chief Executive that, whatever the outcome, the Board would wish to ensure that the special needs of those pupils in the units in September 2008 and thereafter are fully catered for.

Amalgamation of Donaghadee and Movilla High Schools

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the rationale behind the proposed merger of Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School; and what alternatives were considered prior to this decision being made. (AQW 670/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (the Board) published in March 2006 a Strategic Review of Provision in North East Ards, which includes Donaghadee. The purpose of the review was to provide a strategic framework in which to progress a prioritised programme of capital development schemes. The review consulted the options for post-primary provision in the area for Donaghadee HS and Movilla HS including the retention of the two schools, the amalgamation of the two schools and the possibility of developing a new

school in Donaghadee which would cater for all age-groups, nursery, primary and post-primary. A copy of the review document can be viewed through the Board's website.

Following the Review, the Board commenced preliminary consultations with Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School in relation to a potential rationalisation between the two schools. Formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term.

Armagh Integrated College

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the religious breakdown of pupils enrolled at Armagh Integrated College over the past 3 years. (AQW 674/07)

Ms Ruane: The religious breakdown of pupils enrolled at Armagh Integrated College over the past three years was as follows:

Year	Protestant	Catholic	Other/Not specified	Pupils
2004/05	#	30	*	50
2005/06	28	67	11	106
2006/07	41	92	20	153

Note:

'*' relates to less than 5 cases.

'#' means figure has been treated under rules of disclosure.

Ulster Scots

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education what guidance her department has received from the Inter Departmental Charter Implementation group as to what 'resolute action' it should take to promote the Ulster-Scots language in the sphere of education. (AQW 705/07)

Ms Ruane: The Inter-Departmental Charter Implementation group, on which my Department is represented, has developed guidance for public servants to help them meet their obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

This guidance is available on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's web-site.

Special Educational Needs

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many children carry a statement of special educational needs in (a) Donaghadee High School; (b) Movilla High School; (c) Glastry College; and (d) Bangor

Academy, broken down by year group. [R] (AQW 746/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of children with a statement of special educational needs in (a) Donaghadee High School; (b) Movilla High School; (c) Glastry College; and (d) Bangor Academy, broken down by year group is shown below:

Children with a Statement of Special Education Needs by Year Group 2006/07				
	Donaghadee High School	Movilla High School	Glastry College	Bangor Academy and 6th Form College
Year 8	13	*	9	6
Year 9	25	*	*	*
Year 10	20	*	*	#
Year 11	16	*	6	5
Year 12	12	*	*	5
Year 13	0	0	0	0
Year 14	0	0	0	0
Total	86	14	22	23

Note:

'*' relates to less than 5 cases.

'#' means figure has been treated under rules of disclosure.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Social Work Grants

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister Employment and Learning to detail what support is available to students from Northern Ireland who are studying for social work degrees in universities in other regions of the United Kingdom. (AQW 609/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Northern Ireland students undertaking degree courses including those in social work at institutions in other regions of the United Kingdom are entitled to receive support in accordance with the Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland).

Students who commenced study in the current academic year may apply through their Education and Library Board for support comprising a fee loan, a

means-tested maintenance grant, a maintenance loan and supplementary grants.

Tuition Fees

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will carry out an assessment of the impact of tuition fees on university entrants; and, in particular, if he will examine the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds who take up places at university. (AQW 633/07)

Sir Reg Empey: A review of variable tuition fees is planned to take place in FY2008/09. Widening participation in higher education by students from those groups who are currently under-represented is one of my Department's key strategic goals, in particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The impact of the new arrangements, particularly on people from disadvantaged backgrounds, will be a key aspect of the review.

Migrant Workers

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what steps will be taken to ensure that the skills of migrant workers are matched with existing job vacancies. (AQW 638/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department offers access to a range of information, advice and guidance services aimed at assisting jobseekers to find suitable work through its network of local offices and through the JobCentre Online facility. A telephone interpretation service has been introduced to ensure that those customers whose first language is not English have full access to the services offered. Information leaflets have been translated into a number of languages, including basic Chinese, Portuguese, those relating to the majority of Eastern European countries. Job vacancies are displayed locally and throughout Northern Ireland, Europe and World-wide via the website www.JobCentreOnline.com. Potential migrant workers can therefore begin their jobsearch activity before arriving in Northern Ireland. Those migrants who are eligible to work in Northern Ireland, may apply for employment opportunities for which they have the skills and experience on equal terms with local job seekers.

School Leavers with Severe Learning/Physical Difficulties

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has

made of existing further education provision for young people aged 19 and over, with severe learning and/or physical disabilities, leaving special needs schools in Northern Ireland; and if he will seek to enhance that provision. (AQW 755/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department offers access to a range of information, advice and guidance services aimed at assisting jobseekers to find suitable work through its network of local offices and through the JobCentre Online facility. A telephone interpretation service has been introduced to ensure that those customers whose first language is not English have full access to the services offered. Information leaflets have been translated into a number of languages, including basic Chinese, Portuguese, those relating to the majority of Eastern European countries. Job vacancies are displayed locally and throughout Northern Ireland, Europe and World-wide via the website www.JobCentreOnline.com. Potential migrant workers can therefore begin their jobsearch activity before arriving in Northern Ireland. Those migrants who are eligible to work in Northern Ireland, may apply for employment opportunities for which they have the skills and experience on equal terms with local job seekers.

Transitions Inter-Departmental Working Group

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm that a stakeholder forum has been established to support policy development and good practice in relation to transition processes and provision, as detailed in the report of the Transitions Inter-departmental working group; to detail the membership of the forum, and to outline when the forum has met to date. (AQW 756/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Transitions report was published in February 2006 and since then, my Department has been progressing a number of actions.

The Careers Service is currently developing an all-age Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy, jointly with the Department of Education. The overall aim of the proposed strategy is to develop effective career decision makers leading to increased participation in education, training and employment. The development of this strategy began in March 2006 with a consultation event involving almost 70 key stakeholders. The strategy will be issued for consultation in the near future and will include a clear commitment towards young people and adults who are vulnerable to social exclusion, including young people and adults with disabilities.

In relation to the establishment of the specific stakeholder forum referred to in the Transitions

Report, this has not yet been formally set up. However, work is on-going to develop appropriate stakeholder relationships with a view to establishing a formal stakeholder group to support the development and implementation of the actions within the Transitions Report, following publication of the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance strategy,

The Careers Service has introduced a Social Inclusion policy with a focus on addressing the needs of young people and adults who are facing or vulnerable to, social exclusion and excellent stakeholder engagement is firmly in place, at a local level. This is evidenced through the active role that Careers Advisers play in working with a range of professionals on the Transition Planning process of clients with Statements of Special Educational Need. In addition, since the publication of the Transitions Report, the Careers Service has hosted and participated in several stakeholder networking events, at local level throughout Northern Ireland. A list of participating organisations is attached.

The Department will continue to progress all of the actions specified in the Transitions Report, for which it has lead responsibility.

Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to widen access to further education colleges, to include leavers of special needs schools who are unable to access mainstream vocational training provision, such as Jobskills or Jobskills Access and specialist vocational training. (AQW 757/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department provides a range of financial incentives to encourage Colleges to make provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including leavers of special needs schools. This includes dedicated provision. However, FE is not always suitable for those with severe learning difficulties who may require nursing and other personal care and attention.

The Department, in co-operation with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC), is undertaking a review of the nature and extent of special needs provision throughout the FE network, to determine how best provision might be improved, within the terms of FE's remit.

Funding for Post Graduate Diplomas in Legal Studies

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total amount of all grants

given by his department to students studying at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies, in relation to course fees, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 783/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department has not provided funding for postgraduate diplomas including legal practice courses at the Institute of Professional and Legal Studies, since 2005. The amounts of course fee grants paid to students at the Institute of Professional and Legal Studies for each of the 3 years prior to this were:

2002/03	£127K
2003/04	£144K
2004/05	£264K

Funding for Post Graduate Courses in Legal Studies

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to provide means-tested financial support to trainee solicitors and barristers, to aid their training and contribute towards their course fees at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies.

(AQW 784/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Support for postgraduates has always been discretionary and subject to change to reflect wider Government priority.

The Department is currently drawing up Terms of Reference for a Review of Postgraduate Policy and Funding which is due to commence in autumn 2007. The review will inform the way forward for the funding of postgraduate provision across all disciplines including the legal professions.

Access to Post Graduate Courses

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to take action to increase access to postgraduate courses to students from a less affluent background. (AQW 785/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Widening participation in higher education by students from those groups who are currently under-represented is one of the key strategic goals of my Department. My Department has a widening participation strategy in place to ensure that participants in higher education are representative of society, which includes the target to increase representation of people from the lowest socio-economic classifications (SEC 5 to 7) among entrants to higher education.

My Department increases access to all higher education through a number of broad policy directions

and a range of specific actions including Foundation Degrees, funding premia and special project funding for the universities. Furthermore, my Department is now taking forward the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council (NIHEC) Expert Group report on proposals for the future direction of the Department's widening participation policies. Work is underway to develop and implement a regional strategy to widen participation in higher education by groups who are currently under-represented.

In the wider context, I am aware that an increase in the number of PhD places would be beneficial to the Northern Ireland economy. My Department has therefore bid for additional postgraduate places from the Chancellor's Fund for Innovation. A review of Postgraduate Policy and Funding will be taken forward this autumn.

Funding of Places at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of places funded by his department for (a) solicitors; and (b) barristers, at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies in Northern Ireland, for each of the last five years. (AQW 788/07)

Sir Reg Empey: As autonomous bodies, the Northern Ireland universities are responsible for determining how the core teaching funding provided to them by the Department for Employment and Learning is allocated and which courses they provide. The Department has no locus in this area and does not allocate specific core funding for places at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies in the Queen's University of Belfast.

Course Fees for Trainee Solicitors and Barristers

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the course fees charged to trainee solicitors and barristers at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies for each of the last five years.

(AQW 789/07)

Sir Reg Empey: According to the admissions office at the Institute of Professional and Legal Studies, the course fees charged in the last five years were as follows:

in 2002/03 £5,150; in 2003/04 £5,640; in 2004/05 £6,000; in 2005/06 £6,500; and in 2006/07 £6,750.

Ulster Scots

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what guidance his depart-

ment has received from the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group, as to what 'resolute action' it should take to promote the Ulster-Scots language in the spheres of tertiary and community education.

(AQW 968/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department for Employment and Learning has received no specific guidance from the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group as to what action it should take to promote the Ulster-Scots language in the spheres of tertiary and community education.

Kilroot Power Station

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action is being taken to resolve the situation at Kilroot Power Station, where workers employed in the construction of the new desulphurisation plant have not been paid by the sub-contractor.

(AQW 1069/07)

Sir Reg Empey: It is the statutory duty of the Labour Relations Agency (LRA) "to improve industrial relations" and in doing so may assist the parties to a trade dispute to try and achieve a settlement. Until this question was asked the LRA were unaware that a dispute was taking place in Kilroot Power Station. The LRA have now been advised of this dispute and will try to contact the parties to assess the situation and try and achieve a settlement. Both parties can also independently seek the free services of the LRA, or indeed professional advice, for guidance on their respective positions and avenues of redress.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Ardboe Business Park

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what strategic measures/investment his Department has to support business expansion & future job creation at Ardboe Business Park, Co. Tyrone

(AQW 632/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Invest NI's strategic role is to deliver expertise and resources to accelerate the creation and growth of businesses committed to, and capable of, being entrepreneurial, innovative and international.

To facilitate this work, Invest NI has developed a series of Business Development Solutions tailored to the needs of businesses to help them become more competitive and to enhance their exporting capability,

leading to an increase in sustainable employment and wealth creation throughout Northern Ireland. For companies to be eligible for Invest NI support they must be engaged in manufacturing or internationally-traded services and demonstrate an ability to grow and compete in international markets.

Invest NI recently undertook a business review with one of the companies based at Ardboe Business Park which concluded that it did not meet this criteria for support. However, Invest NI will now, through its regional office team, approach each of the other businesses located in the Park to establish whether they could qualify for any form of support under the Agency's Business Development Solutions

Land for Industrial Use

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the efforts being made by Invest NI to identify and secure additional land for industrial use within the Strabane District Council area, in order to facilitate opportunities for inward investment and the expansion of existing businesses within the area. (AQW 710/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI continues to work closely with Planning Service to assist it to meet its obligation under the Regional Development Strategy to identify a generous and continuous supply of land for industrial use.

It has contributed in detail to the West Tyrone Area Plan, which is expected to be published in draft form in 2008. As part of that consultation it has considered the needs of its clients and submitted representations to the various stages of the Plan process, including the issues paper of October 2005. It continues to engage with Planning Service on site specific matters.

In addition to endeavouring to influence future zoning, Invest NI has also sought to protect existing industrial land. It has opposed planning applications, on the former Adria factory and Dublin Road Industrial estate, by objecting to planning applications for non-industrial uses.

Strabane is one of four areas identified in the first phase of Invest NI's current acquisition policy, which was adopted in August 2006. The Strabane acquisition project will move forward in due course, following a full economic appraisal and in line with the Area Plan process

Future of Manufacturing in Northern Ireland

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the recommendations of the report 'The Future of Manufacturing in Northern Ireland', commissioned by

his department in 2006; to detail the number of recommendations that were implemented; and to give an assessment of their success. (AQW 733/07)

Mr Dodds: Information on the share of Gross Value Added¹ (GVA) accounted for by tourism is not available for the years 1996, 2001 and 2006. However, research commissioned by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment estimated that tourism's direct contribution to GVA was 1.9% in 2003, and when indirect and induced effects are also included it contributed a total of 3.5% to Northern Ireland GVA.

¹ Regional Gross Value Added is now used instead of Gross Domestic Product

Visitors' Centre, Giant's Causeway

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explain the reasons for the delay in replacing the Visitors Centre at the Giants Causeway, and to state the plans and timetable for bringing the project to completion. (AQW 825/07)

Mr Dodds: The detailed design for the replacement visitor facilities has reached an advanced stage of development. In committing public funds to the project my Department must take account of all material considerations which may impact on the development of the new facilities including a value for money assessment. Key issues which have delayed the project have been the resolution of car parking requirements and planning considerations.

Consideration must be given to a planning application submitted to Planning Service for an alternative, private sector led visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway.

Performance of Invest NI

Mr Trevor Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if Invest NI is underperforming compared to the Industrial Development Agency (IDA) in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 879/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI and the IDA cannot be compared directly as the agencies differ in terms of functional responsibility and product offering. Whereas the IDA is responsible solely for attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Invest NI's remit is significantly broader as its client base comprises both locally-owned and internationally-owned companies. In addition to attracting FDI to Northern Ireland, Invest NI supports local business starts and expansions by existing companies. It also encourages its client companies to embrace higher levels of Research and Development and Innovation to help increase their competitiveness, and supports the development of their exporting capability.

Invest NI has performed strongly in FDI terms since it was set up in 2002. In the five years to March 2007 Invest NI has secured 169 inward investment projects, leveraging over £1 billion of investment, promoting over 13,200 new jobs and safeguarding almost 10,500 existing jobs. Directly equivalent information is not available from the IDA, which does not publish the number of jobs promoted with each project.

Economic Impact of Tourism

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to indicate the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product produced by tourism in (a) 1996; (b) 2001; and (c) 2006. (AQW 950/07)

Mr Dodds: Information on the share of Gross Value Added¹ (GVA) accounted for by tourism is not available for the years 1996, 2001 and 2006. However, research commissioned by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment estimated that tourism's direct contribution to GVA was 1.9% in 2003, and when indirect and induced effects are also included it contributed a total of 3.5% to Northern Ireland GVA.

¹ Regional Gross Value Added is now used instead of Gross Domestic Product

ENVIRONMENT

Golf Course at Gilford Castle

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of the Environment if she is satisfied that all procedures have been applied properly in relation to the planning application to build a championship golf course and related works at Gilford Castle in Co. Down; if she recognises the benefits that this project will bring to the rural economy; and if she will commit herself to making a positive intervention in this case.

(AQW 347/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I am assured that this application was considered against all relevant planning policy and procedures applicable. I am fully aware of the benefits this scheme would bring to the Gilford area. However, the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office did not consider that the benefits of the scheme as currently framed would outweigh the planning policy constraints. The Divisional Office is holding the application following a request by Banbridge District Council for a decision to be deferred to allow the applicant to put forward amendments. Contact between this office and the developer's agents is being maintained and there have

been some discussions. Intervention by me in these circumstances would not be appropriate.

Possible Breaches of Planning Control

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how many of the 11,229 files opened in Omagh Divisional Planning Office, in relation to possible breaches of planning control, relate to (a) Omagh District Council area; (b) Fermanagh District Council area; (c) Strabane District Council area; (d) Cookstown District Council area; and (e) Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area. (AQW 569/07)

Mrs Foster: Of the 11,229 files opened on possible breaches of planning control in the last 3 years, some 1,680 were opened in the Omagh office. The breakdown by council area is as follows: (a) Omagh, 392; (b) Fermanagh, 382; (c) Strabane, 278; (d) Cookstown, 265; and (e) Dungannon & South

Unlicensed Waste Disposal

Mr Ian McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment if the Environment and Heritage Service responds to every complaint and/or referral it receives in regard to the unlicensed disposal of waste; and to detail the circumstances in which a referral might not be actioned. (AQW 576/07)

Mrs Foster: Every complaint and/or referral received by the Environment and Heritage Service is individually risk-assessed. Investigative resources are limited, so waste disposal reports are prioritised for further action. Commercial-scale disposal, biodegradable wastes of a municipal-nature, hazardous wastes, and other wastes likely to cause significant environmental damage, are investigated as a priority. Consequently, reports of wastes falling outside these parameters are only actioned if resources permit.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Francie Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment if any planning applications which have been refused on the basis of 'Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside' will be reviewed, in light of possible changes to planning policy in the future. (AQW 604/07)

Mrs Foster: In relation to planning applications which have been refused under PPS14, my Department will carefully consider the implications of any change in policy emerging from the Executive's review along with the findings of the court in relation to the ongoing Judicial Review.

Development at Camperdown Garden Village, Comber

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to give an update on the proposals for development at Camperdown Garden Village, Comber. (AQW 616/07)

Mrs Foster: A planning application (X/2000/0001/O) for a new village including a mixed-use centre, business park and housing on 123.4 hectare of land to the east of Belfast Road, Comber between Ballyrainey Road junction, 372 Comber Road, Belfast, Fairview 52 Greengraves Road, Dundonald and The Old House 77 Ballyrainey Road, Comber was received on 23 December 1999. The application was considered as a major planning application under Article 31.

The applicants (Frazer Houses [NI] Ltd) in their submission refer to the application as Camperdown Garden Village.

I can confirm that the application was withdrawn by the applicants on 4 May 2002. The Department is not aware of any subsequent contact or discussion in relation to this proposal.

Carnmoney Hill, Newtownabbey

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the steps she is taking to ensure the conservation and preservation of Carnmoney Hill, Newtownabbey. (AQW 623/07)

Mrs Foster: I am aware of the conservation importance of Carnmoney Hill particularly for its landscape, amenity and biodiversity value. In 2000, as part of the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment, my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) identified it as a unique landform and as an area of scenic quality.

Designation COU 1 of BMAP proposes extending the Metropolitan Area Green Belt to include Carnmoney Hill. Within the Green Belt, landscapes which are particularly sensitive because of their quality, or which need particular protection because of their location and the pressures for development on them, are afforded special protection by additional designations in the Plan. One such form of protection is the Area of High Scenic Value (AoHSV) designation.

BMAP designated Carnmoney Hill as an AoHSV. Policy COU 7 of the draft Plan proposes that planning permission will not be granted to development proposals that would adversely affect the quality, character and features of interest in designated AoHSVs. Proposals for mineral working would not be acceptable. All proposals must be accompanied by a Landscape

Analysis to indicate the likely effects of the proposal on the landscape.

A significant part of the Carnmoney Hill is also designated as a Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance. Policy ENV2 protects such sites on the basis of their flora, fauna or earth science interest. Planning permission will not be granted for development that would be liable to have an adverse effect on nature conservation interests in such sites.

The proposals in the draft Plan seek to conserve the natural environment, protect the City's natural setting and keep the slopes free from urban development.

EHS has provided grant aid to the Woodland Trust to produce a Biodiversity Management Plan for Carnmoney Hill and also for the creation of safe public access routes within the area.

Carnmoney Hill was also designated as a Local Nature Reserve by Newtownabbey Borough Council in 2006. EHS continues to support this initiative through the provision of grant-aid to two of the partnership bodies that are involved in the management of the site: the Woodland Trust and the Belfast Hills Partnership.

Water Pollution

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to outline, for each of the last three years, (a) the number of incidents of water course pollution investigated by the Environment and Heritage Service in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area; and (b) the number of cases brought to the Director of Public Prosecutions. (AQW 624/07)

Mrs Foster: The data presented in tables below detail the numbers of pollution incidents investigated by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area. The incidents have been classified by Severity (the environmental impact of the pollution).

Year	Severity			Total No of Incidents
	Low	Medium	High	
2004	43	9	0	52
2005	49	6	0	55
2006	43	8	3	54

The data presented in the table below detail the enforcement action taken by EHS with respect to water pollution offences in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area.

Year	To DPP	Absolute Discharge	Fine	Dismissal	Pending	Warning Letters
2004	2	1	0	1	0	2
2005	0	0	0	0	0	7
2006	1*	0	0	0	1	8

* To Public Prosecution Service

EHS also undertakes Pollution Prevention Risk Assessments. The aim is to identify sites which have the potential to adversely affect water quality and, through education or enforcement, reduce the risk of these sites causing pollution. The data presented in the table below detail enforcement action in respect of these visits in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area.

	2005	2006	2007
Pollution Prevention visits	6	5	11
Water (NI) Order 1999 Notices	0	0	5

The Water (NI) Order 1999 gives EHS the power to issue legally binding Notices; which can be used where an offender is required to take prompt action to stop pollution or to remedy its effects, or to remedy a serious risk of pollution.

Water Course Pollution

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to outline, for each of the last three years, (a) the number of incidents of water course pollution investigated by the Environment and Heritage Service in the Antrim Borough Council area; and (b) the number of cases brought to the Director of Public Prosecutions. (AQW 625/07)

Mrs Foster: The data presented in tables below detail the numbers of pollution incidents investigated by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) in the Antrim Borough Council area. The incidents have been classified by Severity (the environmental impact of the pollution).

Year	Severity			Total No of Incidents
	Low	Medium	High	
2004	25	10	2	37
2005	33	4	0	37
2006	31	7	0	38

The data presented in the table below detail the enforcement action taken by EHS with respect to

water pollution offences in the Antrim Borough Council area.

Year	To DPP	Absolute Discharge	Fine	Dismissal	Pending	Withdrawn	Sentence	Warning Letters
2004	3	0	2	0	0	0	1	7
2005	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
2006	1*	0	0	0	1	0	0	8

* To Public Prosecution Service

EHS also undertakes Pollution Prevention Risk Assessments. The aim is to identify sites which have the potential to adversely affect water quality and, through education or enforcement, reduce the risk of these sites causing pollution. The data presented in the table below detail enforcement action in respect of these visits in the Antrim Borough Council area.

	2005	2006	2007
Pollution Prevention visits	8	3	6
Water (NI) Order 1999 Notices	0	0	4

The Water (NI) Order 1999 gives EHS the power to issue legally binding Notices; which can be used where an offender is required to take prompt action to stop pollution or to remedy its effects, or to remedy a serious risk of pollution.

Waste Management Centre, Dungiven

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of objections that have been received to the planning application for a proposed industrial development to provide a waste management and recycling centre at Upper Dernalflaw, Dernalflaw Road, Dungiven. (AQW 645/07)

Mrs Foster: The application was received in May 2007 and as at 19 June, some 112 objections have been received.

Impact of Penalty Points

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to give her assessment of the success of the penalty point system in relation to reducing the speed of traffic, in order to prevent accidents and fatalities. (AQW 652/07)

Mrs Foster: There is no Northern Ireland research demonstrating a direct link between penalty points

and reductions in traffic speed, collisions and fatalities. There are many factors that impact on safety on our roads and it is very difficult to attribute reductions in collisions or fatalities to any one single measure.

It is my view that penalty points are useful as part of a package of measures to reduce speeding.

Research to assess the impact of penalty points which were introduced in October 1997 showed that 70% of drivers reported a change in their driving behaviour with 34% indicating that they had slowed down and 46% driving more carefully as a result.

Illegal Dumping at Bonfire Sites

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in preventing illegal dumping and fly-tipping at bonfire sites in the East Antrim area. (AQW 653/07)

Mrs Foster: The Environment and Heritage Service has targeted the disposal of waste tyres on bonfires and continues to work towards reducing the number of tyres disposed of illegally. This has been achieved by auditing producers of waste tyres, and by enforcing waste legislation where evidence is obtained of illegal dumping from commercial premises. Some tyre dealers in the East Antrim area have been visited. Powers in relation to removing waste fly-tipped on bonfire sites lie with District Councils.

Governance Arrangements for Councils

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will implement legislation immediately that makes it binding on local councils to share power with all political parties, on the basis of proportionality, in time for local council annual general meetings in 2008. (AQW 687/07)

Mrs Foster: The development of governance arrangements for local councils will be informed by the review that I will be

leading with Ministerial colleagues of the RPA decisions of the previous administration as they related to local government.

Drainage of Reservoir, Carrickfergus

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to give her assessment of the drainage of water of the reservoir at Raw Brae Road, Carrickfergus, and the potential impact on wildlife. (AQW 695/07)

Mrs Foster: EHS has no historic information on the wildlife present at this location. It is believed that the impact on wildlife will have been minimal. Rivers

regularly experience flood events and their wildlife usually recovers quickly.

I am advised that DARD Rivers Agency has no statutory remit in the control of water in reservoirs or the potential impact on wildlife.

Rivers Agency is aware of incidents when large quantities of water were discharged to the designated Slaughtersford-Water river from this small reservoir. However, it does not consider that these incidents have caused any lasting damage to the drainage function of the watercourse.

Water Framework Directive

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the proposal to maximise public participation in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive; and to detail her plans to ensure full public participation in water management issues. (AQW 719/07)

Mrs Foster: I received these proposals from the Freshwater Task Force and welcome the interest shown by it in Water Framework Directive implementation matters. The proposals are currently under consideration and will be responded to in due course. I am also aware that the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the Republic of Ireland is also considering the same proposal.

My Department is committed to encouraging the active involvement of all interested parties in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. Regular meetings take place of the WFD Stakeholder Forum, which includes representatives of a broad range of non governmental organisations; local-level Catchment Stakeholder Groups are being established, reports on important issues affecting our water environment are published and public consultation takes place on policy and legislation designed to protect and enhance our environment. The recent publication for public comment of the reports on Significant Water Management Issues is likely to serve as a catalyst for further active involvement by the public in WFD issues.

Eelgrass at Island Hill

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to explain the enhanced growth of eelgrass at Island Hill, near Comber, in the last year. (AQW 763/07)

Mrs Foster: I am not aware of any enhanced growth of eelgrass at Island Hill. Environment and Heritage Service will conduct a condition assessment of all of Northern Ireland eelgrass beds in 2009 as part

of its 6 yearly monitoring of Natura 2000 sites, of which this part of Strangford Lough is one. This will enable us to determine how far the Island Hill site has recovered utilising 2003 baseline data.

Motorcycle Track at Nutts Corner

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of the Environment what action she will take, with respect to the motorcycle track at Nutts Corner Road, that has recently been developed without planning permission. (AQW 806/07)

Mrs Foster: This motor-cycle track is currently under investigation as a breach of planning control. The owners of the land have been identified and have been asked to rectify the breach of planning control. It could compromise any potential action through the Courts to provide further detailed information on the particular stage in the enforcement process which this case has reached.

Protection of Wild Birds

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what measures she will introduce to stop trees being cut down during the nesting season, if there is the possibility that birds are nesting. (AQW 815/07)

Mrs Foster: The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 already gives full legal protection to all wild birds and also protects them by making it an offence to intentionally damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird whilst that nest is in use or being built.

The Wildlife Order is currently being reviewed and the effectiveness of the protection afforded to wild birds during the nesting season will be considered as part of this Review.

Pollution Caused by Burning Tyres

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any information regarding the pollution caused by the burning of tyres; and if she has any plans to prevent tyres being burnt in public. (AQW 824/07)

Mrs Foster: Waste tyres are extremely combustible and produce thick clouds of sulphurous black smoke. This smoke results in high levels of particulate pollution and may contain up to fifty toxic components. Due to the poor combustion conditions when tyres are burnt in the open air, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and dioxins are also produced.

The Environment and Heritage Service has targeted the disposal of waste tyres on bonfires and continues

to work towards reducing the number of tyres disposed of illegally, through auditing producers of waste tyres, and by enforcing waste legislation where evidence is obtained of illegal dumping from commercial premises.

The Environment and Heritage Service does not have the powers to remove waste from bonfire sites. This falls within the remit of the District Councils, who are also responsible for the control of smoke emissions.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her response to the recent review calling for the setting up of an independent Environmental Protection Agency. (AQW 842/07)

Mrs Foster: The independent Review of Environmental Governance was commissioned under Direct Rule. Its recommendations touch on the responsibilities of a range of Executive Ministers and other authorities.

I will carefully consider my approach to environmental governance and make proposals to the Executive Committee. In so doing, I will take full account of the Review's recommendations and of resource considerations. I will discuss the way forward with my Ministerial colleagues, the Environment Committee and other stakeholders. It is important to ensure that the right decisions are made and this will take some time.

At present I remain open minded about proposals for an independent Environment Protection Agency.

Arthritis Treatment Centre

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, further to her reply to AQW 655/07, to detail her position on the proposed amendment to the previously approved building, to include the arthritis treatment centre which will be the direct use of the renewable heat produced by the previously approved Biomass (CHP) system. (AQW 868/07)

Mrs Foster: A refusal notice outlining the specific reasons for refusal was issued from the Ballymena Divisional Planning Office on 25th May 2007.

The Department does not deem the proposed use, even within the approved Biomass building, to be a use acceptable in the rural area. The sustainable aspects of the proposal have not been regarded as outweighing the other strict planning policies which exist to protect the countryside from unacceptable development or inappropriate use.

The applicant does, of course, have the opportunity to appeal the decision with the Planning Appeals

Commission within 6 months of the date of the refusal notice.

Illegal Dumping of Waste

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment if she is satisfied with the current arrangements for the remediation and removal of hazardous waste, arising from the illegal dumping of waste originating in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 74/07)

Mrs Foster: Waste illegally dumped in Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland is mainly from households. It is not legally defined as 'hazardous' but nevertheless presents a high risk of pollution of the environment and a risk to human health.

There is already good co-operation between the authorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. My officials are currently exploring with their counterparts the available mechanisms for the removal of this illegally deposited waste.

Road Traffic Laws

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to outline progress in harmonising road traffic laws and penalties between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 187/07)

Mrs Foster: While there is no specific programme of harmonisation of traffic laws and penalties between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the framework of road traffic and transport regulation in both jurisdictions is defined very largely by EC directives, and my Department is responsible for transposing these into domestic law. Work is ongoing to introduce mutual recognition of driving disqualifications, and a study on further opportunities for cooperation has been commissioned.

Marine Act

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment what co-operation has taken place, and will take place in the future, between her department, Westminster departments and the other devolved governments in preparation for a Marine Act. (AQO 189/07)

Mrs Foster: My officials have been working closely with other UK administrations in the development of the proposals for a Marine Bill and their possible application to Northern Ireland. I also had a meeting in London on 18 June with the Defra Secretary of State and Ministers from the other devolved administrations to discuss a wide range of issues including marine management.

Planning Service

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications submitted to the Planning Service in February and March 2006; and to detail the number of these applications which were not validated until 16 March 2006 or later. (AQO 161/07)

Mrs Foster: 2,922 applications were received by the Planning Service during February 2006 and 4,279 during March.

1,393 applications were validated after 16 March 2006. Of these, 380 were received by the Planning Service on or before 16 March.

Identity Checks for Driving Tests

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what identity checks are in place for learner drivers sitting the driving theory and practical tests. (AQO 141/07)

Mrs Foster: At check-in for the theory test, candidates are required to provide a photocard driving licence. If a candidate does not have or cannot produce their photocard driving licence, he or she MUST present both the licence paper counterpart AND one of the approved forms of photographic identification as follows:

Passport, Employers Identity Card, Trade Union Card, Cheque Guarantee Card or Credit Card (containing a photograph); or

A photograph signed by an approved person. The original documents must be presented as photocopies and faxes are not accepted. Driving licences are examined to establish authenticity and establish the identity of the candidate. The candidate's signature is captured electronically and compared with the signature on their licence or approved form of identification. A candidate who does not provide the appropriate identification cannot sit the test.

At the commencement of the practical driving test appointment, the candidate is asked to sign an insurance declaration. DVA's driving examiner then examines the candidate's driving licence and compares the signature on the licence with the signature on the declaration. If a licence is defaced or altered the test will not proceed.

If a candidate does not have or cannot produce their photocard driving licence, other forms of acceptable identification are the same as I have outlined for the theory test.

With all forms of acceptable ID the candidate must be clearly recognisable from the photograph presented.

The original documents must be presented as photocopies and faxes are not accepted.

Processing Planning Applications of Economic Significance

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment what assistance is in place to help businesses and foreign direct investors to speed up planning applications. (AQO 191/07)

Mrs Foster: Over the last 4 years my Department has been engaged in a comprehensive reform and modernisation programme which has looked at all aspects of the planning system. This includes aligning structures within the Planning Service to improve delivery, working with consultees on improving performance, reforming planning legislation and developing new IT systems to support the process.

One of the outcomes of this programme of reform and modernisation has been the creation within Planning Service of a new division to focus specifically on planning applications which are of social or economic significance to Northern Ireland. A further outcome has been the introduction of a protocol for dealing with such applications – a protocol which focuses on front-loading the planning process with constructive pre-application discussions and pro-active management of applications through the planning system. This protocol is already paying dividends, as experience with the Coca Cola and IKEA planning applications has demonstrated.

All of these arrangements are of course a necessary but not quite a sufficient requirement for speeding up the processing of major planning applications. It is important to emphasise that an application can only pass through the planning process as quickly as the quality of the application and its supporting information will allow. To this end, there is clear onus on the applicant to ensure that any application is well prepared and that it is accompanied from the outset by all of the information that is necessary to determine it.

Advanced Driving Courses

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of the Environment if she is satisfied with the provision of advanced driving courses for those who have just passed their test. (AQO 175/07)

Mrs Foster: The provision of advanced driver training throughout the UK is currently under review, along with all aspects of driver training and testing. Whilst there is currently no legislative requirement for advanced training in Northern Ireland, private initiatives such as the advanced driving tests conducted by the Institute of Advanced Motorists and ROSPA are available here. In addition a privately operated scheme known as Roadwise is available to encourage drivers to take advanced training. I have announced my

intention to initiate a review of road safety and this is an issue I will wish to consider.

Open Cast Mining in Glenarm

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment if she will make a statement on the suitability of proposed sites for open cast mining in Glenarm, and other areas of the glens of Antrim which rely heavily on tourism. (AQO 154/07)

Mrs Foster: In relation to minerals developments my Department applies the relevant policies contained in the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland.

In considering the suitability of sites within areas such as the Glens of Antrim Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Policy MIN 1 Environmental Protection and Policy MIN 2 Visual Implications are of particular relevance.

The policies for mineral developments not only recognise that it is a fact of geology that scenic areas such as AONBs contain workable reserves but also that mineral workings can have significant environmental impacts.

My Department will therefore balance the case for a particular mineral working proposal against the need to protect and conserve the environment, taking account of all relevant environmental, economic and other considerations, including statutory designations and advice from other Departments, including DETI which has responsibility for the promotion of tourism.

It should also be noted that minerals proposals, particularly those in sensitive locations will be subject to the Environmental Assessment Regulations.

Road Safety

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the nature of co-operation with the Minister for Regional Development on the issue of road safety. (AQO 169/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department works closely with DRD and the PSNI to coordinate delivery of the road safety strategy, ensuring cohesive and complementary road safety education, enforcement and engineering activities.

This partnership is working well and is making a significant contribution to casualty reduction.

However, there is much more that we can do, and I have instructed officials to instigate a full review of the road safety strategy. I am meeting with the DRD Minister and the PSNI early next month to decide how the review should be taken forward.

Environmental Stewardship in Schools

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment what measures she intends to put in place to ensure co-operation between herself and the Minister of Education in promoting responsible environmental stewardship in schools. (AQO 181/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service, already promotes environmental stewardship in schools. Since 2002, the Environment and Heritage Service has delivered curriculum-based environmental education programmes to 5,300 school groups, comprising some 78,000 children at our various sites.

EHS has contributed significantly to the revised Curriculum for Primary Schools, to be implemented from September 2007, which has the development of a young person as a contributor to the economy and the environment, as one of its three key objectives.

EHS also works in partnership with many voluntary groups to deliver environmental education. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has been very active in this area; and I had the pleasure, only last week of seeing an outstanding presentation from a number of schools as part of the RSPB initiative.

The Environmental Education Forum which includes officials from both my Department and the Department of Education, promotes environmental education. Last year, the Forum provided training for 650 trainee teachers in education for sustainable development.

In addition, it is intended that 25% of our schools will achieve Eco-schools accreditation by 2009. This target was included in the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy, published last year.

Areas of Village or Townscape Character

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of the Environment what proposals exist to ensure that all departments take account of Areas of Village or Townscape Character status, when carrying out public works. (AQO 166/07)

Mrs Foster: Planning Policy Statement 6 (PPS 6) - Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage and its subsequent Addendum sets out my Departments policies for Areas of Townscape/Village Character.

These policies together with the provisions of the development plan are material considerations in the determination of individual planning applications and appeals for proposed development, including public works, within an ATC/AVC.

In processing planning applications within ATC/AVCs the key consideration for the Department will be to ensure that development proposals respect the

appearance and qualities of each townscape area and maintain or enhance their distinctive character. My Department has no additional proposals in relation to Areas of Townscape/Village Character.

Plastic Bag Levy

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what evaluation she has made of the impact of the plastic bag levy in the Republic of Ireland; and if she has had any discussions on this matter with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 152/07)

Mrs Foster: I have not made any evaluation of the impact of the plastic bag levy in the Republic of Ireland although I am aware that, with effect from 1 July this year, the levy will increase from 15 cents to 22 cents per bag in an attempt to counteract a gradual increase in the use of bags over recent years. I have not had any discussions on this matter with my Republic of Ireland counterpart.

National Parks

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of the Environment if she intends to expand the number of National Parks in Northern Ireland. (AQO 142/07)

Mrs Foster: There are currently no National Parks in Northern Ireland.

I will consider the issue of National Parks very carefully before making any decisions.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Staffing Levels at Rates Offices

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide details of staffing levels and case load at Rates Offices and to make a statement on performance pressures. (AQW 758/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): Housing Benefit applications are handled only in the Land & Property Services Agency's Housing Benefit central unit based in Londonderry House, Belfast.

At 1 April 2006 there were 36 staff employed in the central unit and by 31 March 2007 there were 60 staff in post.

In the period 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 some 19,000 new applications for Housing Benefit were received, resulting in a total of some 52,000 owner occupiers entitled to Housing Benefit.

The Agency has experienced performance pressures as a result of ongoing work necessary to implement a new IT system to handle rate collection together with Housing Benefit and rate relief, which has led to delays in issuing refunds of Housing Benefit. The Agency, in cooperation with its IT supplier, is working hard to resolve all outstanding difficulties and clear backlogs of benefit assessments and subsequent refunds.

Rate Rebate Applications

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide details of the number of outstanding rate rebate applications (a) per District Council area and/or constituency; and (b) per Rates Office; and if he will indicate the numbers of such cases which have taken longer than six months to process.

(AQW 759/07)

Mr Robinson: Applications for assistance with payment of rates are processed through the Housing Benefit scheme and are handled centrally in the Land and Property Services Housing Benefit central unit based in Londonderry House, Belfast.

The number of outstanding Housing Benefit cases on a District Council basis, including those outstanding longer than six months, is set out in the table attached.

Council Area	Number Outstanding	6 Months plus
Antrim	130	10
Ards	224	13
Armagh	180	14
Ballymena	149	5
Ballymoney	68	7
Banbridge	111	7
Belfast	801	54
Carrickfergus	93	4
Castlereagh	163	19
Coleraine	154	15
Cookstown	97	6
Craigavon	189	18
Derry	306	19
Down	166	15
Dungannon	183	17
Fermanagh	167	13
Larne	101	6
Limavady	99	10
Lisburn	244	12

Council Area	Number Outstanding	6 Months plus
Magherafelt	149	8
Moyle	42	4
Newry & Mourne	341	28
Newtownabbey	197	14
North Down	146	13
Omagh	157	8
Strabane	129	9
Total	4786	348

Heating in Stormont Estate

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress made in the installation of a Combined Heat and Power based heating system to heat buildings in Stormont Estate.

(AQW 862/07)

Mr Robinson: This project originated in late 2003 but did not proceed, pending development of Workplace 2010. A review of the proposal in February 2006, when the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund was launched, concluded that Combined Heat and Power was no longer viable due to changes in fuel prices. As an alternative, this review also identified opportunities for stand-alone biomass units around Stormont Estate and adjacent buildings, some of which are now being developed.

Revaluation of Non-Domestic Property

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he plans to carry out a re-evaluation of non-domestic property in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1168/07)

Mr Robinson: The next revaluation will take effect in 2010. However, business ratepayers should be aware that this measure is not a reform of the system. There will be no change to the basis of valuation and the exercise will be revenue neutral.

EU Funding Compensation

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he is seeking European Union funding, under EQUAL 2007-2013, to provide compensation to those unsuccessful in the recruitment competition for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as a result of the 50/50 recruitment policy.

(AQO 133/07)

Mr Robinson: There is no EU EQUAL Community Initiative Programme for 2007-13.

Meetings with other Finance Ministers

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to meet his Ministerial colleagues with responsibility for finance in other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQO 148/07)

Mr Robinson: I recognise that it is beneficial to meet with Ministerial colleagues from other parts of the UK, as there are various issues of common interest and concern.

In this context, I met with the UK Euro Ministers on the 6th of June regarding the UK and its policy on the Euro.

On the 9th of July I will attend a meeting of Finance Ministers from the three devolved administrations with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. These meetings provide a regular forum discussion and consideration of issues of common concern.

I am also planning to meet bilaterally with the Scottish Minister in the near future.

Financial Subvention to Northern Ireland

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the scale of the current financial subvention to Northern Ireland from the UK Treasury. (AQO 170/07)

Mr Robinson: Unfortunately because of the time-lags involved in obtaining data from HM Treasury, the most recent calculation of a subvention or fiscal deficit is for the 2003-04 financial year. This figure stood at £7 billion – the shortfall between total public expenditure attributed to Northern Ireland and revenue collected.

However a consideration of the growth in public expenditure since 2003-04 would suggest that the fiscal deficit has increased to £8 billion by 2006-07

Sale of Land for Social Housing

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will review arrangements for selling land, so that the proceeds of land sold by the Department for Social Development can be used for social housing. (AQO 193/07)

Mr Robinson: The proceeds from the disposal of assets, including land, by any department remain in NI for use on public services here. It is important that decisions on such reinvestment are taken collectively by the Executive, in the context of strategic priorities and available resources.

Civil Service Recruitment

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a breakdown of recruitment to the Civil Service, by religion and gender, for each of the Northern Ireland government departments, for each of the last five years. (AQO 153/07)

Mr Robinson: I am placing in the Library a table providing the information requested. The figures include all permanent, temporary, non-industrial and industrial appointments. The breakdown by gender shows that more females than males have been appointed over the period. In terms of community background, fewer Protestants than Roman Catholics have been appointed over the last five years.

Regional Economic Strategy

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the development of the Regional Economic Strategy. (AQO 179/07)

Mr Robinson: The formal consultation period on the draft Regional Economic Strategy concluded on 19 April 2007. There were 23 responses in total. Key issues flagged up included the need for local fiscal measures, a greater role for local government and the importance of dispersing economic activity beyond the greater Belfast area. The Strategy redrafting will now await the outcome of the Varney Review.

Additional Funding for Northern Ireland

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will provide details of additional funding being received by Northern Ireland, over the next four years, as part of the political settlement. (AQO 143/07)

Mr Robinson: Discussions on the content of the financial package are ongoing, and thus at this stage it is not possible to be specific as regards the final outcome. The latest position on offer from the Chancellor was set out in his Written Statement to the House of Commons on 8 May 2007. I have placed a copy of this in the Library.

Public Sector Share of GDP

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to comment on the public sector share of Northern Ireland's Gross Domestic Product. (AQO 176/07)

Mr Robinson: Public sector spend in the local economy is estimated to be equivalent to 71 per cent

of regional GDP in 2005-06 – higher than the UK average of 43 per cent

However, it is important to note that the local public sector is not overly large when assessed as a proportion of the local population. It is the relatively small private sector that gives rise to the perception of a highly dominant public sector.

Decentralisation of Public Sector Jobs

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to decentralise public sector jobs to areas west of the river Bann.

(AQO 150/07)

Mr Robinson: The consultation on ‘The Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland’ which closed on 30 April 2007 is the first step in developing a framework which would facilitate future decision-making on the location of public sector jobs. The analysis and summary of the consultation responses has now been completed and the next stage will be to discuss the matter further with the Executive Committee.

Take-Up of Rate Reliefs

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are his plans to bring forward proposals to increase the take-up of existing rate reliefs.

(AQO 147/07)

Mr Robinson: I am very keen to make sure that all those entitled to get assistance with paying their rate bills are made aware of the help that is available through the various relief schemes and that they are encouraged and helped to make application. Work is already underway to encourage and increase the take-up of reliefs through a targeted public information campaign and continuation of the existing take-up strategy for Housing Benefit. To this end, Land & Property Services are working in partnership with a range of organisations including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Social Security Agency, the Department of Social Development and the voluntary and advisory sector.

While it is too early at this stage to give a substantive report on take-up for 2007/2008 so far, this is being carefully monitored and will be reviewed as soon as possible to identify if, and where, additional steps may be needed.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to ensure that the content and conclusions of the OFMDFM report ‘The

Cost of Division - A Shared Future Strategy’ are taken into account within the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review. (AQO 167/07)

Mr Robinson: The Executive’s spending priorities and associated financial allocations for the period covered by the 2007 Comprehensive Review, 2008-09 to 2010-11, will be determined through the development of a draft Programme for Government and Budget which is due to be published in September for consultation. In terms of A Shared Future, OFMDFM commissioned research into the ‘Financial Cost of the Divide’ in April 2006. This is a very comprehensive and complex piece of research that the Executive will wish to take time to consider.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Centre, Sion Mills

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he will take to provide a fully resourced health care centre in Sion Mills, County Tyrone. (AQW 595/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): There are no plans to develop a Health and Care Centre in Sion Mills. There have been no proposals put to my Department to suggest this facility is required, or has a priority need.

Medical Cards

Mrs Michelle O’Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps, if any, have been taken to rationalise medical cards, so that those living in border counties can access the nearest available health facility. (AQW 607/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are currently no plans to rationalise medical cards; however, it remains a high priority for my Department to ensure that health facilities are accessible for all NI residents, including those living in border counties.

Funding for Health Care Assistants

Mrs Mary Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when funding will be made available to allow health care assistants to be put in place for the new academic year, so that children with special needs can be admitted to schools. (AQW 610/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Funding has already been made available for the academic years 2006 to 2007 and 2007 to 2008 across all four Board areas to enable health care assistants to be put in place to support school children who have special needs.

Radiotherapists

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of radiotherapists per head of population, and (b) how this compares with the figure in each of the last three years. (AQW 680/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of Radiotherapists (Clinical Oncologists) per head of population employed within the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Services as at March 2007 and in each of the previous 3 years is shown below.

	Radiotherapists per 100,000 Population	
	Headcount	WTE
March 2007	1.51	1.51
March 2006	1.51	1.51
March 2005	1.40	1.39
March 2004	1.29	1.28

Source: Radiotherapists (Clinical Oncologists) Numbers – Belfast Health & Social Care Trust

Population Figures – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)

Civilian Population Mid-Year Estimate (MYE)

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
2. Figures refer to Radiotherapists (Clinical Oncologists) employed at Consultant and Specialist Registrar Grades.

The latest Civilian Population MYE figures are for 2005. These figures have therefore necessarily been used for 2006 and 2007. 2004 MYE figures have been used to determine the 2004 ratio.

Nurses' Pay

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will explain the rationale for the upgrade from one nurses' pay scale to the next, in terms of experience and training, with reference to the Agenda for Change programme. (AQW 707/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Under the Agenda for Change arrangements there is no automatic upgrade to a higher pay band for any staff group. However, nurses who have acquired the necessary qualifications, knowledge, skills

and experience are eligible to apply for a job in a higher pay band whenever vacancies arise.

Ambulance Service Provision

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the current levels of ambulance service provision, in terms of staffing, resources and cover, at the Strabane town and Castlederg facilities; and to outline whether this level of provision will be developed or contracted in the short, medium or long term. (AQW 711/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The current level of ambulance service provision in terms of staff, resources and cover, for Strabane and Castlederg ambulance stations is as follows:

	Strabane	Castlederg
Staffing level	1 x Paramedic Supervisor 5 x Paramedics 4 x Emergency Medical Technicians	1 x Paramedic Supervisor 3 x Paramedics 4 x Emergency Medical Technicians
Resources	2 x A&E vehicles 1 x PCS vehicle	2 x A&E vehicles 1 x PCS vehicle
Cover	Mon – Sun: 24/7 1 x A & E crew	Mon – Sat: 0800 – 1700hrs 1 x A&E crew Mon – Sun: 2300 – 0800hrs 1 x A&E crew Cover is provided by Strabane/Omagh: Mon – Sat: 1700 – 2300hrs Sun: 0800 – 2300hrs

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) currently has no plans to alter the level of service provision in the Strabane and Castlederg areas. However, NIAS is constantly reviewing its service provision to ensure that adequate resources are in place to deal with emergency demand.

Fire Cover in Northern Ireland

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of fire cover in Northern Ireland; and to detail any areas that would warrant further assessment, on the basis of economic growth and population movement. (AQW 720/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In line with developments throughout the UK, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has reviewed the operational effectiveness of its service delivery since 2003 to take account of the changing demands of Northern Ireland's

public and business communities. This process has resulted in the development of:

- an annual review and update of its Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP);
- a 2007/08 IRMP Action Plan, which includes a review of fire station locations and resources in Belfast on the basis of social demographics and economic growth; and
- a Risk Assessment System which reflects nationally agreed standards.

NIFRS also works closely with other agencies such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Valuation and Lands Agency to ensure that the data used is up to date and accurately reflects the demographics and building risks across Northern Ireland.

Malicious Calls to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of false alarm call outs to the Fire Service in the South Antrim constituency, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 721/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) does not collect operational data on a Westminster Constituency basis. However, the following figures have been collated from data provided by NIFRS stations in the South Antrim area.

Calendar Year	No of Malicious/False Alarms Calls
2002	263
2003	232
2004	243
2005	170
2006	140

Fire Related Casualties / Fatalities

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last five years, the number of (a) fire related deaths; and (b) non-fatal fire related casualties, recorded in the South Antrim constituency.

(AQW 724/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) does not collect operational data on a Westminster Constituency basis. However, the following figures have been collated from data provided by NIFRS stations in the South Antrim area.

Accidental Dwelling Fires (Fatalities & Casualties) in South Antrim (2002 to 2006)

Year	Casualty	Fatality
2002	17	1
2003	15	-
2004	13	1
2005	22	-
2006	19	1
Total	86	3

Enniskillen and Omagh Hospital Projects

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will explain the reasons why the Sperrin Lakeland Trust and the Western Health and Social Care Trust have denied UNISON access to documentation (under Treasury rights) on the outline business case for the Enniskillen and Omagh Hospital projects; and why the Trust refuses to respond to UNISON's request for an equality impact assessment of these two projects.

(AQW 737/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Outline Business Cases for both the South West Acute Hospital and Omagh Local Hospital Complex have been made available by the Western Health and Care Trust (and previously the Sperrin Lakeland Trust) to the public and trade unions, including Unison. In line with HM Treasury guidance only those sections which were judged commercially confidential, given the current procurement process underway, have not been made available.

An Equality Impact Assessment (EQUIA) was completed by the Sperrin Lakeland Trust in 2005 and a further equality screening exercise was carried out by the Western Health and Care Trust in April 2007. As a result of this it was decided that a full EQIA should be conducted specifically on facilities management services at the Preferred Bidder stage in the procurement, when the details of facilities management arrangements proposed by the Preferred Bidder, and the effects on staff, will be known.

Omagh and Enniskillen Hospital

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the deal to secure the building of the proposed new Omagh and Enniskillen Hospitals will include an undertaking from the successful private contractor to provide a guaranteed 25% reduction in whole-time equivalent posts.

(AQW 738/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A reduction in whole-time equivalent posts has NOT been stipulated as a tender requirement, either in the Outline Business Case or to the companies bidding to deliver the new facilities in the South West Acute and Omagh Local Hospital projects. Bidders are required only to put forward their detailed proposals for delivering the optimum facilities management services to meet NHS Standard Specifications.

The Trust is assessing the best Value for Money from all bids, regardless of the labour complement within them. Bidder's proposals are being shared with trade union representatives and will be subject to a rigorous value for money evaluation before any decision is reached regarding future service provision.

Key to the evaluation will be the benefits for patients and choosing a service delivery method that provides the best support to deliver quality care.

Health Centre, Omagh

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are his plans to review, and potentially reverse, the decision by the Western Health and Social Services Board regarding the building of a new Health and Social Care Centre for Omagh; and if he will allow the new centre to be built in a central location, according to the wishes of local patients and health care professionals.

(AQW 739/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The inclusion of the Health and Care Centre in the Local Hospital Complex in Omagh is to provide core community services with the aim of achieving a more integrated service in terms of patients more easily accessing diagnostics, outpatients, and related services.

After a detailed area search and analysis of site options, the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital location was selected as the most suitable. The decision was based on a robust appraisal of a range of options based on need and accessibility as part of the Outline Business case process, and involved consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.

Following robust scrutiny of the Outline Business Case by my Department no evidence has been identified which would merit reconsideration of the decision on location for the new Health and Social Care Centre for Omagh.

Type 1 Diabetes

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people that have been diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in each of the past three years; and how many of those

diagnosed have been under 18 years old.

(AQW 742/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Official estimates of the number of people who have been diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes are not available. However, under the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract, the total number of GP-registered patients aged 17 and over with diabetes mellitus is recorded. Table 1 shows the total number of people on the QOF diabetes register in the past three years.

	Number of patient on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over)
As at 14 February 2005	51,541
As at 14 February 2006	54,950
As at 14 February 2007	56,924

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS).

In addition, a 2005 study¹ by Ireland and Northern Ireland's Population Health Observatory has made estimates of the expected number people with diabetes, that is, those diagnosed plus those undiagnosed. This study estimated that in Northern Ireland in 2005, the expected number of those aged 20 years and over with Type 1 diabetes was 4,776. The study also estimated that the expected number of the population aged 0-19 years with Type 1 diabetes, most commonly diagnosed in children and adolescents, was 992.

References: ¹ Making Diabetes Count: First Report of The Irish Diabetes Prevalence Working Group, Ireland and Northern Ireland's Population Health Observatory (INIsPHO), Institute of Public Health in Ireland, April 2006. Available from www.publichealth.ie.

Leukaemia

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people that were diagnosed with leukaemia in each of the last three years.

(AQW 743/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The table below details the number of incidences of leukaemia (ICD-10 C91-C95) in Northern Ireland for the last three years available.

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF LEUKAEMIA BY YEAR OF DIAGNOSIS: 2002-2004

2002	2003	2004
178	122	145

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Exemptions to Smoking Ban

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will outline the exemptions to the smoking ban in public places or places of work. (AQW 744/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Smoke-free legislation applies to most enclosed and substantially enclosed public places and workplaces in Northern Ireland. Limited exemptions are available, primarily in premises which represent one person's home, whether permanently or temporarily, and another's workplace. The exemptions available include a designated bedroom in a hotel or guest house, and a designated room used as accommodation for persons aged 16 or over in a residential care home or nursing home. Prisons, young offenders' centres and remand centres are also exempt but are covered by prison rules.

The exemptions are set out in The Smoke-free (Exemptions, Vehicles, Penalties and Discounted Amounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007, copies of which have been placed in the Assembly Library. The Health Promotion Agency's "Space to Breathe" website www.spacetobreathe.org.uk contains helpful information about smoke-free legislation.

Type 2 Diabetes

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people that have been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in each of the last three years; and how many of those diagnosed were under 18 years old. (AQW 745/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Official estimates of the number of people who have been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes are not available. However, under the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract, the total number of GP-registered patients aged 17 and over with diabetes mellitus is recorded. Table 1 shows the total number of people on the QOF diabetes register in the past three years.

	Number of patient on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over)
As at 14 February 2005	51,541
As at 14 February 2006	54,950
As at 14 February 2007	56,924

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS).

In addition, a 2005 study¹ by Ireland and Northern Ireland's Population Health Observatory has made estimates of the expected number people with diabetes, that is, those diagnosed plus those undiagnosed. This study estimated that in Northern Ireland in 2005, the

expected number of those aged 20 years and over with Type 2 diabetes was 62,287. No estimates have been made of the expected number of the population aged 0-19 years with Type 2 diabetes. Type 2 diabetes usually occurs in older people although it is becoming more common amongst younger people, partly due to lifestyle factors such as diet, lack of physical activity and obesity.

References: ¹ Making Diabetes Count: First Report of The Irish Diabetes Prevalence Working Group, Ireland and Northern Ireland's Population Health Observatory (INIsPHO), Institute of Public Health in Ireland, April 2006. Available from www.publichealth.ie.

Young Carers

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional support he intends to put in place to support children who are acting as carers for their parents and/or guardians. (AQW 747/07)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has allocated an additional £400,000 per annum, from 2005/06, on a recurrent basis to Health and Social Services (HSS) Boards to be earmarked to provide flexible and responsive services for all carers.

The HSS Boards have also submitted a proposal for an additional £0.5m from the Children and Young People funding package to bring consistency and uniformity in relation to assessments for, and services to, young carers through a new regional initiative. Additional allocations under the funding package will be considered by the Executive in due course in the context of its overall spending priorities.

Asylum Seekers and Illegal Immigrants

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provisions are available through the National Health Service to protect the health of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants in Northern Ireland. (AQW 768/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Immigration and Nationality is a reserved matter and therefore falls within the responsibility of the Home Office rather than my Department or the Northern Ireland Executive.

The current position is that asylum-seekers are entitled to care under the health service while their application to remain in Northern Ireland is being processed. Should their application be unsuccessful then they would no longer be entitled to receive free health care.

Any person who has overstayed their visa period or entered the country illegally is not entitled to free health care. There is, however, an exemption to this in relation to “emergency care” and any “immediately necessary care” to stop a condition becoming life-threatening. In addition, treatment for communicable diseases such as Tuberculosis can also be carried out free, because of their potential impact on public health.

Smoking Cessation Clinics

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, with reference to the smoking ban, the number of smoking cessation clinics available within the Ulster Community Hospitals Trust, in each of the last three years. (AQW 776/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of clinics available within the former Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust in each of the last three years pre-dates the introduction of smoke-free legislation. The information requested is set out below.

2004/05:	20 clinics
2005/06:	22 clinics
2006/07:	49 clinics

Tuberculosis

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to screen all (a) staff; (b) visitors; (c) inpatients; and (d) outpatients, for the type of tuberculosis diagnosed in a member of staff at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. (AQW 791/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Precautionary screening of all those who may have been in contact with the healthcare worker diagnosed as having Multi-drug Resistant Tuberculosis at Causeway Hospital is continuing to determine the likelihood that this infection has been transmitted to exposed individuals. This is in line with national guidelines. However current expert advice is that this is not an easy infection to catch.

As part of this action, all patients and staff who may have been in contact with this healthcare worker have been contacted by telephone and/or letter. They have been advised of the risk and, if necessary, to make an appointment for screening. The Northern Trust is holding special clinics to facilitate testing.

A helpline has been set up from Friday 8th June for the immediate future from 9am to 9pm, seven days a week. This will enable those with concerns to speak to professionals, and where indicated to arrange appointments for screening.

My Department is continuing to monitor the situation with the Northern Health and Social Services Board.

Testing for Tuberculosis-like Symptoms

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding will be made available for General Practitioners in the Causeway Hospital catchment area, to enable them to test anyone attending surgeries with tuberculosis-like symptoms. (AQW 792/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Causeway Hospital is dealing with one case of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis in a healthcare worker. This is not considered to be an outbreak and any additional costs arising from screening and testing of possible contacts will be met from within existing resources.

Tuberculosis Testing

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will undertake to make additional funding available for tuberculosis testing, in light of the tuberculosis outbreak at Causeway Hospital. (AQW 793/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Causeway Hospital is dealing with one case of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis in a healthcare worker. This is not considered to be an outbreak and any additional costs arising from screening and testing of possible contacts will be met from within existing resources.

STARS Early Years Intervention Project

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his department will provide funding to ensure that the pre-school service provided by the STARS early intervention project at Kilrea Health Centre is supported and safeguarded. (AQW 823/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Stars early years intervention project will continue to be supported by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety, through the Children's Fund, until March 2008. Government spending plans after that date have yet to be agreed.

Diagnosis of Breast Cancer

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who have been diagnosed with breast cancer in the last three years; and to specify their age groups. (AQW 850/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The table below details the number of incidences of breast cancer (ICD-10 C50) in females in Northern Ireland by age for the last three years available.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CASES OF FEMALE BREAST CANCER BY AGE GROUP: 2002-2004

Age	Year of diagnosis		
	2002	2003	2004
0 to 29	5	7	6
30 to 34	18	13	16
35 to 39	46	40	47
40 to 44	67	71	75
45 to 49	103	90	115
50 to 54	105	141	137
55 to 59	119	145	125
60 to 64	102	139	148
65 to 69	79	90	107
70 to 74	96	88	96
75 to 79	83	85	95
80 to 84	66	63	85
85 & over	56	63	65
Total	945	1,035	1,117

Notes:

1. Incidence refers to the number of new cases of a cancer diagnosed in Northern Ireland for a particular period.
2. There were 18 males diagnosed with breast cancer between 2002 and 2004. These are excluded from the above table for confidentiality reasons.

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Early Detection and Diagnosis of Breast Cancer

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the examinations and appointments that are available to those people with a family history of breast cancer, to enable early detection and diagnosis. (AQW 851/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Patients with a family history of breast cancer, or a suspected family history, will have an initial assessment of the risk of their developing breast cancer undertaken in primary care prior to referral to appropriate breast care.

Subsequent patient management reflects the assessed risk to the individual. Care may range from follow-up within the breast screening programme for those considered to be at no greater risk than the general population, an annual appointment at a specialist

breast clinic for those considered to have an increased risk of breast cancer or, for those considered to be at high risk, testing for a genetic predisposition to breast cancer and annual review at a specialist breast clinic.

Guidance on the referral of patients with suspected breast cancer or concerns about their family history has been issued to GPs and reflects best practice guidance issued by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE).

Availability of Dedicated Stroke Units

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many dedicated stroke units there are available in each of the health board areas, and what percentage of hospitals have on-site generic rehabilitation units which can be used for recovery. (AQW 852/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of dedicated stroke units available in each health board area, as of 1st April 2007, is shown in the table below.

Health Board	Number of Dedicated Stroke Units Available
Eastern	6
Northern	0
Southern	3
Western	2
Northern Ireland	11

Source: Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Providers

Of the 30 hospitals in Northern Ireland that provide services from the acute programme of care, 47% have on site generic rehabilitation units which can be used for recovery of stroke patients. This figure does not include the dedicated stroke units detailed above.

Support for Informal Carers

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision he is making to support carers, and in particular, to address the growing levels of care that is provided unpaid. (AQW 853/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In recognition of the contribution made by informal carers, and taking into account future changes in demographics, my Department published a strategy for carers in January 2006, which aims to recognise, value and support the important role they play in our society. Carers are entitled to have their needs assessed and have access to a range of advice, training and practical support.

In addition to the additional investment that has already been made, I shall be working to ensure that the needs of carers are reflected as a priority within the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Private-Sector Involvement in the Provision of Public Health Service

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to cap private sector involvement in the provision of public health services, and to detail why no guarantees have been given to staff that there will be no compulsory redundancies. (AQW 854/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no plans at present to cap the extent of private sector involvement. I consider that it is necessary and appropriate to make use of independent sector providers in some circumstances, for example as a short term measure to supplement local capacity to reduce waiting times for patients and the HSC system will continue to involve the private sector where that is in the public interest. It is not anticipated that contracts with the independent sector would lead to redundancies.

On job reductions, I am currently considering the next steps that should be taken in respect of the HSC following the creation of the five new Trusts. There are no plans for compulsory redundancies, and every effort is and will be made by all HSC organisations to provide suitable alternative employment for those staff displaced through the reorganisation of services. However, I cannot at this stage rule out the possibility that compulsory redundancies may be needed. Further clarification will follow as soon as possible.

Diagnosis of Agoraphobia

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an indication of the number of people who have been diagnosed with Agoraphobia in each of the Health and Social Services Board areas; and to outline what support services are provided for people with this condition. (AQW 856/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Accurate figures are not available for the number of people suffering from Agoraphobia because they would normally be treated at primary care level. More severe cases may be referred to clinical psychologists or cognitive behavioural therapists. A diagnostic breakdown would only be made on admission to hospital. However, an admission to hospital, with

Agoraphobia as a primary diagnosis, would be extremely rare.

Availability of National Health Dental Services

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what emergency dental services are available to people not registered with a dentist under the National Health Service or private practices, particularly at weekends, and for those who cannot afford to pay. (AQW 857/07)

Mr McGimpsey: General Dental Practitioners providing health service dentistry have a contractual obligation to ensure that a registered patient has access to urgent treatment outside of normal surgery hours. In addition, the Northern, Eastern and Southern Health and Social Services Boards run relief of pain clinics to provide out of hours emergency dental services for all patients at times when dental surgeries would not normally be open including weekends and public holidays. These services are available to the public whether they are registered with a Health Service dentist or not.

In the Western Board area, all dental practices have answering machines which are activated when the practices are closed and these machines detail the arrangements for emergency care in their area. Many of the practices in the major towns participate in an emergency rota. Normally, dentists operating the rota do not discriminate between registered and unregistered patients.

Normal Health Service charging arrangements apply for this service; however, those who are normally exempt from charges do not have to pay for treatment.

Withdrawal of Ear, Nose and Throat Surgical Services from Omagh

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the reasoning was behind the withdrawal of children's ear, nose and throat surgical services from Omagh, given the lack of 24-hour paediatric cover in Tyrone County Hospital. (AQW 858/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The recent NHS Clinical Governance Support Team's review of services in the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust highlighted concerns about the level of paediatric cover at the Tyrone County Hospital (TCH). In implementing the recommendations from that review steps have been taken to ensure that if a child needs to remain in hospital overnight after an ENT procedure, as is often the case following a

tonsillectomy, they should be admitted to a hospital that has appropriate paediatric cover.

This ensures that if they develop a post-operative complication they are in a hospital that has the necessary facilities and trained staff to respond quickly and effectively.

ENT services continue to be provided at TCH and this includes adult ENT cases, inpatient and daycase, as well children's daycase procedures.

Future Plans for South Tyrone Hospital

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his future plans for the South Tyrone Hospital.

(AQW 859/07)

Mr McGimpsey: As set out in *Developing Better Services*, South Tyrone Hospital will play a key role as a local hospital, providing a broad range of services, including a minor injuries unit, high quality diagnostic services, day procedures, outpatient services, and intermediate care and rehabilitation beds.

An Outline Business Case for the redevelopment of the South Tyrone Hospital site was received by the Department in March 2007. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has been asked to review their proposals for the hospital with a view to establishing the requirements to maintain the existing services

Renal Dialysis Units

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) outline why patients in the Dungannon/South Tyrone area currently have to travel to Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry, for dialysis treatment, (b) give his assessment of these arrangements, and (c) explain why this provision cannot be made available at South Tyrone Hospital.

(AQW 860/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Renal Dialysis is provided in a number of units across Northern Ireland. These are, the regional unit in Belfast City Hospital, and local units in Tyrone County, Omagh; Daisy Hill, Newry; Antrim; Altnagelvin; and Ulster Hospitals. The Southern Health and Social Services Board commissions renal services for patients in the Dungannon/South Tyrone area. These patients are given the choice of accessing renal dialysis units in Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and the Tyrone County hospital in Omagh.

Plans to increase dialysis capacity for the Northern Ireland population are based on the Renal Services Review 2002, which addresses estimated demand to 2010. Increased capacity is being facilitated by the

provision of additional stations in existing units. Renal dialysis is a life-saving specialised treatment required by a relatively small number of patients, currently 666 patients across Northern Ireland. As a specialised service it cannot be provided at all hospital locations. The only new unit planned will be at the Causeway Hospital, although this will not be required for some years to come.

Junior Doctors in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Erne Hospital

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to ensure that the required and appropriate number of junior doctors will be in place to provide sufficient cover for the maternity and obstetrics unit at the Erne Hospital post-August 2007.

(AQW 861/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Six junior doctors will take up speciality training posts in obstetrics and gynaecology in Erne Hospital on 1 August 2007. The number of junior doctors taking up post is in line with previous year's arrangements and is considered to be sufficient to ensure the provision of maternity services.

Psychiatric Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on progress in relation to the building of the new psychiatric unit at the Craigavon Area Hospital, including an assessment of whether the expenditure is on target and within budget.

(AQW 888/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is making excellent progress on the building of the new psychiatric unit, also known as the Crisis Resource Centre, at Craigavon Area Hospital.

Construction work began in September 2006 and the Trust reports that the project is currently running two weeks ahead of schedule and is within budget.

Work is on schedule to meet opening of the new facility planned for early in the Spring of 2008.

Adoption and Fostering Placements

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many children and young people are currently awaiting (a) adoption (b) fostering placement, on a Trust by Trust basis, including age, gender and, how long each is waiting; what plans his department has to encourage more people to come forward to foster/adopt; and to

indicate the waiting time for assessments of prospective parents by social services. (AQW 890/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The statistical information requested is not available centrally.

In July 2006, my Department launched an adoption strategy which proposed a radical overhaul of adoption legislation and adoption services with a view to:

- ensuring that effective adoption support services are available for children and adoptive families throughout the process and after adoption;
- building confidence in the adoption process by establishing an independent review mechanism for adoptive applicants who have had an unfavourable recommendation as to their suitability; and
- tackling delays in adoption.

The Department is also consulting on 'Care Matters in Northern Ireland', a strategy also developed under the previous administration, that aims to further improve services for children in and on the edge of care and their carers through increased financial packages, greater assistance with educational and recreational needs, continued support for children up to 21 years of age, and increased parental responsibility for foster carers. Funding for the initiative is being considered as part of the CSR process.

I will consider the implications of implementation of these new strategies in line with other pressures and commitments.

A Fostering Strategy, developed by four HSS Boards and Fostering Network, was commenced in June 2006. This was underpinned by additional funding of £4m in 2006/07 rising to £6m in 2007/08. £1.2m of this funding was used to increase foster care allowances in Northern Ireland in line with rates in Great Britain following a review carried out there. The strategy also involves the setting up of a regional service delivered by one provider from the statutory sector, responsible for the provision of:

- a 24/7 telephone helpline for foster carers, staffed by experienced foster carers;
- a regional recruitment/marketing service, which will work alongside Trusts; and
- a regional training co-ordinator, to co-ordinate and, where appropriate, commission training for foster carers.

The Department also supports and participates in Foster Care Fortnight and National Adoption Week in association with HSC Boards and Trusts and the voluntary sector. High profile media campaigns take place during these promotional periods to raise the profile of adoption and fostering and increase the numbers of prospective adopters and foster carers.

Treatment of Patients Presenting Neurological Symptoms

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the procedures to be followed when a patient arrives at hospital with a suspected neurological condition.

(AQW 894/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The investigation and treatment of a patient with neurological symptoms is a matter of clinical judgement, and will depend on the patient's condition, its severity and the range of treatments available to manage their particular symptoms.

A patient presenting at hospital with a suspected neurological condition will be assessed, and if appropriate, may be referred to a consultant neurologist for a specialised opinion.

Where a patient has been assessed as possibly requiring neurosurgery they would normally be referred to the regional centre at the Royal Victoria Hospital for the specialised opinion of a consultant neurosurgeon.

Encephalomyelitis Cases

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of encephalomyelitis diagnosed, in each year from 2000 to date. (AQW 895/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of cases of encephalomyelitis diagnosed, in each year from 2000 to date is not available. However, the number of admissions to hospital, where the patient had a diagnosis of Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome (PVFS) is available and is detailed in the table below for each calendar year since 2000.

Year	Admissions ¹
2000	57
2001	79
2002	87
2003	93
2004	90
2005	87

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

¹ Discharges and Deaths are used as an approximation to admissions

Encephalomyelitis

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the professional support services that are in place to

provide information, guidance and support to those suffering from encephalomyelitis. (AQW 896/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Encephalomyelitis is a rare neurological condition in which there is inflammation of the brain and spinal cord usually caused by viral, bacterial, fungal or parasitic agents. The symptoms of this condition may come on quickly beginning with encephalitis-like symptoms such as fever, fatigue, headache, nausea and vomiting, and in severe cases, seizures and coma. It may also damage brain tissue leading to neurological symptoms such as visual loss, weakness and paralysis, and difficulty coordinating voluntary muscle movements.

The investigation and treatment of a patient with symptoms of encephalomyelitis is a matter of clinical judgement, and will depend on the patient's condition, its severity and the range of treatments available to manage their particular symptoms.

A patient suspected of suffering from encephalomyelitis will be assessed, and if appropriate, will be referred to a consultant in neurology. Treatment for encephalomyelitis is targeted at suppressing inflammation in the brain using anti-inflammatory drugs. Additional treatment is symptomatic and supportive.

Treatment of Private Patients

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what procedures are in place to ensure that Health and Social Care Trusts recover the full cost of privately provided treatment; and to advise whether these Trusts have a policy of checking with insurers to confirm that the private patient, and associated procedures, are covered. (AQW 900/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Departmental guidance for the health service regarding the treatment of private patients is covered by its document "The Management of Private Practice in Health Service Hospitals". Hospital consultants are required, under their code of practice, which is an agreement between consultants, the Department and the British Medical Association, to notify Trusts of any patients being treated privately. Private patients are also required to sign an undertaking to pay for the treatment they receive. Trusts have a designated Private Patient Officer, who checks with insurers that the private patient and proposed procedures are covered by his or her health insurance. Trusts set charges for private treatment individually in order to fully recover costs.

Waiting Time for Appointments

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for (a) physiotherapy; (b) occupational therapy; (c) psychiatric treatment; and (d) children's behavioural clinics, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 904/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the average waiting time for physiotherapy is not collected centrally. Information is, however, collected on completed waiting times for a first outpatient appointment of an episode of care with a community physiotherapist, according to time band. This is shown in Table 1 below, for the position during the quarter ending 31 March 2007. The information is not collected according to parliamentary constituency, but is shown in respect of the relevant community or hospital Health and Social Services Trusts in operation at that date.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CLIENTS ATTENDING FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT, BY TIME WAITING FOR APPOINTMENT (QUARTER ENDING 31 MARCH 2007)

Trust	Time waiting			All clients attending first appointment
	Less than 3 months	3-6 months	6 months or over	
North and West Belfast	590	294	10	894
South and East Belfast	503	559	213	1,275
Belfast City Hospital	746	134	60	940
Ulster Community and Hospitals	714	343	1	1,058
Down Lisburn	1,960	547	50	2,557
Causeway	1,687	370	53	2,110
United Hospitals	1,954	719	279	2,952
Armagh and Dungannon	1,106	67	189	1,362
Craigavon and Banbridge	412	40	13	465
Newry and Mourne	1,984	234	14	2,232
Altnagelvin Hospital	1,296	603	8	1,907
Sperrin Lakeland	1,437	83	48	1,568
Northern Ireland Total	14,389	3,993	938	19,320

Source: Departmental Information Return CP3

Note: The service may be provided by either community or hospital Trusts.

(b) Information on the average waiting time for occupational therapy is not collected centrally. Information is, however, collected on completed

waiting times for assessment by an occupational therapist, in respect of those aged 19 and over, according to time band. Figures are categorised according to priority and non-priority cases. The figures are shown in Table 2 below, for the position during the quarter ending 31 March 2007. The information is not collected according to parliamentary constituency, but is shown in respect of the community Health and Social Services Trusts in operation at that date.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF ASSESSMENTS COMMENCED BY HSS TRUST, DESIGNATION AND TIME FROM REFERRAL (QUARTER ENDING 31 MARCH 2007)

Trust	Priority Cases		Non-Priority Cases	
	Number commenced within 2 weeks	All commenced	Number commenced within 3 months	All commenced
North and West Belfast	182	375	88	418
South and East Belfast	610	871	668	732
Ulster Community and Hospitals	219	368	346	552
Down Lisburn	394	763	73	442
Causeway	104	357	7	89
Homefirst	765	1,184	1,372	1,733
Armagh and Dungannon	395	447	83	172
Craigavon and Banbridge	227	392	0	0
Newry and Mourne	61	383	32	113
Foyle	85	225	130	433
Sperrin Lakeland	133	410	17	355
Northern Ireland Total	3,175	5,775	2,816	5,039

Source: Departmental Information Return CP4

Note: All of the assessments commenced by Craigavon and Banbridge Trust are in respect of priority cases.

Information is not available on the average waiting time for psychiatric treatment. However, information is collected on inpatient and outpatient waiting times for a number of mental illness specialties. Waiting list information is collected by time band. It is therefore not possible to calculate the arithmetic mean (average) length of time waiting. The median waiting timebands for (a) outpatients who were waiting for their first appointment and (b) inpatients who were waiting for treatment, in the following specialties: Mental Illness, Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Forensic Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Old Age Psychiatry for the quarter

ending 31 March 2007 are shown in Tables 3(a) and 3(b) below. The information is not available by parliamentary constituency, but is shown in respect of the provider (hospital) Trusts in operation at that time.

TABLE 3(A) MEDIAN WAITING TIMEBAND FOR INITIAL PSYCHIATRIC OUTPATIENT ASSESSMENT (31 MARCH 2007)

Provider Trust	Specialty	Median Waiting Timeband
Armagh & Dungannon	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Armagh & Dungannon	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Belfast City Hospital	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Belfast City Hospital	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Belfast City Hospital	Psychotherapy	0-2 months
Causeway	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Causeway	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Craigavon & Banbridge	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
Craigavon & Banbridge	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Craigavon & Banbridge	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Down Lisburn	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
Down Lisburn	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Down Lisburn	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Foyle	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
Foyle	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Foyle	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Homefirst	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
Homefirst	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Homefirst	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Mater	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Newry & Mourne	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Royal Group	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Mental Illness	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Psychotherapy	0-2 months

Provider Trust	Specialty	Median Waiting Timeband
Sperrin Lakeland	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
Sperrin Lakeland	Forensic Psychiatry	0-2 months
Sperrin Lakeland	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Sperrin Lakeland	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months
Ulster Hospitals	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
Ulster Hospitals	Mental Illness	0-2 months
Ulster Hospitals	Old age Psychiatry	0-2 months

Source: Departmental Information Returns CH3 Parts 1 and 2

TABLE 3(B) MEDIAN WAITING TIMEBAND FOR INITIAL PSYCHIATRIC INPATIENT TREATMENT (31 MARCH 2007)

Provider Trust	Specialty	Median Waiting Timeband
South & East Belfast	Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Forensic Psychiatry	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Mental Illness	0-2 months
South & East Belfast	Psychotherapy	0-2 months

Source: Departmental Information Returns CH1 Parts A & B

(d) Information is not collected centrally on waiting times for children's behavioural clinics.

Time Spent on Counselling and Support Services

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of hours of counselling services and support provided by each Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 905/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Due to the wide range and diversity of counselling, collecting details of the number of hours counselling services and support provided by each Health and Social Care Trust could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Bamford Review

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how the recommendations of the Bamford Review, in relation to service user involvement in the design and delivery of mental health services, are to be implemented.

(AQW 913/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There is increasing recognition through mental health services of the need to involve

service users in design and delivery of services and service users are already involved in some aspects in some localities. It will be for the Inter-Departmental Task Force being set up to oversee the Government's response to the Bamford review and subsequent implementation to determine how service user involvement can be firmly embedded throughout mental health services. The Mental Health and Learning Disability Board announced on the 15th May 2007 will include service user and carer representation and will be another mechanism for giving service users and carers a voice in reforming and modernising mental health services.

Bangor Community Hospital

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that there is no intention to cut the services of, or to close, Bangor Community Hospital. (AQW 920/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There no plans to cut services at, or to close, Bangor Community Hospital.

Funding for Patients and their Families Required to Travel outside Northern Ireland

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what funding is available to support patients and their families who have to travel to England for operations, particularly with regard to flights and accommodation.

(AQW 924/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Funding to support patients and their families who are required to travel outside Northern Ireland (NI) is only available to patients who have been referred outside NI for treatment (as opposed to those patients who choose to travel abroad to seek treatment and make their own arrangements).

Assistance with such costs is the responsibility of the patient's local Health and Social Services Board. Expenses covered include the following:

- Transport – this includes flight/ferry costs; mileage at public transport rate; tube; bus; rail; and train fares;
- Accommodation - A subsidy is paid towards the cost of accommodation. It is expected however, that patient hospital accommodation would be used when available;
- Subsistence - In the absence of alternative arrangements, e.g. provision of meal vouchers, the Boards will subsidise food or grocery expenses;
- Other expenses - Boards will consider other expenses necessarily incurred, upon evidence of receipts, e.g. car parking.

The majority of flights are booked and paid for by the Boards/referring hospitals on the patients' behalf in advance of their travel. If/when these arrangements are made prior to assessment/treatment taking place, staff endeavour to make as complete an arrangement as possible – to include air/ferry, accommodation, train and taxi journeys (when necessary) etc. Every effort is made to ensure a smooth transfer during what is already a stressful time for patients and their family or carers.

Support for Young Carers

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance is currently provided for young carers; and what proposals he has to increase support for young carers.

(AQW 926/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The needs of young carers are assessed by HSC Trusts and a range of services are provided to meet those needs. There are a number of voluntary organisations, such as Carers Northern Ireland and Barnardo's that also work for and on behalf of young carers. The range and extent of the information, support and services available from the statutory and voluntary sectors are contained in a useful A - Z Guide for Carers. A DVD for young carers, produced by Barnardo's with financial assistance from my Department, is also available.

My Department has allocated an additional £400,000 per annum, from 2005/06, on a recurrent basis to Health and Social Services (HSS) Boards to be earmarked to provide flexible and responsive services for all carers.

£0.5m from the Children and Young People funding package has been made available in 2007/8 only to provide services to young carers across Northern Ireland. Future plans for these services will be considered as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Transportation of Patients

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to minimise delays in the transportation of patients between hospitals by the Ambulance Service, in particular to and from Whiteabbey Hospital, Antrim Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital.

(AQW 931/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has existing procedures in place to minimise delays in transporting patients between hospitals.

The new regional Non-Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre (RNEMDC) at Altnagelvin co-

ordinates and consolidates the management of non-emergency patient transport. This is augmented by a new non-emergency command and control system to assess non-emergency patients' needs so that resources can be planned and deployed on a regional basis. The system will also capture and use clinical data to support transport prioritisation decisions based on clinical need and minimise delays for patients with greatest clinical need.

The Regional Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre (REMDC) in Belfast ensures that emergency resources are used efficiently and effectively. REMDC prioritises incoming 999 calls on a clinical basis and targets rapid response to the most clinically urgent, life threatening calls. Protocols have been shared with hospitals for urgent transport requests to enable their staff to upgrade requests to emergency response in line with the clinical priority of the patient.

Tonsillectomy Operations at the Erne Hospital

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to return tonsillectomy operations to the Erne Hospital on a permanent basis.

(AQW 948/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Recent paediatric tonsillectomy operations performed at the Erne Hospital were undertaken as part of a waiting list initiative. At present the Trust has no plans to repeat this, however outpatient clinics will continue to be held at the Erne Hospital.

Adult ENT services, both in-patient and day case, and children's day case procedures will continue to be provided at Tyrone County and Altnagelvin Hospitals.

Adoption

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that all those seeking to adopt children will be fairly assessed and treated on an equal basis; and to ensure that all those referred to under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 will have the right to adopt children.

(AQW 973/07)

Mr McGimpsey: HSC trusts welcome enquiries from all persons interested in adopting children and are mindful of their duties in relation to equality legislation. There is, however, no right for any person to adopt. It is the responsibility of adoption agencies to ensure that only those who are suitable to adopt are approved to do so. They also have a responsibility in law to ensure that any adoptive placement is in a

child's best interests. Ultimately, it is for the courts to decide whether to grant an adoption order.

Attacks on Emergency Services Personnel

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of members of staff in (a) the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service; and (b) the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, who were injured as a result of attacks upon them when responding to emergency calls, for the last three years. (AQW 974/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is shown in the table below.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
NIAS	10	12	30	52
NIFRS	9	7	7	23
Total	19	19	37	75

Attacks on Emergency Services Personnel

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of attacks upon staff of (a) the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service; and (b) the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, when responding to emergency calls, for the last three years. (AQW 975/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is shown in the table below.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
NIAS	51	44	70	165
NIFRS	9	7	7	23
Total	60	51	77	188

Attacks on Emergency Service Vehicles

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of vehicles operated by (a) the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service; and (b) the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, that were withdrawn from service as a result of attacks made upon them when responding to emergency calls, for the last three years. (AQW 977/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is shown in the table below.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
NIAS	4	2	1	7

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
NIFRS	5	9	7	21
Total	9	11	8	28

Respite Care for those with Learning Disabilities

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area, the number of respite care beds available to those with learning disabilities; and the number of these beds that are specifically allocated to those aged (a) 18 years and under; (b) 19-25; (c) 25-50; (d) 50 and above. (AQW 986/07)

Mr McGimpsey: This information is not collected centrally. However, information is collected on the number of residential places available for those with learning disabilities, although these include places which are occupied on a long-term basis as well as those which may be used to provide respite care. The average number of places available in 2005/06 is presented in the table below.

AVERAGE AVAILABLE RESIDENTIAL PLACES SOLELY FOR PEOPLE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY: 2005/2006

Health and Social Care Trust	
Belfast	99
South-Eastern	266
Southern	247
Western	273
Northern	220
Total	1105

Respite Care for Young Adults with Learning Difficulties

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area, the number of young adults aged 19-25 with learning disabilities, who have been assessed as requiring respite care, who have (a) received their full allocation of respite care; (b) received a partial allocation; and (c) received no respite care, in (a) 2005/06; and (b) 2006/07. (AQW 989/07)

Mr McGimpsey: This information is not collected centrally.

Treatment of Alcohol Related Injuries/Illness

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people under 18 that were treated for alcohol related injuries/illnesses at each hospital in Northern Ireland, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1026/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of people under 18 that were treated for alcohol related injuries/illnesses at each hospital in Northern Ireland is not available. However, information on the number of admissions¹, for those aged under 18, to hospitals in Northern Ireland, where the primary or secondary diagnosis was an alcohol-related condition or a combination of an alcohol-related condition and an injury is available and is presented below, for 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 (the latest year for which data is available).

Hospital	Financial Year		
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Altnagelvin	16	14	8
Antrim	18	15	12
Belfast City	17	13	20
Causeway	5	6	<5
Craigavon	17	21	20
Daisy Hill	12	15	12
Downe	12	6	<5
Erne	8	5	10
Lagan Valley	<5	<5	<5
Mater	19	8	<5
Mid Ulster	<5	8	6
RBHSC	5	7	6
Royal Victoria	21	23	25
Tyrone County	9	7	<5
Ulster	18	27	20
Whiteabbey	<5	<5	0
Northern Ireland Total	182	181	155

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

Notes:

¹Discharges and Deaths are used as an approximation to admissions. It is possible that any individual could be admitted to hospital more than once in any year and will thus be counted more than once as an admission.

Figures presented are for those aged 17 and under.

Please note that cell sizes that have a value of less than 5 have been masked in order to help protect confidentiality.

Orthopaedic Treatment

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people on the waiting list for an appointment to see an orthopaedic consultant; (b) the waiting time for such appointments; and (c) the average time between the first appointment and referral for joint replacement surgery, for those patients so referred. (AQW 1045/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on (a) the number of people on the waiting list for an appointment to see an orthopaedic consultant and; (b) the waiting time for such appointments are contained in the table below.

NUMBER OF PATIENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND WAITING FOR A FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY AT 31 MARCH 2007

Waiting time (in months)	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	Total number of patients waiting
Number of patients waiting	7,285	3,471	0	1	10,757

Source- Departmental return CH3

Information on (c) the average time between the first appointment and referral for joint replacement surgery, for those patients so referred is not readily available and could only be complied at disproportionate cost.

Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of GPs in the Derry/Londonderry area who have taken up the training available under the Protective Life Strategy, which has a budget of £300,000 for the provision of such training, in order to address the need for more professional help in identifying people at risk. (AQW 1073/07)

Mr McGimpsey: To date nine GPs in Derry/Londonderry have participated in the new GP Depression Awareness Training programme, which has been developed as part of the roll out of the Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy.

In addition, a further 20 GPs have participated in this training programme from the wider Western Health and Social Services Board Area. The roll out of this training programme will continue as a matter of priority during 2007.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Funding for Roads in Donaghadee

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how much money has been spent on roads in Donaghadee over the last five years. (AQW 612/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised me that some elements of its operational budget including resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc. are allocated on a Section Office basis. However these figures do not give an overall indication of actual spend within the section as sizeable elements of the budget are allocated either on a Divisional basis, or indeed on a province-wide basis. These include major and minor improvement works, traffic management, and street lighting.

Roads Service does, however, undertake an analysis of actual spend during the preceding financial year in each council area, which in the case of Ards Borough Council incorporates the Donaghadee area.

The table below provides details of spend in the Ards Borough Council area during each of the last five years for which information is available.

Council	Functional Area	2001/02 £K	2002/03 £K	2003/04 £K	2004/05 £K	2005/06 £K
Ards Borough	Capital	690	2,879	3,685	1,859	1,785
	Maintenance	3,087	3,216	3,547	3,661	4,307
	Total	3,777	6,095	7,232	5,520	6,092

Strategic Road Improvement Programme

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail additional strategic roads measures that are intended to support job creation/business expansion and increased housing development in the Ardboe, Moortown, Ballinderry, Loup, and Ballyronan areas of the Cookstown District. (AQW 631/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the composition and delivery of its major works programme is consistent with the level of investment proposed under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), published in December 2005. The ISNI sets out a high level view of planned investment up to 2015 with proposals for up to £1.4 billion of strategic road improvement schemes. Around £1 billion of these schemes have already been identified

and Roads Service is currently considering responses to a consultation exercise on a further £400million of major works proposals.

The Strategic Road Improvement Programme is a key component of plans to improve our transport infrastructure and Road Service is focused on progressing these major works schemes which are a catalyst for economic development and provide the means for all citizens to access social and educational services as well as leisure activities.

I can confirm that a scheme to construct a dual carriageway from Castledawson Roundabout to the Toome Bypass and from the Bypass to the start of the M22 at Randalstown is now being progressed through the statutory procedures. Furthermore, the Roads Service Forward Planning Schedule contains proposals for a bypass of Magherafelt and an Eastern Distributor Road for Cookstown, which will provide an alternative route for through traffic, avoiding the town centre.

Road Safety in Finis

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will take to improve road safety in the Finis area of Lagan Valley; and, in particular, if he will consider placing gateway traffic calming measures on the approach roads to the area. (AQW 646/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service identifies the need for improvements in road safety on an ongoing basis. Within Finis, during the current financial year, Roads Service plans to improve facilities for pedestrians by providing a section of footway, to complete a pedestrian link between Finis and Dromara. In addition, a scheme is programmed for 2009/10 to improve visibility on the Finis to Dromara road at its junction with Bridge Road, a short distance outside Finis village.

In terms of traffic calming, Roads Service does not implement these measures for roads to which the national speed limit applies, as is the case at Finis. Typically, measures are considered for roads where speed limits of 30mph or 40mph are in place. Given the rural nature of Finis and the lack of development within the area, the existing national speed limit is considered to be appropriate and accordingly, Roads Service has no plans to introduce traffic calming in the area.

Roads Service will, of course, continue to provide and maintain the appropriate road signs and markings required to warn, direct and inform road users.

Flooding at Station Road, Saintfield

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what steps he is taking to alleviate flooding at Station Road, Saintfield, following a site meeting on 12 March 2007. (AQW 672/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that during a site meeting on 12 March 2007, attended by you and two local residents, officials agreed to arrange for a pipe to be laid under the road to alleviate flooding and that the work would be carried out during June 2007.

I am further advised that, following subsequent detailed consideration, officials have concluded that directional drilling would be the best means of placing the pipe under the road. This will avoid the need for deep excavation in peaty ground and will keep traffic disruption to a minimum.

Due to the limited availability of specialist contractor's plant this will result in a slight delay in the commencement of the work. However, I am pleased to be able to advise that Roads Service anticipates that this scheme will be completed before the end of August 2007.

Distributor Road for Dungannon

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the provision of a distributor road for Dungannon. (AQW 718/07)

Mr Murphy: Following a public inquiry into the Draft Dungannon and South Tyrone Area Plan 2010 in February 2003, the Planning Appeals Commission, having considered both the Department's and the objector's case for an Eastern Distributor Road, recommended that it should not be included in the Development Plan.

Accordingly, the Dungannon and South Tyrone Area Plan 2010, adopted in 2004, does not contain any such road proposal.

However, a number of measures to assist in relieving traffic congestion in Dungannon have been identified in the Sub Regional Transport Plan 2015, published on 11 June 2007. They include widening the A29 Moy Road as well as junction improvements at the Oaks Road roundabout, Circular Road at Northland Row and Ranfurly Road at Perry Street, all of which will be subject to the availability of resources.

Road Drainage System, Clonduff Drive

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to upgrade existing drainage systems in Clonduff Drive, Belfast,

in light of the fact that it has flooded four times in the last 17 years. (AQW 725/07)

Mr Murphy: I should point out that the extreme flooding which occurred at a number of locations in the afternoon of 12 June 2007, was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or road drains. The gullies, road drains and watercourses were overwhelmed by the deluge of rain which fell within a 2 hour period.

With regard to Clonduff Drive, I am advised that the road drainage system was not the cause of the flooding experienced on 12 June 2007. The performance of the underlying drainage systems into which the road drainage system discharges at this location, which includes a storm sewer and the Loop River, are matters for Northern Ireland Water and DARD Rivers Agency respectively. I have therefore passed this reply to the Chief Executives of Northern Ireland Water and the Rivers Agency for their direct consideration.

Traffic Volume, Frances Street, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of vehicles using Frances Street, Newtownards, on a daily basis. (AQW 772/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that my Department's Roads Service collects traffic volume data by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year or for one week in each quarter during the year and an annual average calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's annual Traffic and Travel Information Report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site.

Unfortunately, Roads Service has no traffic census point located on Frances Street, Newtownards and therefore cannot provide the information you request.

Traffic Volume, Kempstones Road, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of vehicles using the Kempstones Road between Newtownards and Dundonald, on a daily basis. (AQW 773/07)

Mr Murphy: As you will be aware, my Department's Roads Service collects traffic volume data by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year or for one week in each quarter during the year and an annual average calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's

annual Traffic and Travel Information Report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site.

Unfortunately Roads Service does not have a traffic census point on the Kempstones Road. It does however have one closer to Dundonald on the Upper Newtownards Road, near the site of the old Quarry Inn. Two-way traffic flow information for the past three years from this site is shown in the table below.

Road No.	Location	Annual Average Daily Traffic		
		2004	2005	2006
A20	Upper Newtownards Road	24270	23080	24214

Traffic Volume, Portaferry Road, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of vehicles using the Portaferry Road, Newtownards, on a daily basis. (AQW 774/07)

Mr Murphy: As you are aware traffic volume data is collected by my Department's Roads Service by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year or for one week in each quarter during the year and an annual average calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's annual Traffic and Travel Information Report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site.

Roads Service has a traffic census point located on the A21 Bangor Road, Newtownards and the annual average daily two way traffic flow information for the last three years at this census point is shown in the table below.

Location	Annual Average Daily Traffic		
	2004	2005	2006
A20 Portaferry Road, Newtownards	11,400	11,520	11,939

Companion Travel Scheme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his reply to AQW 41/07, to provide the estimated annual cost of providing companion free travel, in cases where assistance is required by passengers who are eligible for free travel on public transport. (AQW 798/07)

Mr Murphy: The cost of any companion travel scheme would depend critically on the eligibility criteria

to be used and the definition of the circumstances in which assistance would be required. I therefore do not have an estimate.

Traffic Volume, A22 Belfast to Comber Road

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an estimate of the daily volume of traffic along the A22 Comber to Belfast road. (AQW 800/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that traffic volume data is collected by my Department's Roads Service by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year or for one week in each quarter during the year and an annual average calculated. The results are published in Roads Service's annual Traffic and Travel Information Report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site.

Roads Service has a traffic census point located on the A22 Comber to Belfast Road and the annual average daily two way traffic flow information for the last three years at this census point is shown in the table below.

Location	Annual Average Daily Traffic		
	2004	2005	2006
A22 Comber to Belfast Road	10,770	10,860	11,046

Improvement Scheme, Ballygawley Roundabout

Lord Morrow of Clogher Valley asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the starting date for (a) the new dual carriageway from Moygashel, Stangmore roundabout, to Ballygawley roundabout; (b) the improvements to the A5 Tullyvar road, and (c) the improvements to the A4 from Ballygawley roundabout to Annahilla. (AQW 837/07)

Mr Murphy: The main A4 dualling from the M1 motorway at Moygashel, Stangmore Roundabout, to Ballygawley Roundabout is due to commence on site in spring 2008. The A5 Tullyvar and the A4 Annaghilla road improvement schemes will commence shortly afterwards.

Funding for Water Infrastructure Improvements

Mr Fred Cobain asked the Minister for Regional Development in the absence of an improved financial

package, what plans, are in place to address funding for water infrastructure improvements. (AQW 883/07)

Mr Murphy: In light of the Executive's decision to conduct a comprehensive review of the financing of water and sewerage services, I have announced terms of reference for an independent review chaired by professor Paddy Hillyard. The independent review will address, "the cost of water and sewerage services and how these will be funded". It will report on this aspect by Autumn. The scope of the review specifically includes the investment programme including, "the scale, structure and phasing of investment planned to meet requirements

Unfinished Roads, Bashfordsland, Carrickfergus

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the unfinished roads at the Bashfordsland housing development in Carrickfergus. (AQW 932/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that responsibility for bringing development roads to adoption standard rests with developers and when the roads and sewers are properly constructed to the Departments standards, Roads Service will complete the adoption. Although the developer is primarily responsible for completing the roads and sewers in a development and the Department has limited control over progress, where satisfactory completion of the roads and sewers is not effected within a reasonable time, the Department has powers under The Private Streets (NI) Order 1980 to enable it to complete the necessary work at the developer's expense.

Roads Service is aware of the situation at Bashfordsland and has been liaising with the developer to encourage completion of the works. In the absence of a positive response, enforcement action under the terms of the Private Streets Order was initiated in February 2007.

Prior to appointing a Roads Service contractor to undertake the remedial works it is necessary to identify the nature and full extent of the works that are required. While road surfacing defects have been relatively easy to identify, initial investigations into the condition of the development's sewers have revealed substantial damage and blockages that have prevented completion of the CCTV surveys. Roads Service staff are working closely with Northern Ireland Water colleagues to conclude the sewer investigations as quickly as possible.

It is difficult to accurately predict a timescale for completion of the works at this time, as the full extent of the sewer repairs is not yet known. However, Roads Service is aiming to have a contractor on site immediately following the forthcoming July holiday

period. Roads and sewers will be reconstructed as necessary and, under the terms of the Private Streets Order, the streets will be adopted upon completion of the works. The department will of course be pursuing the developer for the full costs of this work.

Sewage System in Kircubbin

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what are his intentions with regard to the continuation of the sewerage system a further 50-60 yards, towards 94 Rubane Road, Kircubbin.

(AQW 958/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issues raised are operational matters, I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Cullybackey Bypass

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make a statement on the proposed Cullybackey bypass. (AQW 1025/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) envisaged that major road improvements would be focussed on the Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTN) and it did not envisage any significant expenditure on major works schemes off the RSTN, so the affordability of schemes like a bypass for Cullybackey remains a difficult issue.

The land needed for this bypass is currently protected and the adjoining land zoned for housing. Discussions have been ongoing for some time with a potential housing developer about how the land could be developed, while helping to deliver a portion of the bypass as part of the development. These discussions concluded recently with the issue of planning approval for a housing development to include a short section (200m) of the proposed new road. This represents approximately 20% of the overall scheme.

Completion of the remainder of the route may only be considered on a priority basis and subject to the availability of land and financial funds. The scheme is not included in any current Roads Service programme.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Housing

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to address the differential experiences of members of the Protestant and Catholic communities in relation to access to social housing, as evidenced by waiting list statistics. (AQW 669/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I am content that all social housing allocations made by the Housing Executive and Registered Housing Associations are made on the basis of need as determined by the points awarded under the Common Selection Scheme – a scheme that was equality proofed and subject to detailed and widespread consultation. Allocations cannot be made on any other grounds.

The Housing Executive formulates plans and programmes for social housing that take into account supply and demand issues. This effectively targets additional supply into areas with the greatest demand, ensuring that assessed need is met.

I recognise that due to supply and demand issues, people have differential experiences in accessing social housing.

Removal of Building Rubble

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale for the removal of building rubble at no. 42 Windmill Road, Millisle, and to explain why it has taken over three years for this issue to be addressed. (AQW 673/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive undertook a Multi Element Improvement Scheme at 42 Windmill Gardens and it appears that rubble was left in the garden of the property following the completion of the work. The Housing Executive however received no complaints from the tenant and was not therefore aware that there was a problem. The site has now been inspected and the Housing Executive has instructed the contractor for the MEI scheme to cut back grass and remove any large debris, during this week.

Vesting Orders

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of occasions that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has used its powers to vest land for social housing in each of the last ten years. (AQW 690/07)

Ms Ritchie: The number of occasions on which the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has used its powers to vest land for social housing in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Year	Number
1997	1
1998	4
1999	3
2000	1
2001	1
2002	6
2003	4
2004	6
2005	5
2006	2
2007	2

Included in these 35 vesting orders were some 3,800 dwellings in addition to plots of land.

Bonfires

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what action she will take to prevent the building and lighting of bonfires on Housing Executive land in Rasharkin, in order to protect property in close proximity. (AQW 753/07)

Ms Ritchie: Rasharkin is within the Ballymoney Borough Council area and the local Community Safety Partnership Group has set up a bonfire sub-committee to review this issue. The committee comprises representation on an inter agency basis, including staff from the Housing Executive's Ballymoney District Office. The Housing Executive also supports an annual safer bonfire competition to encourage awareness of the health and safety, and environmental, implications of bonfires.

There are currently no bonfire sites situated on Housing Executive land in Rasharkin.

Purchase of Land in Calhame Park, Cloughey

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the delay in processing the application to purchase land adjacent to 19 Calhame Park, Cloughey. (AQW 762/07)

Ms Ritchie: The delay related to the fact that this is a small piece of land which the Housing Executive

identified as having development potential as a site for residential housing. The Executive decided to retain the land and carry out a latent demand testing exercise this year to establish the level of social housing need in the area. The two parties interested in purchasing the land have been informed.

Neighbourhood Renewal Schemes

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each post supported

under Neighbourhood Renewal Phase 2, (a) the nature of the post; (b) the geographical location; and (c) the National Joint Council scale for each post, in each of the Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in North Belfast.

(AQW 808/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is included in the table below. The National Joint Council (NJC) scale provided is the current scale for 2006/2007. (In some instances where the NJC scale does not apply, the relevant pay scale referred to is indicated e.g. NIPPA pay scales.)

(a) Nature of post	(b) Geographical Location Neighbourhood Renewal Area (NRA)	(c) NJC Scale (Point Band)
Community Development Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	SO2 (33-34)
Youth Work Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-27)
Community Centre Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 4 (19-20)
Youth Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-27)
Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	SO2 (32)
Youth Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-27)
Deputy Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 1(4-5)
Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	SO1 (32-33)
Administrator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5 (22-23)
Information Technology Tutor	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-27)
Childcare Manager	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	SO (31-32)
Childcare Supervisor	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale3 (16-17)
Childcare Asst	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale1 (6-8)
Childcare Asst	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale1 (6-8)
Administrator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 1 (1-4)
Director	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	PO3 (38-39)
Office Manager	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 4 (20-21)
Regeneration Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6 (28-29)
Youth & Community Development Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5(23-24)
Youth Dev Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 2 (13)
Youth Dev Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 2 (13)
Coordinator Childcare	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 4 (19-20)
Deputy Leader	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 1 (10-11)
Training Coordinator	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6(27-28)
Outreach Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5 (22)
Outreach Worker	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5 (22)
Project Manager	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	SO2 (32-33)
Trainer	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5 (22-23)
Information Technology Tutor	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5 (23-24)

(a) Nature of post	(b) Geographical Location Neighbourhood Renewal Area (NRA)	(c) NJC Scale (Point Band)
Centre Projects Manager	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-27)
Parent Support Officer	Inner North Belfast N.R.A	Scale 5 (22-25)
Project Coordinator	Rathcoole N.R.A.	Scale 5 (22-25)
Development Worker	Rathcoole N.R.A.	Scale 5(22-25)
Managing Director	Ligoniel N.R.A	PO1(33-36)
Finance Manager	Ligoniel N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-28)
Admin Assistant	Ligoniel N.R.A	Scale 6(26-28)
Centre/Projects Manager	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG II (32-34)
Centre Manager	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	PO1(33-36)
Child Coordinator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-21)
Youth Worker (1)	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-21)
Youth Worker (2)	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-31)
Project Coordinator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG II (32-34)
Community Development Worker	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-28)
Youth Project Worker	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 2 (11-13)
Project Manager	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	PO3(38-41)
Administrator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-21)
Receptionist	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 1(5-11)
Project Manager	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	PO3(38-41)
Therapeutic Coordinator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	PO.2 (35-28)
Youth Counsellor	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG 1(29-31)
Adult Counsellor	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG1 (29-31)
Coordinator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG 1(29-31)
Outreach Worker	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG II (18-21)
Director	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG1(29-31)
Administrator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 1(5-11)
Community Development Worker	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG1 (29-31)
Development Manager	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG1(29-31)
Development Manager	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	P01 (33-36)
Senior Administrator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-21)
Senior Administrator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-21)
Editor	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-28)
Administrator/Finance	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-28)
Programme Coordinator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG1 (29-31)
Neighbourhood Renewal Worker	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 6 (26-28)
Administrator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 2 (11-13)
Senior Youth Worker	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 4 (18-21)
Youth Assistant	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 1 (5-11)

(a) Nature of post	(b) Geographical Location Neighbourhood Renewal Area (NRA)	(c) NJC Scale (Point Band)
Youth Assistant	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 1 (5-11)
Project Coordinator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	SOG1 (29-31)
Administrator	Crumlin/Ardoyne N.R.A	Scale 3 (14-17)
Manager	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	SOG2(32-34)
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	Scale 3 (14-17)
Community education coordinator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 6(26-28)
Project Co-ordinator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 6(26-28)
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 4(18-21)
Environmental Officer	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	minimum wage
Environmental Officer	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	minimum wage
Environmental Officer	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	minimum wage
Community development officer	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 4(18-21)
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	Scale 3(14-17)
Play Group Supervisor	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	NIPPA scale 23
Play Group Assistant	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	NIPPA scale 12
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	Scale 5(22-25)
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 1(5-11)
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 1(5-11)
Administrator	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 1(5-11)
Advice Worker	Ballysillan/Upper Ardoyne N.R.A.	scale 6(26-28)

North Belfast Community Action Unit

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each post supported by the North Belfast Community Action Unit, (a) the nature of the post; (b) the geographical location; and (c) the National Joint Council scale. (AQW 809/07)

Ms Ritchie: The following table details the posts currently supported by the North Belfast Community Action Unit.

Nature of the post	Geographical location	NJC scale
Communication Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 6 (26-28)
Administrator/Finance officer	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 4 (18-21)
Outreach Capacity Building Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 4 (18-21)
Outreach Capacity Building Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 4 (18-21)
Youth Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 4 (18-21)
Youth Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 4 (18-21)
Co-Ordinator	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 6 (26-28)
Detached Part-time Youth Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 5 (22-25)
Detached Part-time Youth Worker	Ardoyne & Marrowbone	Scale 5 (22-25)
Community Development Worker	Cliftonville	Scale 6 (26-28)

Nature of the post	Geographical location	NJC scale
Co-ordinator	Cliftonville	Scale 6 (26-28)
Administrator	Cliftonville	Scale 4 (18-21)
Youth Coordinator	Cliftonville	Scale 6 (26-28)
Communications Worker	Cliftonville	Scale 6 (26-28)
Co-ordinator	Greater Ballysillan	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator/Finance officer	Greater Ballysillan	Scale 3 (14-17)
Youth Worker	Greater Ballysillan	Scale 5 (22-25)
Fundraiser	Greater Ballysillan	Scale 5 (22-25)
Youth Co-Ordinator part time	Greater Greencastle	Scale 5 (22-25)
Youth Co-Ordinator part time	Greater Greencastle	Scale 5 (22-25)
Co-ordinator	Greater Greencastle	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator	Greater Greencastle	Scale 3 (14-17)
Community Development Team Leader	Greater New Lodge	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Communications Co-ordinator	Greater New Lodge	Scale 6 (26-28)
Capacity Builder Worker	Greater New Lodge	Scale 6 (26-28)
Youth Co-ordinator	Greater New Lodge	Scale 5 (22-25)
Administrator	Greater New Lodge	Scale 4 (18-21)
Co-ordinator	Ligoniel	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator	Ligoniel	Scale 3 (14-17)
Communications & Information Worker	Ligoniel	Scale 6 (26-28)
Co-Ordinator	Lower North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Youth Development Worker	Lower North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Administrator	Lower North Belfast	Scale 4 (18-21)
Detached Youth Hours	Lower North Belfast	Scale 4 (18-21)
Operational Manager	North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Strategic Operations Manager	North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator/Finance officer part time	North Belfast	Scale 3 (14-17)
Administrator/Finance officer part time	North Belfast	Scale 3 (14-17)
Money & Debt Advice Worker	North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Tribunal Worker	North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Development Officer	North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Development Officer	North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Co-ordinator	North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Youth Worker part time	North Belfast	Scale 6 (29-31)
Programme Director	North Belfast	Principal Officer 4 (41-44)
Senior Development Officer	North Belfast	Principal Officer 3 (38-41)
Senior Peace Building Advocate	North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Senior Peace Building Advocate	North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator/Finance officer	North Belfast	Scale 2 (11-13)

Nature of the post	Geographical location	NJC scale
Co-ordinator	Rathcoole	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Community Support Worker	Rathcoole	Scale 5 (22-25)
Youth Development Worker	Rathcoole	Scale 5 (22-25)
Administrator	Rathcoole	Scale 3 (14-17)
Co-ordinator	Upper Ardoyne	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator/Finance officer	Upper Ardoyne	Scale 4 (18-21)
Community Development Support Officer	Upper North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Community Development Support Officer	Upper North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Youth Support Officer	Upper North Belfast	Scale 6 (26-28)
Senior Officer Community Development & Good Relations	Upper North Belfast	Senior Officer 1 (29-31)
Administrator/Finance officer	Upper North Belfast	Scale 4 (18-21)
Director	Upper North Belfast	Principal Officer 3 (38-41)

Social Housing in Ards Borough

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will initiate a strategy, involving the Housing Executive and Housing Associations, to provide new-build and social housing in the Ards Borough, as a matter of urgency. (AQW 816/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has in place a number of robust planning mechanisms that establish locally and strategically the current and projected levels of housing need within each Council area and indeed within each settlement and catchment area. These mechanisms include a formal annual assessment of housing need which is used to develop the Social Housing Development Programme and to inform Planning Service under the remit of PPS12 of such needs so Area Plans and the Planning system can make land available. The annual District Housing Plans currently outline the extent of identified social housing need and the Social Housing Development Programme proposals for addressing that need.

The Housing Executive has submitted formal objections to the Ards & Down and Belfast Metropolitan Area Plans, pointing out a general lack of zoning and provision for social and affordable housing within those plans

Neighbourhood Renewal Programme

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to ensure that any proposed review of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme will not prevent essential funding going to community groups in the Derry/Londonderry area post-30 June 2007; and to detail when the action plans agreed by the Neighbourhood Partnership Boards will be ready for full implementation. (AQW 880/07)

Ms Ritchie: Neighbourhood Renewal works across Government to tackle the root causes of deprivation by ensuring that the needs of the community come first. There are no plans to review this policy. The 6 Neighbourhood Action Plans in the North West have been agreed by the Neighbourhood Partnerships and extensive discussions with Government Departments and Agencies to take forward the implementation of these plans are underway. I expect that agreement to best address the needs identified in Action Plans will be reached well in advance of the end of this financial year. Meanwhile, all community groups, citywide or otherwise, currently funded by DSD providing key services in Neighbourhood Renewal areas will be eligible to seek extension funding. The key criteria will be that they are addressing priority needs in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 6 July 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Northern Ireland Bureau

Mr David Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what direct business input there has been to the management and direction of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington D.C. (AQW 375/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): Economic Development is one of the primary objectives for the Northern Ireland Bureau. The business community is actively involved in the Bureau's management through an informal economic advisory group of business people from both the United States and Northern Ireland, based in the Greater Washington, DC area. Members of this network were consulted in the development of the Bureau's strategy and meet regularly with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Invest NI and Ministers during economic development visits to Washington, DC.

Contract to Draft Legislation

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give details of all private companies under contract to draft legislation on behalf of Northern Ireland government departments; and the total costs incurred due to the use of these companies in each of the last three years. (AQW 585/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Office of the Legislative Counsel in our Department drafts all primary legislation (Assembly Bills) for the Executive's Legislative Programme. Normally the drafting of subordinate legislation (Statutory Rules) is

carried out by officials in the relevant department with the assistance of the Departmental Solicitor's Office in the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The Department for Regional Development employed the law firm Herbert Smith to provide legal advice in relation to the development of the new arrangements for delivering water and sewerage services. This included the drafting of some subordinate legislation but we understand that the cost of this cannot be readily disaggregated from the total cost of advice provided.

Lisburn City Council

Mr Paul Butler asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will examine the reasons why the Equality Commission did not ensure Lisburn City Council's compliance with its recommendations on the Council's policy in respect of flags, arising from the investigation of 4 July 2006. (AQW 649/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has no legal authority to scrutinise investigations undertaken by the Equality Commission under its powers and duties contained in Schedule 9 to the NI Act 1998, except where they relate to Government Departments.

Unemployment and Economic Inactivity

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps it has taken, in legislative and policy measures, to address the religious differential in terms of unemployment, long-term unemployment, and economic inactivity. (AQW 668/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: While we note from the Labour Force Survey 2005 religion report that progress has been made since 1990, we remain committed to tackling the differential experience in unemployment between the two communities and a range of measures both legislative and non-legislative have been put in place to deal with this.

One of the challenges is the need to tackle inequality in the labour market. Key to tackling such inequality is the creation of employment opportunities as a primary route out of poverty and the promotion of equality of opportunity.

New Targeting Social Need has in the past directed resources and effort at those in greatest need as a means of reducing community differentials. Future policy to tackle poverty and patterns of deprivation must continue to be based on objective need. In

addition, a strong framework of fair employment and broader anti-discrimination legislation provides protection from discrimination in the area of employment, including training, recruitment and promotion.

Policy responsibility to help people move towards and into work rests with the Minister for Employment and Learning. Programmes and services for the unemployed and economically inactive are available to all eligible clients, irrespective of their community background.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide a schedule of equality impact assessments conducted by each department, including the number of policies screened out, and those which were subject to a full equality impact assessment, over the past two years.

(AQW 865/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The details requested by the member are published in the annual reports on implementation of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which are submitted annually to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland by each individual Department. Details for 2004/05 and 2005/06 are currently available on Departments' respective websites. Information for 2006/07 is in preparation and will be available at the end of August 2007, when these reports are submitted to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Rural Poverty

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what steps it has taken to identify the extent of rural poverty in Northern Ireland, and what action it proposes to deal with the issue.

(AQW 893/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The preferred Government method of measuring poverty is through the Family Resources Survey. This survey was first introduced to Northern Ireland in 2002/03. The survey is sponsored by the Department for Social Development (DSD). The survey incorporates a geographical marker that allows for poverty levels to be compared on an urban and rural basis.

The most recent year for which data has been published by DSD is 2004/05. Results for 2004/05 estimated that 19% of all individuals live in relative income poverty after adjustments for housing costs have been made. A household is classed as being in relative income poverty if the household income is less than 60% of the contemporary median income level.

In terms of urban and rural, the level of relative income poverty in the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area (BMUA) of 17% compares with 23% in other urban areas and 19% in rural areas.

'Lifetime Opportunities – Governments Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland' (which still has to be formally considered and adopted by the Executive Committee) highlights that while poverty and multiple deprivation tend to be concentrated in urban areas, rural communities are also at risk with high levels of deprivation in less accessible rural areas.

Within the strategy the need, to strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas by supporting farm based non-agri businesses and non-farm small rural businesses in the creation of rural jobs, is recognised. Government commits to work to ensure that rural and fisheries dependent villages and communities in greatest need, are sustained and regenerated and have equitable access to public services and programmes. Government further commits to seek to build a strong rural community infrastructure which will help provide economic and social opportunities for everyone, but in particular, for young people who want to live and work in the countryside.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) vision of a thriving and sustainable rural community and environment means that it is engaged in many activities that will directly and indirectly tackle rural poverty.

DARD is in the final stages of obtaining approval for its 2007-13 Rural Development Programme. This programme will invest over £500m in rural areas over the next 6 years, with the focus on supporting the farming industry, improving the environment, and improving the quality of life in rural areas. The Programme will make a significant contribution to Government's Anti Poverty strategy by supporting initiatives to ensure that, by 2015, the needs of rural communities are met by equitable access to public services and programmes and through programmes which enhance economic opportunities in rural areas and strengthen their social infrastructure.

In addition DARD's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise aims to build up a skilled workforce within the agri-food sector by providing training opportunities for those entering and working in the industry, and development programmes to assist the development of competitive and sustainable farm businesses.

Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many staff surveys were carried out by this department in each of the last two years, and what was the total cost.

(AQW 916/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has undertaken a total of 20 staff surveys in the last 2 years, 14 in 2005/06 and 6 in 2006/07 at a total cost of £750.

Older People's Commissioner

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide details of work undertaken by junior Ministers in relation to the creation of an Older People's Commissioner.

(AQW 947/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: A key concern for Ministers is how best to champion older people's issues and Junior Ministers have been given particular responsibility for older people.

This matter of an Older People's Commissioner was debated by the Assembly on Tuesday 5th June when an undertaking was given to examine carefully the case for establishing such an office.

Junior Ministers will now agree how this assessment should be taken forward and on completion of the work will seek agreement on proposals through the Executive Committee, in consultation with the Departmental Committee.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Tree Felling Licences

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will consider the introduction of tree felling licences. (AQW 814/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): My Department has completed an extensive review of forestry policy which resulted in the publication of Northern Ireland Forestry: A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth in March 2006 and which confirmed future forest policy and produced a strategy for its delivery.

A key recommendation is to regulate the felling of trees so that woodland owners will be compelled to manage their woods with greater consideration to

sustainability, including the timing and extent of felling and the composition of regenerating woodlands.

It will be necessary to amend the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 to give effect to the proposed regulation and I am currently considering this and other amendments to the Act. Once drafted, there will be a formal 13 week consultation period when interested parties will be given the opportunity to comment on the changes and the Bill will also be considered within the Assembly.

Rivers Agency

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Rivers Agency officials are available within her department to address problems in (a) Ards Borough, and (b) Strangford.

(AQW 818/07)

Ms Gildernew: Drainage and flooding problems in Ards Borough and Strangford Council Areas are handled by the Rivers Agency's Eastern Region Office in Lisburn (which covers the Greater Belfast and Lisburn areas)

Routinely 10 industrial workers together with 2 Foremen are available for frontline operations in these areas. These are supervised and managed by the respective Area Engineers and other engineering and technical staff who have broader management responsibilities across wider areas. These frontline staff may be augmented by staff from other Rivers Agency Areas as the scale and nature of an emergency may demand.

Detailed information on the deployment of staff may be obtained from the Rivers Agency's Regional Manager in Lisburn at Telephone 028 92606110.

Fishing Industry

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide figures for those who have been working in the fishing industry in 2004, 2005 and 2006. (AQW 821/07)

Ms Gildernew: My Department gathers information regarding the number of people employed in the fishing industry, including the processing and marketing sector as well as those employed in professions related to the fishing industry in the harbours of Ardglass, Kilkeel, Portavogie and the North Coast ports. Minor ports are not included.

In 2004, there were 1433 people employed full-time and 227 employed part-time within the fishing industry. In 2005, there were 1401 employed on a full-time basis, with 268 employed part-time. In 2006,

1319 were employed in the fishing industry full-time, with 282 employed part-time.

Bird Flu

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, with reference to the recent outbreak of bird flu in Wales, what steps she has taken, and proposes to take in the future, to ensure that Northern Ireland and its agricultural interests are protected from a possible outbreak. (AQW 897/07)

Ms Gildernew: My Department is constantly monitoring developments and reviewing the risk of Avian Flu being introduced to Northern Ireland. A range of preventive measures are in place, which are on-going, to address the risk of Avian Flu entering Northern Ireland and to prevent it spreading in poultry. Surveillance of domestic poultry and wild birds is undertaken. A NI Bird Register is in place to gather essential information about poultry, game and other captive birds for the purposes of risk assessment, disease prevention and control. My Department has issued extensive guidance to bird keepers on biosecurity measures to protect their birds. This is also available on the DARD website.

In response to confirmation of low pathogenic Avian Flu H7N2 in North Wales, my Department carried out an assessment of the risk and took additional precautionary measures to minimise the risk of spread of the disease to Northern Ireland. A temporary precautionary ban was imposed on the movement of poultry from Great Britain to attend bird gatherings in Northern Ireland. Additional General Licence conditions were introduced in relation to imports of poultry and ornamental fowl from Great Britain to ensure protection and traceability were maintained. My Department reiterated its advice that bird keepers remain vigilant for signs of disease and maintain good biosecurity and reminded bird keepers of the requirement to register on the NI Bird Register. These precautionary steps were in proportion to the risk associated with the Wales outbreak. Throughout the outbreak, my Department worked closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Welsh Assembly Government, and in conjunction with NI stakeholders, to monitor developments and to keep the position under review. Very close contact was also maintained with the Department of Agriculture and Food in Dublin.

As regards future steps, it is my intention that the range of on-going preventive measures that is already established in Northern Ireland will remain in place. In addition, my Department will continue to keep the Avian Flu situation and the need for further measures under constant review in proportion to the level of risk.

My Department has a contingency plan in place to ensure that Avian Flu is dealt with quickly and effectively if it does occur here.

DARD Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many staff surveys were carried out by her department in each of the last two years, and what was the total cost. (AQW 915/07)

Ms Gildernew: The following table highlights the number of staff surveys conducted by DARD over the last two years and the total cost involved in conducting these surveys.

Year	Number of surveys	Total cost
2005/06	8	£10,078
2006/07	7	£9,070.50

Staff Employed Beyond the Age of 65

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what facility exists, at present, for members of staff in her department to work in their existing post beyond the default retirement age. (AQW 937/07)

Ms Gildernew: Since 1 October 2006 staff in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development wanting to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised all such applications are approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements). To date all staff in DARD have remained in their existing posts.

Flooding at Killyleagh Football Club

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she will take to alleviate the flooding at Killyleagh Football Club playing fields; and if she will consider providing a larger water pipe crossing the main road in order to help the water to drain. (AQW 941/07)

Ms Gildernew: Rivers Agency is investigating the recent flooding at Killyleagh Football Club playing fields and the scope and responsibility for remedial action. The culverted watercourse crossing the football field (which may have contributed to the flooding) is not designated under the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 and therefore maintenance is the responsibility of adjacent occupiers of land. Rivers

Agency is not yet in a position to comment on the adequacy of the main road culvert but will liaise with DRD Roads Service on this as necessary. Road culvert would be a matter for Roads Service.

Flooding at Killyleagh Football Club

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain why the excess water at Killyleagh Football Club playing fields was not cleared by officials, following their call to the site on Sunday 17 June 2007. (AQW 942/07)

Ms Gildernew: When Rivers Agency officials attended the flooding incident on 17 June they placed sand bags to protect the Club pavilion. The depth of flood waters and the need for further investigation of the complex drainage system affecting the playing fields made it impossible to clear excess water. This was achieved during a further site inspection on 20 June. I would explain that in the initial emergency response to flood reports Rivers Agency's immediate priority is to alleviate risk to life, and damage to built property such as dwellings or, in this case, the pavilion.

Watercourse at Greyabbey

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that Rivers Agency is responsible for the water course that runs behind numbers 2 and 4 Strangford View, Greyabbey; and to explain why her department has stopped cleaning the metal grid that covers the entrance to the water course. (AQW 943/07)

Ms Gildernew: The watercourse in question is not designated within the terms of the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 and therefore Rivers Agency has never had responsibility for maintenance of either the watercourse or the metal grid (grille) that covers the entrance to it. Responsibility for maintenance rests with adjacent landowners. The Agency did however provide an emergency response to reported flooding at this location on 15 June 2007 and, on a one-off basis to alleviate flooding, cleared the blocked grille.

Underspend of European Funding

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, as a consequence of N+2 underspend, (a) the amount of European funding not spent by her department; (b) the amount of European funding transferred to other departments or agencies; (c) how transferred monies were ultimately spent; and (d) what impact this has had on meeting the

outcomes contained within the Rural Development Action Plan. (AQW 965/07)

Ms Gildernew: As a consequence of N+2 underspend my Department:

- (a) did not spend €1,500,000 (EU) and €500,000 (National) from Measure 1.4 of the Interreg programme;
- (b) all of this funding was transferred to either the Department of Finance and Personnel or the Department of Regional Development;
- (c) this money was transferred to other Interreg measures which directly target rural economic and business development projects and the improvement of rural infrastructure in cross-border hinterlands.
- (d) as the reallocated funds remained within the Interreg Programme it was used to achieve the targets contained in that programme such as creating and safeguarding jobs in rural businesses / enterprises.

Use of Meat and Bone Meal

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is his department's policy on the use of meat and bone meal. (AQW 991/07)

Ms Gildernew: The use of meat and bone meal must be conducted in accordance with the EU Animal By-Products Regulation No. 1774/2002, which is implemented by the Animal By-Products Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003. The options for use depend on whether it is considered to pose a high risk to animal and public health, for example, if it contains Specified Risk Material; or a low risk if it contains material that was fit for human consumption. Depending on the risk, meat and bone meal may be used for energy production, as an organic fertiliser, or in petfood.

Bridge Replacement at Aghagallen

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give a timescale for the replacement of the bridge on the laneway to the farm at 109 Cornakinnegar Road, Aghagallen. (AQW 1063/07)

Ms Gildernew: As advised in a letter of 18 June 2007 from officials in DARD, Rivers Agency, there are no plans to replace the bridge. A site inspection by Rivers Agency staff failed to identify any hydraulic reason to replace the bridge. Rivers Agency did not construct the bridge therefore responsibility for its structural integrity and replacement rests with the riparian owner.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Multi -Sports Stadium

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will disclose the reasons why the potential sites for a multi-sports stadium, other than the Maze prison, were ruled out. (AQW 811/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): All the sites submitted for consideration for a Shared Future Multi-Sports Stadium were initially subject to a rigorous technical review covering planning, transport, contamination, site assembly and other related issues. The short-listed sites were then tested against cost, development potential and acceptability to the three sports bodies, Soccer, Rugby and Gaelic. Only the Maze/Long Kesh site was deemed capable of delivering against these criteria. This report will be made available on request.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will make available, in full, all information relating to the selection of the site for the proposed multi-sports stadium. (AQW 812/07)

Mr Poots: All relevant information in relation to the selection of the site for the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium will be released once negotiations with the 3 sports bodies and business planning exercises are completed and a decision is reached. In the meantime, the SIB is planning to release the technical study that covered the deliverability criteria in response to a request it has received under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Lough Neagh

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to work with local authorities to regain ownership of the soil and bed of Lough Neagh. (AQW 906/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has never owned the bed and soil of Lough Neagh. As this Department's only relevant statutory functions on Lough Neagh are restricted to dredging and marking the mouth of the River Sixmilewater, I can confirm that I have no plans to take forward the possibility of bed and soil purchase from its owners.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the organisation responsible for the preparation of the business case for a multi-sports stadium at the Maze; (b) when the business case was completed; and (c) when it was submitted to the department. (AQW 939/07)

Mr Poots: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) were engaged in 2005 on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Strategic Investment Board to prepare an economic appraisal on a multi-sports stadium for Northern Ireland. PwC are currently updating this appraisal and preparing an outline business case. Work on the updated outline business case is well advanced and will be considered by the Department once complete.

Promoting Target Sports

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, further to his answer to AQW 358/07, to detail the target sports that have applied for funding from Sport NI; and when the decisions will issue. (AQW 979/07)

Mr Poots: Sport NI (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. The Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) can confirm that Comber Shooting Club, in conjunction with Hollow Farm Shooting Club, together with Dungannon Rifle and Pistol Club have applied for funding to improve their grounds through the Elite Facilities Competition for Northern Ireland's Olympic/Paralympic Sports.

The decision on who can proceed to the second stage of the Elite Facilities Programme will be taken by SNI's Council at its meeting on Tuesday 4th September 2007.

New Library in Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the total cost of the new library for Newtownards. (AQW 980/07)

Mr Poots: The cost of the new library in Newtownards was estimated, in March 2006, to be in the region of £3.3m. This figure is subject to revision as more detailed costs are identified as part of the ongoing appraisal process.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the Strategic Investment Board has employed the services of external consultants in preparing a business case for a multi-sports stadium at the Maze, and if so, to name the consultants. (AQW 998/07)

Mr Poots: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) were engaged in 2005 on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Strategic Investment Board to prepare an economic appraisal on a multi-sports stadium for Northern Ireland. PwC are currently updating this appraisal and preparing an outline business case for the Multi-Sport Stadium. PwC are also completing a business plan which will assess the operational viability of the Multi-Sports Stadium.

International Football Games

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken, or intends to take, to ensure that international football games can continue to be played in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1020/07)

Mr Poots: Responsibility for ensuring international football games can continue to be played in Northern Ireland rests with the Irish Football Association (IFA) which is the governing body of soccer in Northern Ireland. I am currently developing proposals for a new Multi-Sports Stadium which will meet the future facility requirements of the IFA for international football. In the meantime, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure officials, in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland, are in discussions with the IFA over their current needs for staging international football games in Northern Ireland.

Soccer Strategy

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain why a key recommendation of the 'Soccer Strategy', namely the provision of modern facilities exclusively for football, has not been implemented. (AQW 1021/07)

Mr Poots: Primary responsibility for implementing the recommendations of the 'Soccer Strategy' rests with the Irish Football Association, which is the governing body of football in Northern Ireland. The IFA has developed a facilities strategy for football which is designed to enable more modern facilities to be provided for the game. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), with support from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), is assisting the IFA with the implementation of this facilities strategy. The 'Soccer

Strategy' did not recommend that modern facilities should be provided exclusively for football.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the recruitment process used to appoint the first interim chief executive of the Ulster-Scots Agency; (b) when he took up the appointment; and (c) when he left the position. (AQW 1032/07)

Mr Poots: The first interim Chief Executive of the Ulster-Scots Agency was recruited through a NICS wide trawl notice/interest circular and took up the appointment on 2 December 1999. He resigned from the position as Accounting Officer of the Ulster Scots Agency on 2 August 2001 and retired from the Civil Service on 14 August 2001.

Arts Council of NI and An Chomhairle Ealaíon

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what matters of co-operation and mutual interest have been brought forward as a result of the North-South committee meetings between the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon, during the years 2005-2007. (AQW 1035/07)

Mr Poots: During the years 2005-07 the following matters of co-operation and mutual interest were brought forward as a result of the North-South committee meetings between the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon:

- A joint art exhibition organised at the Glucksman Gallery, Cork, in partnership with the British Council (as part of the European Capital of Culture programme, 2005);
- Consideration of the advantages and benefits of continuing to fund organisations on a joint basis;
- Agreement to review the arrangements for the appointment of members to the board of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre;
- Agreement to jointly fund a curated visual arts award;
- Proposals to encourage north/south touring;
- Agreement to update and upgrade the Arts and Disability Handbook from a printed to an online publication;
- Agreement to co-operate on a joint language and traditional arts initiative (pilot launched May 2007);
- Agreement to support a common position urging an amendment to the rules relating to VAT on non-resident artists' earnings;

- Agreement to support the formation of a literature touring network on a pilot basis for three years.

Soccer Strategy

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to advise (i) at what stage is the 'soccer strategy'; and (ii) what recommendations from the Soccer Advisory Panel have yet to be implemented. (AQW 1044/07)

Mr Poots: The governing body of soccer in Northern Ireland, the Irish Football Association (IFA) has agreed to implement the 'soccer strategy' and is currently doing so with assistance from Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) and the support of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). All the recommendations from the Soccer Strategy Advisory Panel are currently being implemented, but work to date has focused mainly on governance and administration, youth football and facilities.

EDUCATION

Homophobic Bullying

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to ensure that all secondary-level schools have policies in place to deal with homophobic bullying. (AQW 533/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): All schools are required by law to have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils.

The Department's publication 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour' offers detailed guidance, practical initiatives and case studies to support schools to tackle bullying. However, the detail of each school's policy and their approach to tackling bullying of any type is a matter for each school to determine in consultation with pupils and parents.

Within the next few weeks, the Department will be publishing a research report on the nature and extent of bullying in the North of Ireland. This will provide us with further insight into the nature and extent of bullying in our schools and will help us in our efforts to tackle this problem.

Staff Non-Pensionable Bonuses

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline how many non-pensionable bonuses were paid to staff in her department in each of the last three

years; and what steps she has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 640/07)

Ms Ruane: Non-pensionable bonuses can be paid to staff at all grades to reward performance in two ways: (a) as part of the annual pay round, and (b) under the NICS Special Bonus Scheme. The number of payments made in the last three financial years is as follows:

Year	Performance - related bonuses	Special Bonuses
2004/05	670	37
2005/06	562	42
2006/07	563	157

Performance related bonuses are an important and integral element of the NICS reward strategy, and as such are used as part of the annual pay round to acknowledge and reward higher performing staff in year.

The NICS Special Bonus Scheme allows Departments to reward staff for exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks.

The award of bonuses is therefore regarded as being complementary to, rather than as a substitute for, the award of consolidated pay increases.

Merger of Donaghadee and Movilla High Schools

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what is the timescale for the proposed merger of Donaghadee High School and Movilla High. (AQW 656/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has commenced preliminary consultations with Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School in relation to a potential rationalisation between the two schools. A formal consultation by the Board is expected to commence during the forthcoming autumn term. Should the Board decide to proceed with the rationalisation, it would be required to publish a statutory development proposal which would initiate a 2-month period during which all interested parties can make their views known to the Department of Education. The Board has suggested September 2008 as the date for rationalisation though this would be subject to the consultation process, and the subsequent approval of a development proposal. No decisions have therefore been made at this time.

Merger of Donaghadee and Movilla High Schools

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what assurances she can give to the staff of both Donaghadee High and Movilla High, in terms of job security, following the proposed merger of the two schools. (AQW 658/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (the Board) has commenced preliminary consultations with Governors, staff and parents at Donaghadee High School and Movilla High School, Newtownards, in relation to a potential amalgamation of the two schools.

If the proposed amalgamation proceeds, teaching staff at both schools would be offered posts in the new school and be eligible for protection under the terms of the Collective Agreement with the Teachers' Unions (Teachers' Negotiating Committee Circular - TNC 1999/4). This Agreement ensures (inter alia) that in the two years immediately following the date of the amalgamation, there will no compulsory redundancies of those permanent teachers who transfer to the new school. In addition, it provides that transferring teachers, who are unable to secure a post of a similar level of responsibility in the new school and thus suffer a reduction in salary, are eligible for a Re-organisation Allowance (Department of Education Circular 1996/1) to protect their salary to the level they would have been paid had they remained in their previous post.

There is no comparable agreement for other staff in the schools. However, the Board would make every reasonable effort to find employment for all non-teaching staff who would want to continue working, whether this is in the new school or at a suitable alternative location.

Armagh Integrated College

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the capital expenditure costs of Armagh Integrated College over the past four financial years. (AQW 675/07)

Ms Ruane: Armagh Integrated College opened in 2004 as a new grant maintained integrated (GMI) school. As for all new GMI schools, it must satisfy intake criteria set down by the Department of Education before capital grant aid is provided. The capital expenditure for this school has to date been incurred by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) amounting to £59k in 2005-06 and £9.7m in 2006-07.

Special Needs Pupils

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education what is the current policy in relation to enabling young people attending special needs schools to remain in education after their nineteenth birthday, until the end of the school term; and to detail if this policy is equally applied across all education and library board areas in Northern Ireland. (AQW 686/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has obtained extra-statutory approval for the 2006/07 school year to allow Education and Library Boards to maintain a statement of special educational needs until the end of the school year following the young person's 19th birthday. An extension of that approval will be sought for the 2007/08 school year. Boards are currently preparing information for the Department to enable this extra-statutory approval to be sought. The Department of Education will be taking the first available legislative opportunity to amend the current legislation, which only allows Boards to maintain a statement of special educational needs until the end of the school term following the young person's 19th birthday.

I have sought and obtained assurances from each education and library board that this change of policy is equally applied across all 5 boards.

Ulster-Scots Language

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education which organisation made the representation to her department, in January 2001, regarding the lack of educational resources available for the teaching of the Ulster-Scots language. (AQW 702/07)

Ms Ruane: This representation was made by Balmore Primary School.

Expenditure for Ulster-Scots

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to itemise the expenditure of £69.95, which was the total expenditure by her Department in relation to Ulster-Scots in the year 2003-2004. (AQW 703/07)

Ms Ruane: This expenditure was due to the translation of a leaflet entitled 'Information about Transfer Tests and New Post-Primary Arrangements' into Ulster-Scots.

Funding for Additional Administrative and Support Staff

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she will undertake to review the resources allocated

to primary schools, with specific reference to the provision of funding for additional administrative and support staff in schools, and to the discrepancy between the primary school and secondary school surplus funds. (AQW 708/07)

Ms Ruane: The rationale for the differential in funding for primary and secondary schools stems from the additional cost demands which arise for secondary schools in the delivery of the curriculum. I am, however, committed to reducing the current differential and will be looking very carefully, within the resources I can secure for education under the Comprehensive Spending Review, at how we can improve the current balance and allow more investment in early years. At a local level, it is for school boards of governors and principals to determine how best to spend their funding allocations in meeting their needs and priorities, including provision of administrative and support staff. This includes the flexibility, in the interests of prudent financial management, to hold modest surpluses in reserve in order to allow the school to live within its budget allocation or to plan for specific future expenditure.

Teacher Education

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Education if she will consider introducing a bursary scheme to support teachers' continuing professional development. (AQW 709/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department and the Department for Employment and Learning are jointly carrying out a review of teacher education.

The Review is almost complete and Sir Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning and I will, in the coming months, be carefully considering the way forward on all aspects of teacher education. This will include consideration not only of the introduction of a bursary scheme to support teachers' continuing professional development but also the way forward on all phases of teacher education: initial teacher education, induction, early and continuing professional development. In considering the way forward account will be taken of the overall resources made available for education.

School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools in each Education and Library Board area, where meals are prepared on site, that are buying in pre-packed sandwiches for sale to pupils. (AQW 715/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of schools in each Board area, where meals are provided on-site, that are buying-in pre-packed sandwiches for sale to pupils is:

Belfast	19
North-Eastern	12
South-Eastern	15
Southern	9
Western	19

School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for the provision of school meals that is actually used for this purpose. (AQW 716/07)

Ms Ruane: Education and Library Boards receive allocations to cover the delivery of the full range of services that they provide, including school meals. It is a matter for each Board to determine how much of its centre allocation is spent on school meals. Additionally, however, my Department is allocating a further £3 million to schools in the current financial year which is ring-fenced and must be used to ensure that expenditure on the food and nutritional content value of school meals amounts to at least 50p in nursery, primary and special schools and 60p in post-primary schools.

Early Years Strategy

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Education if she will review the maximum size of pre-school education groups, currently set at 26 places, with particular reference to rural areas. (AQW 717/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department is currently working on an Early Years Strategy for the 0-6 age group. Policy responsibility for early years services transferred from DHSSPS to DE in November 2006. I will ensure this issue, particularly as it may impact on rural areas, is taken into consideration as the new policy for early years is developed.

Education Transition Co-ordinators

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education what is the current position in regard to the recruitment of two education transitions co-ordinators per Education and Library Board area, as outlined in the report of the Transitions Inter-departmental Working Group; and to detail when the positions were (a) advertised; and (b) filled. (AQW 722/07)

Ms Ruane: I am advised by the Chief Executive Officers of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that following the publication of the Transitions Report in February 2006, all permanent appointments to the post of Education Transition Co-ordinators were made by March 2007.

Home Tuition

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who have been in receipt of home tuition in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area in each of the last three years. (AQW 754/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is shown in the following table:

School Year	Number of Pupils in Receipt of Home Tuition
2003/04	188
2004/05	242
2005/06	237

Figures for the 2006/07 school year are not yet available.

11+ Examination

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to explain the rationale behind the instruction given to staff to find a way of replacing the 11+ examination, no matter what form this replacement takes. (AQW 761/07)

Ms Ruane: No such instruction has been given.

Draft Disability Action Plan

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to explain the reasoning behind the omission of the term 'Northern Ireland' from her department's draft disability action plan, with particular reference to the inclusion of the term in this document when initially posted on the department's website, and its subsequent removal during the course of the week commencing 11 June 2007. (AQW 764/07)

Ms Ruane: The draft Disability Action Plan was published on the Department of Education website on the 5th June for a limited and targeted consultation.

This version did not reflect my preferred terminology in a number of respects and an amended version was placed on the Departmental website on 7th June. There were no substantive changes made to the actions or intentions of the plan which are the subject of consultation.

Maintenance Expenditure by SEELB

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister of Education to detail the total spend on maintenance within the South Eastern Education and Library Board, in this financial year. (AQW 767/07)

Ms Ruane: I have been advised that the amount of maintenance expenditure by the South Eastern Education and Library Board during the 2006/07 financial year was £3,935k.

School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what measures she will take to maintain the current level of school meal preparation at schools across Northern Ireland. (AQW 804/07)

Ms Ruane: The arrangements for school meal preparation are an operational matter for the Education and Library Boards. However, the Member will be assured to know that, for 2007-08, the Department is continuing to provide additional, earmarked funding of over £3 million to Education and Library Boards and other school authorities over and above the normal centre budget allocations to improve the quality of food in schools. That funding helps deliver enhanced food and nutritional content value of school meals. It also supports training arrangements for the many hundreds of canteen staff and assists with additional staff costs and preparation time.

Pupils Attending Post Primary Schools

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children currently attending secondary schools in (a) the state sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 805/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

PUPILS ATTENDING POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN EACH EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2006/07

School Management Type	Education and Library Board area					
	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Controlled	5,807	6,113	15,442	10,847	11,265	49,474
Maintained ¹	8,954	10,631	6,130	4,535	11,821	42,071
Integrated ²	1,586	1,750	2,122	3,713	1,555	10,726

School Management Type	Education and Library Board area					
	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Voluntary ³	14,382	8,482	8,961	6,998	8,671	47,494
Total	30,729	26,976	32,655	26,093	33,312	149,765

Note:

1. Maintained schools include Catholic Maintained and Other Maintained schools.
2. Integrated schools include Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.
3. Voluntary Grammar schools may be Catholic Managed or Other Managed.

Children with Autism

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Education how she plans to improve services for children with autism. (AQW 822/07)

Ms Ruane: In 2002 the Task Group on Autism published its report providing a framework for action over a ten-year period. Since its publication the Department of Education (DE) has secured additional resources totalling some £7.5m to support positive measures in the area of autism. Many of these measures are already underway, however future measures include:

- additional resources for special educational needs (SEN) pressures made available to the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in 2007/08;
- the continued funding of an Interboard Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) group to advise the ELBs' Regional Strategy Group and DE on progress on ASD-related matters;
- the implementation of the strategy for the Interboard ASD Group to progress the work of the group within the ELB's overall ASD services and to which ELBs are committed;
- the ongoing observation by the Education and Training Inspectorate of the use of DE-produced classroom resources to support positive interventions for children with ASD.
- the establishment by ELBs of multi-disciplinary, multi-agency intervention practices for children and young people with autism.

The Department plans to work closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, through the SEN Interdepartmental Group, to jointly review ASD provision.

DE and the Department of Education and Science (DES), are taking forward arrangements to enable the

Middletown Centre of Excellence for Autism to begin offering services later this year.

In addition, DE and DES are exploring the possibility of jointly hosting an all-island ASD conference, also later this year.

Devenish College

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister of Education what is the estimated start date and completion date for the new Devenish College in Co Fermanagh. (AQW 878/07)

Ms Ruane: The Western Education and Library Board has advised that the estimated date for construction work to start on the new Devenish College is autumn 2008 with an estimated completion date of spring 2011.

Expenditure for Teaching Irish Language and Irish-Medium

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to confirm that, in 2006/07, her department's expenditure on the Irish language and Irish-medium teaching was close to £13 million. (AQW 909/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education's expenditure on the Irish language and Irish-medium teaching for 2006/07 is provisionally £11,721,530.

Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education how many staff surveys were carried out by her department in each of the last two years, and what was the total cost. (AQW 914/07)

Ms Ruane: In the two years 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2007 the Department of Education commissioned two staff surveys and the total cost was £10,324

Primary School in Keady

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister of Education what is the future of the state primary school in Keady; and if she will make a statement on the effect of the closure of small rural schools on the local community. (AQW 925/07)

Ms Ruane: The Southern Education and Library Board has initiated discussions with this school on its future but these discussions are at an early stage and no decisions have yet been taken.

Rural schools are an important and integral part of rural life and I fully understand community concerns when the future of such schools is under review. Reviews of small rural schools should be handled carefully with a focus on educational quality and the needs of the children in the area.

Post Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education what facility exists, at present, for members of staff in her department to work in their existing post beyond the default retirement age. (AQW 936/07)

Ms Ruane: Since 1 October 2006 staff in the Department of Education, who want to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) policy on the age of retirement has been finalised all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

Number of Pupils Attending Primary School

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children currently attending primary schools in (a) the state sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 951/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

PUPILS ATTENDING POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN EACH EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2006/07

School Management Type	Education and Library Board area					
	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Controlled	5,807	6,113	15,442	10,847	11,265	49,474
Maintained ¹	8,954	10,631	6,130	4,535	11,821	42,071
Integrated ²	1,586	1,750	2,122	3,713	1,555	10,726
Voluntary ³	14,382	8,482	8,961	6,998	8,671	47,494
Total	30,729	26,976	32,655	26,093	33,312	149,765

Note:

- Figures include children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.
- Maintained schools include Catholic Maintained and Other Maintained schools.
- Integrated schools include Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated schools.

- Includes preparatory departments of Voluntary Grammar schools.

Administrative and Advisory Staff

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of additional administrative and advisory staff recruited by (a) Education and Library Boards; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, in the last two years. (AQW 959/07)

Ms Ruane: The 5 Education & Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have advised that they have not recruited any additional administrative and/or advisory staff in the 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years. This answer relates to permanent appointments that are additional to the 2004/05 approved staffing complement for ELB and CCMS Headquarters based staff. Fixed term appointments and temporary appointments are therefore excluded.

A Vacancy Control Policy was introduced in October 2006 in the Department's "RPA-affected bodies", following the publication of the agreed Public Service Commission Principle 'Managing Vacancies Effectively', to ensure that all reasonable steps are taken to safeguard and secure the employment of existing education sector staff until the new Education and Skills Authority is established.

Heads of Departments Redundancies

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of heads of department that will be made redundant, and the total cost of redundancy payments, in (a) each Education and Library Board; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. (AQW 960/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of posts in the Education and Skills Authority will be determined by the arrangements established for the delivery of services and the associated organisational structure. Work in these areas is ongoing and it is not therefore possible, at this stage, to determine the number and cost of redundancies arising from the establishment of ESA.

Every effort will be made to avoid compulsory redundancies and as part of this process a Vacancy Control Policy has been put in place across existing education organisations.

Second Tier Officer Redundancies

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of second tier officers that will be made redundant, and the total cost of

redundancy payments, in (a) each Education and Library Board; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. (AQW 961/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of posts in the Education and Skills Authority will be determined by the arrangements established for the delivery of services and the associated organisational structure. Work in these areas is ongoing and it is not therefore possible, at this stage, to determine the number and cost of redundancies arising from the establishment of ESA.

Every effort will be made to avoid compulsory redundancies and as part of this process a Vacancy Control Policy has been put in place across existing education organisations.

Chief Executive Redundancies

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Chief Executives that will be made redundant, and the total cost of redundancy payments, in (a) each Education and Library Board; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. (AQW 962/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of posts in the Education and Skills Authority will be determined by the arrangements established for the delivery of services and the associated organisational structure. Work in these areas is ongoing and it is not therefore possible, at this stage, to determine the number and cost of redundancies arising from the establishment of ESA.

Every effort will be made to avoid compulsory redundancies and as part of this process a Vacancy Control Policy has been put in place across existing education organisations.

Suicide Prevention in Schools

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to liaise with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the development of strategies and support, in order to address suicide prevention within schools and the community sector. (AQW 967/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education contributed to the development of the Suicide Prevention Strategy published by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in March 2006. My Department is also an active member of the Suicide Strategy Implementation Body. The action plan for this Body sets out a number of measures aimed at preventing suicide across all age groups and communities. These actions require close co-operation across Departments as well as with the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

I have met with the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to examine progress with these measures and to discuss how to ensure effective co-operative working in this area. I plan to continue monitoring progress on a regular basis.

Alcohol Abuse in Schools

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils excluded from schools as a result of alcohol abuse, broken down by Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 990/07)

Ms Ruane: Statistics on the reasons for pupil suspension are gathered annually from each Education and Library Board, and relate to the number of incidents of suspension not to the number of pupils suspended. In 2002/03, data on alcohol abuse was combined with data on substance abuse, however from 2003/04 it has been identified separately. Available information on the number of incidences of suspension for alcohol abuse is shown in the following table:

NUMBER OF INCIDENCES OF PUPILS BEING SUSPENDED FOR ALCOHOL ABUSE BY ELB AREA

	2003/04	2004/05
Belfast	3	6
Western	11	14
North Eastern	0	16
South Eastern	29	7
Southern	8	27
Total	51	70

Note:

There was a change in the data collection systems between these two years

Reasons for pupil expulsions were first collected in 2003/04, and alcohol abuse was combined with data on substance abuse. In 2004/05, data on alcohol abuse was collected separately and, in that year, there were 2 pupils expelled for this reason.

The suspension and expulsions statistics for the 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Promotions in Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education how many existing staff in (a) each Education and Library Board; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have been promoted, in advance

of the implementation of the Review of Public Administration recommendations. (AQW 993/07)

Ms Ruane: The 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have provided the following information for the period 22 November 2005 (when the Review of Public Administration was announced) to 31 March 2007. The information relates only to non-teaching ELB and CCMS headquarter based staff and reflects only permanent promotions, ie fixed term promotions and temporary promotions are excluded.

BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	CCMS
15	20	23	16	29	6

Teacher to Pupil Ratios

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the current target teacher-to-pupil ratios at each of the key stages in primary and secondary schools; and what plans she has to change target ratios in the near future. (AQW 1008/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education does not set targets for pupil: teacher ratios. It is for schools to decide, within their delegated budgets, how many teachers to employ.

Pupil:teacher ratios are compiled and published each year by the Department based on pupil numbers from the Annual School Census and teacher numbers verified with schools.

The following table provides the current (2006/07) pupil:teacher ratios for schools in the North of Ireland by school type.

School type	Pupil: teacher ratio
Nursery	25.9
Primary*	20.8
Preparatory	16.8
Secondary	14.0
Grammar	15.3
Special	5.9
All	16.9

*includes pupils and teachers in Nursery classes

School Attendance

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children attending primary and secondary schools in the years (a) 1985; (b) 1990; (c) 1995; (d) 2000; and (e) 2005. (AQW 1010/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

	Primary	Secondary
1985/86	182,697	152,917
1990/91	184,874	141,146
1995/96	185,413	151,576
2000/01	172,491	155,553
2005/06	161,143	151,840

Note:

- Figures for primary include pupils in primary schools and preparatory departments in grammar schools in years 1 – 7.
- Secondary includes both secondary and grammar schools

Pupils Learning English as an Additional Language

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many pupils learning English as an additional language are attending (a) primary schools; (b) special schools; (c) post-primary selective schools; (d) post-primary non-selective schools, in each of the Education and Library Board areas, and what are the countries of origin of these pupils. (AQW 1015/07)

Ms Ruane: Information on the country of origin of pupils learning English as an Additional Language is not collected. The number of pupils with English as an Additional Language in each school sector, by Education and Library Board and by main language spoken is as follows:

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE PUPILS IN PRIMARY¹ SCHOOLS BY FIRST LANGUAGE SPOKEN²

Main Language spoken	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Polish	79	120	120	30	261	610
Lithuanian	10	25	31	22	274	362
Portuguese	*	*	15	*	193	217
Filipino	62	16	19	46	25	168
Cantonese	42	9	32	44	15	142
Malayam	38	13	17	18	0	86
Hindi	19	*	22	8	10	63
Arabic	12	7	6	17	*	43
Latvian	0	6	5	*	28	43
Indian	6	5	9	18	*	41
Bengali	16	0	*	19	*	39
Slovakian	13	*	8	*	14	39

Main Language spoken	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Mandarin	10	7	6	*	7	34
Urdu	9	7	8	*	6	32
Punjabi	13	5	9	*	*	31
Russian	7	*	7	*	13	31
German	7	*	6	5	7	29
Tagalog	13	*	6	7	0	28
Spanish	7	*	*	7	*	22
Malaysian	5	*	*	*	*	15
French	5	*	*	0	*	14
Hungarian	*	7	*	0	*	13
Gujarati	*	*	0	0	7	10
Italian	*	0	0	7	*	10
Czech	*	0	7	0	0	9
Chinese	*	0	*	*	*	8
Albanian	7	0	0	0	0	7
Korean	*	*	*	0	0	6
Thai	*	*	0	*	0	6
Dutch	*	0	*	*	*	5
Farsi (Persian)	0	5	0	0	0	5
Other Languages/ not specified ³	55	33	68	47	54	257
Total	453	292	417	325	938	2,425

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE PUPILS IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS BY FIRST LANGUAGE SPOKEN²

Main Language spoken	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Other Languages/ not specified ³	3	*	8	6	*	21

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE PUPILS IN POST PRIMARY SELECTIVE SCHOOLS BY FIRST LANGUAGE SPOKEN²

Main Language spoken	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Cantonese	66	*	*	8	44	122
Polish	*	7	*	*	*	17

Main Language spoken	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Lithuanian	*	*	0	0	5	8
Indian	0	*	*	*	0	7
Mandarin	6	0	0	0	*	7
Filipino	*	0	0	0	*	5
German	*	0	0	*	0	5
Urdu	*	0	0	*	0	5
Other Languages/ not specified ³	33	7	12	9	*	63
Total	119	19	21	23	57	239

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE PUPILS IN POST PRIMARY NON SELECTIVE SCHOOLS BY FIRST LANGUAGE SPOKEN²

Main Language spoken	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Polish	32	24	41	19	113	229
Lithuanian	5	14	7	22	118	166
Portuguese	*	*	0	6	102	112
Cantonese	13	6	8	29	8	64
Filipino	43	*	*	*	*	53
Latvian	0	6	*	*	21	30
Spanish	*	*	0	*	17	21
Hindi	*	0	5	8	*	18
Indian	6	6	0	5	0	17
Bengali	6	0	0	6	*	13
Mandarin	*	*	*	*	*	13
Urdu	0	0	*	*	7	12
German	0	9	0	*	0	10
Hungarian	0	*	0	0	7	10
Arabic	5	*	0	0	0	8
Punjabi	0	0	5	*	*	8
Malaysian	*	*	0	0	*	5
Other Languages ³	12	17	17	20	54	120
Total	133	100	92	125	459	909

Notes:

“(*)” denotes fewer than 5 pupils.

10. Figures for primary schools include preparatory departments in grammar schools and enrolments in years 1 – 7.

11. Country of origin information is not collected by the Department. An alternative indicator is the main language spoken by these pupils. It is this information that has been provided.
12. The "Other Languages" category includes those languages which were listed by schools as 'Other first language spoken', as well as those first languages where there were very small numbers of pupils listed.

New School at Glastry

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to outline whether a price had been agreed concerning the site for a new school at Glastry, following the discussions between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the landowners. (AQW 1016/07)

Ms Ruane: Negotiations for the purchase of the land are currently ongoing between the Land and Property Services (Valuation and Lands Agency), who are acting for the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and the landowners. Subject to the outcome of these negotiations the Board have advised that they hope to complete the acquisition of the land within the current financial year.

Sale of Land for Glastry College

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale for the completion of the sale of land for Glastry College; and to outline whether a direct contract had been developed with the landowners, and, if so, what has been the outcome of negotiations. (AQW 1017/07)

Ms Ruane: Negotiations for the purchase of the land are currently ongoing between the Land and Property Services (Valuation and Lands Agency), who are acting for the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and the landowners. Subject to the outcome of these negotiations the Board have advised that they hope to complete the acquisition of the land within the current financial year.

English as an Additional Language

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of pupils learning English as an additional language that are currently fee-paying boarding pupils in schools in Northern Ireland; (b) what schools they attend; and (c) what are their countries of origin. (AQW 1018/07)

Ms Ruane: Information on the countries of origin of pupils learning English as an Additional Language is not collected. In 2006/07 the number of pupils with English as an Additional Language who are fee-paying boarding pupils by school attended and by main language spoken is as follows:

	Main Language spoken			
	Cantonese	Mandarin	Russian	Other
Methodist College	22	*	*	*
Victoria College	8	*	0	0
The Royal School Dungannon	30	0	0	0

Notes:

"*" denotes fewer than 5 pupils

13. Country of origin information is not collected by the Department. An alternative indicator is the main language spoken by these pupils. It is this information that has been provided.

Vandalism at Schools

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of damage caused by vandalism at schools in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1029/07)

Ms Ruane: The Education and Library Boards have provided the following information on the cost of repairing vandalism in controlled and maintained schools in each of the last three years:

Board Area	2004/05 £000s	2005/06 £000s	2006/07 £000s
Belfast	115	131	60
Western	55	63	58
North Eastern	180	134	194
South Eastern	132	129	122
Southern	157	222	128
Total	639	679	562

Figures rounded to the nearest £1,000.

Information for Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools is as follows:

Board Area	2004/05 £000	2005/06 £000
Belfast	29	27
Western	1	-
North Eastern	1	3
South Eastern	6	3
Southern	2	19
Total	39	52

The information for 2006/07 for schools in the Voluntary Grammar and Integrated sectors is not yet available and has been requested. I will write to you with the information as soon as possible.

Special Education

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education if she will determine when the fundamental review of Special Education will be published.
(AQW 1030/07)

Ms Ruane: It is anticipated that the policy proposals which have emerged from the review will be published for consultation by January 2008 following consideration by the Education Committee.

Unqualified Teachers in Irish Language Schools

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline whether any comment has been made by inspectors on the impact of unqualified teachers teaching in Irish language schools.
(AQW 1036/07)

Ms Ruane: The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) has made comment to the Department of Education, in relation to its review of Irish Medium Education, of the need to ensure, that all teachers in Irish Medium schools have a recognised teaching qualification. The Inspectorate gives similar advice in relation to all teachers in all schools.

Formal Teaching Qualifications for Teachers in Irish Language Schools

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to require teachers in Irish language schools to have formal teaching qualifications.
(AQW 1037/07)

Ms Ruane: The Teachers' (Eligibility) Regulations 1997 require that all teachers hold the relevant qualifications as laid down by the Department. This provision covers all sectors.

All teachers employed currently in Irish Medium schools on Permanent, Pro rata or Job share contracts are confirmed as eligible to teach.

However, under the provisions of the Teachers' (Eligibility) Regulations 1997 an employer may appoint, for a period normally not exceeding 4 weeks, a person who is not eligible to teach.

There are currently 25 unqualified teachers employed by virtue of this provision in Irish Medium schools.

Unqualified Teachers in Irish Language Schools

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers in Irish

language schools who do not have a formal teaching qualification.
(AQW 1039/07)

Ms Ruane: The Teachers' (Eligibility) Regulations 1997 require that all teachers hold the relevant qualifications as laid down by the Department. This provision covers all sectors.

All teachers employed currently in Irish Medium schools on Permanent, Pro rata or Job share contracts are confirmed as eligible to teach.

However, under the provisions of the Teachers' (Eligibility) Regulations 1997 an employer may appoint, for a period normally not exceeding 4 weeks, a person who is not eligible to teach.

There are currently 25 unqualified teachers employed by virtue of this provision in Irish Medium schools.

Modern Languages

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of Education what efforts are being made to encourage more children to study modern languages.
(AQW 1040/07)

Ms Ruane: I am introducing a primary languages programme from September 2007 to give our youngest pupils an enjoyable introduction to language learning, with a view to encouraging them to continue with languages at post-primary and beyond.

The purpose of this initiative is to prepare the ground for the languages strategy, which the Department has asked the universities to develop by March 2008. The strategy will include recommendations on how we can encourage greater uptake of language learning at all levels of education.

Under-Spend in Capital Investment

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the reason for her department's £30.7 million under-spend in capital investment in 2006/07, in light of the deteriorating conditions of school premises and the accepted cases for renovation and new build for schools.
(AQW 1052/07)

Ms Ruane: Of the £30.7million under-spend in capital incurred in 2006/07, £28.9million was attributable to the schools capital programme. This under-spend arose from issues arising for individual building projects. The main reasons were delays in planning approvals and, site purchase, site difficulties and reviews of projected enrolments. The funding committed to those capital projects where there has been slippage in spending will be carried forward for those projects in future years.

Children Suspended from Schools

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Education to advise of the number of children per thousand who have been suspended from schools, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) District Council area or postcode area, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1057/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is set out in the following tables:

	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
BELB	17.2	20.1	16.8	20.1	19.0
NEELB	16.5	15.3	16.7	18.0	18.7
SEELB	12.6	14.4	15.6	15.6	15.4
SELB	10.5	12.6	16.2	15.1	14.7
WELB	14.9	14.5	15.0	15.7	16.6
All Boards	14.2	15.3	16.1	16.8	16.8

	No. of pupils per thousand suspended from schools by DC area		
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Antrim	22.1	18.4	18.9
Ards	14.0	15.9	14.0
Armagh	13.4	7.6	10.4
Ballymena	17.6	20.6	18.5
Ballymoney	15.7	23.9	19.8
Banbridge	6.3	10.9	12.3
Belfast	16.2	19.5	18.5
Carrickfergus	18.2	17.9	18.6
Castlereagh	18.6	17.2	25.3
Coleraine	20.1	21.9	22.8
Cookstown	20.9	20.4	18.4
Craigavon	14.7	16.1	17.4
Derry	19.5	19.6	23.0
Down	18.3	16.1	12.1
Dungannon	15.8	12.4	12.3
Fermanagh	10.5	19.4	13.7
Larne	16.1	10.4	12.7
Limavady	13.4	11.1	10.6
Lisburn	12.5	13.0	12.9
Magherafelt	8.9	8.8	11.8
Moyle	21.6	28.9	26.8
Newry & Mourne	22.2	20.3	16.1

	No. of pupils per thousand suspended from schools by DC area		
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Newtownabbey	14.5	17.0	21.0
North Down	18.8	19.4	17.8
Omagh	11.2	8.7	14.8
Strabane	14.3	11.2	8.0
Total	16.1	16.8	16.8

The numbers of pupil suspensions per thousand were first collected by District Council area in 2002/03 and therefore no data is held for previous years. The suspension statistics for the 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Grammar School Enrolment

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of grammar school places there are in Northern Ireland, broken down by the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies. (AQW 1064/07)

Ms Ruane: The total approved grammar school enrolment numbers for the 2007/08 school year by constituency are as follows:

Constituency	Total Approved Grammar School Enrolment Numbers
Belfast East	4765
Belfast North	3510
Belfast South	7240
Belfast West	2190
East Antrim	3075
East Derry	3860
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	4730
Foyle	4751
Lagan Valley	2130
Mid-Ulster	2717
Newry And Armagh	3960
North Antrim	4363
North Down	3110
South Antrim	1950
South Down	3974
Strangford	1856
Upper Bann	3100
West Tyrone	3560

Constituency	Total Approved Grammar School Enrolment Numbers
Total	64841

Children Travelling to School

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children living within the Strangford constituency that are estimated to travel outside the constituency in order to attend a grammar school. (AQW 1065/07)

Ms Ruane: In the 2006/07 school year, there were 3,134 children living within the Strangford constituency who attended a grammar school outside the constituency.

Unqualified Teachers in Irish Language Schools

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline any proposals she has to pay the fees of unqualified teachers in Irish language schools, in order to enable them to obtain formal teaching qualifications. (AQW 1070/07)

Ms Ruane: I do not have any proposals to pay the fees of unqualified teachers in Irish Language schools in order to enable them to obtain formal teaching qualifications.

Preparation of Briefings and Speeches

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm that she has instructed her officials, when preparing her briefings and speeches, to refer to 'England, Scotland and Wales' rather than the 'United Kingdom'. (AQW 1074/07)

Ms Ruane: I have not instructed my officials regarding my use of language. I have, however, indicated my own preference in relation to language and am committed to ensuring the principles of equality apply to all areas of my work.

Permanent Teaching Posts

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers on the substitute teachers' roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and to state the number that are (a) male; and (b) female. (AQW 1075/07)

Ms Ruane: Based on the payroll information, since September 2005 there have been 3176 female and 695 male teachers paid who worked as substitute teachers

and who have never worked in a permanent teaching post. It includes teachers paid on the DE payroll regardless of qualified status, e.g. teachers who are not treated as qualified until they graduate and those who are qualified to teach in the FE sector only, but are employed on a temporary capacity in the primary and secondary sector.

The Curran Report

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline the business case put to her by the Teachers Trades Unions, regarding the implementation of aspects of the Curran Report on teachers' conditions of service. (AQW 1077/07)

Ms Ruane: I have not received a business case from the Teachers' Trades Unions regarding the implementation of any aspect of the Final Report Part 2 of the Teachers' Pay & Conditions of Service Inquiry (the Curran Report).

Preparation of Briefings and Speeches

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm that she has instructed her officials, when preparing her briefings and speeches, to use the terms 'Derry' instead of 'Londonderry', and 'the North' or 'the North of Ireland' instead of 'Northern Ireland'. (AQW 1081/07)

Ms Ruane: I have not instructed my officials regarding my use of language. I have, however, indicated my own preference in relation to language and am committed to ensuring the principles of equality apply to all areas of my work.

Preparation of Briefings and Speeches

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm that she has instructed her officials, when preparing her briefings and speeches, to use the term 'South of Ireland' instead of the 'Republic of Ireland'. (AQW 1087/07)

Ms Ruane: I have not instructed my officials regarding my use of language. I have, however, indicated my own preference in relation to language and am committed to ensuring the principles of equality apply to all areas of my work.

East West Co-operation

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail how she will develop and expand

education as an area of east-west co-operation.
(AQW 1121/07)

Ms Ruane: I am keen to build on the progress made and to develop and expand East-West co-operation in the area of education.

The Department funds the Education and Training Group of the British Council to support and encourage schools to participate in the East-West Schools Programme. This Programme aims to build educational links on a tripartite basis, involving schools from the North and South of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Education what discussions she has had with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools regarding the proposals for the closure of St Aloysius High School in Cushendall; and what was the outcome of these discussions.

(AQW 1136/07)

Ms Ruane: I have had no discussions with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) about proposals for the closure of St Aloysius High School. The CCMS and the Trustees are examining possible rationalisation of post-primary provision in the Glens and East Antrim area involving three schools, including St Aloysius HS. A feasibility study which examines options for rationalising provision has been presented by CCMS to the Department of Education for consideration. Any proposal for rationalisation which CCMS and the Trustees bring forward in due course will require the publication of a statutory development proposal which will be the subject of consultation.

Expenditure for Award Schemes

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail, for the last two years, the amount spent by each Education and Library Board in relation to the achievement of (a) quality assurance awards; (b) Investors in People awards; and (c) other similar awards.

(AQW 1149/07)

Ms Ruane: The 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have provided the following information on spend (excluding VAT) for the 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years.

	Quality Assurance Awards		Investors in People Awards		Other Similar Awards	
	2005/06 €	2006/07 €	2005/06 €	2006/07 €	2005/06 €	2006/07 €
BELB	0	0	0	0	0	0
WELB	2,436	526	0	0	0	0
NEELB	8,442	2,801	0	0	0	0
SEELB	3,441	1,244	0	0	0	0
SELB	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	14,319	4,571	0	0	0	0

Promotion and Teaching of the Ulster-Scots Language

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education what guidance she has sought from the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group as to what 'resolute action' it should take to promote the teaching and use of the Ulster-Scots language in the sphere of education.

(AQW 1163/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department has not sought guidance from the Inter-Departmental Charter Implementation group. However, the Department is represented on this group and has been involved in the guidance developed for public servants to help them meet their obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Learning Outside the Classroom

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Education what proposals she has to introduce a 'Learning Outside the Classroom' manifesto in Northern Ireland, similar to those established in England and Wales by the Department for Education and Skills.

(AQW 1187/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education specifies the minimum curricular content that schools are required to provide but does not specify how the curriculum should be delivered. It is a matter for schools, with the support of the Education and Library Boards, to determine what out-of-classroom learning opportunities they provide.

The Education and Library Boards issued an 'Education for Sustainable Development Good Practice Guide' to schools in 2005, which includes guidance on Education Outside the Classroom. The Boards also worked with CCEA to produce a 'Learning Outdoors' resource for primary schools in 2005 to support teachers in provide high quality

outdoor play experiences. In these circumstances, I do see a need to introduce such a 'manifesto' here.

Sign Language Interpreters

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers in Northern Ireland that are qualified as sign language interpreters. (AQW 1213/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not hold this information centrally and contacted the 5 Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (who employ teachers), for the information.

The Southern Education and Library Board have advised they have 4 and the Western Education and Library Board have 7. These figures relate to Peripatetic Teachers in the Boards Sensory Impaired Services. The other employing authorities have advised they do not hold this information.

Sign Language

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce sign language onto the school curriculum. (AQW 1222/07)

Ms Ruane: Although sign language is not currently a specific requirement within the curriculum, there are already some schools who offer it as an extra-curricular option. Indeed, the revised curriculum provides greater flexibility for schools to teach sign language as part of the opportunities pupils have to develop the cross-curricular skill of communication, and through the Language and Literacy Area of Learning.

I am also awaiting recommendations in March 2008 from the joint University of Ulster-Queen's University Belfast Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies on a languages strategy. The strategy will include recommendations on how we can encourage greater uptake of language learning and will include coverage of sign language.

The Vacancy Control Policy

Mrs Claire McGill asked the Minister of Education to detail, if there is a delay in establishing the new Education and Skills Authority, whether the Education and Library Boards and other education bodies will continue to operate vacancy control policy. (AQW 1228/07)

Ms Ruane: The Vacancy Control Policy has been in place since November 2006 and operates in accordance with the 2nd PSC Guiding Principle. It is a

key means of minimising potential redundancies which may arise in the future from the streamlining of education administration. There are currently no plans to discontinue the operation of the policy.

Irish Medium Education

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education (a) to give the date on which her department initiated the review of Irish-medium education; (b) what is the scope and nature of the review; and (c) to advise whether this review is being carried out internally, or whether consultants have been employed to take forward the work. (AQW 1286/07)

Ms Ruane: (a) The Review of Irish-medium education was initiated on 14 December 2006 by the then Minister, Maria Eagle.

(b) The scope of the review is to take stock of the best way to facilitate continued and sustainable growth of Irish Medium education for the next decade, ensuring the highest quality education outcomes for pupils, particularly in light of the revised Northern Ireland curriculum.

The objective of the project is to review current DE policy towards the development of high-quality education through the medium of Irish. This will be achieved by fulfilling the Terms of Reference (TOR), agreed by Maria Eagle. The full TOR are:

- i. an analysis of past and likely future demography and demand;
- ii. an analysis of how DE's policy has developed and operated over the last five years with regard to pre-school, primary and post-primary education;
- iii. a consideration of the current approaches of Irish-medium schools, units and streams;
- iv. a review of Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (InaG) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's (CnaG) development plans, particularly in light of the forthcoming Bain Review;
- v. through ETI, an evaluation of quality and standards across Irish-medium provision;
- vi. a study of the outcomes of Government's financial investment in Irish-medium education over the last five years;
- vii. an analysis of the challenges and issues facing the Irish-medium sector;
- viii. a gathering of information on how such provision is developed and operated elsewhere;

- ix. an analysis of the implications of “A Shared Future” for Irish-medium provision;
 - x. a consideration of future policy towards the provision of Irish Medium Education; and
 - xi. an investigation and analysis of how cross-border approaches in the development of IME might enhance provision.
- (c) Consultants have not been employed to take forward the work of the review. The review is being taken forward internally by departmental officials, based on the PRINCE II methodology. This requires a Project Board, supported by an Advisory Group which quality assures the information that the Review considers. Both groups have members from outside the department.

Enrolment at Portstewart Primary School

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Education if she is aware of allegations of malpractice in the recording of enrolment figures at Portstewart Primary School; and if she will make a statement. (AQW 1311/07)

Ms Ruane: I am aware of allegations of malpractice in the recording of enrolment figures at Portstewart Primary School. My Department has investigated the allegations.

While no evidence of criminality was established, there were matters identified during the investigation which are subject to further consideration. It would be unfair and prejudicial to the outcome of those considerations to release any information at this time.

Saint MacNisius' School

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail whether Saint MacNisius' Primary School in Tannaghmore will be included in the Buildings List. (AQW 1331/07)

Ms Ruane: A scheme for a replacement school at St MacNisius' Primary School was stopped in March this year following a review of all previously announced schemes then in planning. It was announced at that time that there were concerns over enrolments, raising the issue of longer term viability. The school has 73 pupils.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proposals he will

bring forward to generate greater flexibility in the modern apprenticeship framework; and if he will consider alternatives to National Vocational Qualifications. (AQW 156/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Although normal practice, it is not always necessary to use NVQ frameworks in undertaking a Modern Apprenticeship. However, all apprentice frameworks must include a competence based element assembled from the National Occupational Standards set by the employment sector for which the framework is designed and, if required, other employment sectors.

The content of the competence element may be determined by the Sector Skills Councils, Sector Bodies and their employers. Subject to assessment methods designed to test competency, it is not a mandatory requirement to use National Vocational Qualifications. Alternatives may be considered.

Health and Safety

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if any provisions are being made by his department, to provide courses to precede apprenticeships, in order to provide skills and knowledge on matters such as health and safety. (AQW 1022/07)

Sir Reg Empey: All Apprenticeship training has a Health and Safety element built into the qualification frameworks. Health and Safety awareness is usually delivered in the early stages of the training as part of induction.

Skills Deficit in Northern Ireland

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proactive steps are being taken by his department, in order to address the skills deficit in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1023/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Success through Skills, the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, aims to identify current and future skills needs both at a regional and local level and seek appropriate interventions.

The Strategy advocates the use of the Department's existing provision to raise the population's overall level of skills. This provision includes Essential Skills, Leading..to Success, Management Analysis Planning (MAP), Investors in People, Training for Success and the implementation of an all age Careers Strategy.

In addition, the Department is examining more sector specific requirements through an employer led network consisting of the Skills Expert Group, six Workforce Development Forums and the 25 UK wide Sector Skills Councils. Two priority skills sectors have

already been identified: Financial Services and Information and Communication Technology.

Once specific skills needs have been identified the Department will work with the relevant stakeholders to put in place suitable interventions.

My Department has undertaken to work more closely with Invest NI. This continued collaboration is aimed at ensuring the local workforce has the skills needed to take full advantage of future Foreign Direct Investment and business opportunities.

Information and Communications Technologies Skilled Labour

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps are being taken to increase the number of skilled workers in Information and Communications Technologies, in order to address the needs of indigenous firms, and eliminate the need for them to locate elsewhere for skilled labour. (AQW 1024/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The demand for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills in Northern Ireland is experiencing a period of rapid expansion. This together with the loss of image of the sector as a career choice following the retrenchment in the sector about 5 years ago, has created pressure on the demand for skills. The department is working with key stakeholders such as E-skills, the Sector Skills Council, Invest NI and employers from the sector to profile the demand for specific skills and find solutions. In order to do this, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has established a Future Skills Action Group which brings together all of these interests with representative of Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE).

In the meantime a range of initiatives have taken place, including the creation of a 30-week software professional course delivering through 3 FE Centres of Excellence. This DEL "Budget to Employment" funded course provides software developers through the conversion of non-IT graduates. This is in addition to training undertaken on behalf of specific companies. In addition, work continues with the sector employers, E-skills and other interests to improve the attractiveness of IT careers, prepare new entrants to the workforce and determine how best to develop the existing workforce.

Acceptance of Corporate Gifts

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline whether his department has conveyed any views or advice to the University of

Ulster on the acceptance of gifts, such as Rolex watches, from a middle eastern company. (AQW 1059/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The University of Ulster is an independent autonomous institution, with responsibility for its own policies and practices, including those in relation to corporate gifts and hospitality. The Department has not, therefore, conveyed any views or advice to the University on the acceptance of gifts. The University's Financial Procedures Manual sets out the policy statement to provide guidance as to circumstances when it is and is not appropriate to accept gifts, gratuities and hospitality.

Comparisons with Qualification Recognition

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on the issue of mutual recognition of qualifications for apprentices, for example, City and Guilds, in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1090/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The UK awarding and qualifications regulatory bodies and the Irish awarding bodies and qualifications authorities embarked on an exercise to align/cross reference the qualifications frameworks in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Following completion of this exercise in June 2005 the document "Qualifications can cross boundaries – a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland" was published and is on the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland website.

Potential Redundancies

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of whether redundancies will take place as a result of the merger of Fermanagh, Omagh and Dungannon Colleges; and to detail the number of potential redundancies. (AQW 1097/07)

Sir Reg Empey: As incorporated bodies, the Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland are the employers for all college staff. The College Governing Bodies are the legal entities. Accordingly, it will be for the Governing Body of the new South West College, supported by the senior management team, to consider the staffing requirements of the new college, and whether or not there will be a need for redundancies. Therefore, I am not in a position to provide the assessment you have requested.

Apprenticeships in Manufacturing

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of apprenticeships in the manufacturing industry available in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the Ards Borough Council area; and (c) the Strangford constituency, in the last three years. (AQW 1145/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's method of data recording makes it very difficult to report the number of apprentices in the manufacturing industry within the specific areas of Ards Borough Council and the Strangford constituency. To do so would incur disproportionate cost. However, I can confirm that in Northern Ireland, a total of 1,027 young people commenced a manufacturing apprenticeship in 2004-05, 1,049 in 2005-06 and 988 in 2006-07.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Water-Based Tourism on Lough Neagh

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the commitment the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is making to the development of water-based tourism on Lough Neagh. (AQW 891/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): In the NITB Activity Tourism Strategy 2005-08, priority has been given to adventure activity, walking and cycling. Watersports is an integral part of adventure activity and therefore marketed alongside other adventure tourism activities.

NITB encourages key tourism organisations to work together to develop product around more regional and local areas (such as Lough Neagh). For example NITB recently hosted a Countryside Recreation Network (CRN) Seminar in Northern Ireland titled "Activity Tourism – A Practical Approach". Activity providers, Local Authority and Countryside Officers throughout Northern Ireland were invited.

Once developed and market-ready NITB will support and help promote activity tourism developments as an integrated part of our overall marketing strategies.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the

numbers of foreign nationals currently living in Northern Ireland by (a) constituency; and (b) District Council area. (AQW 954/07)

Mr Dodds: My officials are still working on the response. I will have a substantive answer to you by Wednesday 11 July 2007 at the latest.

Shooting Sports

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will consider including shooting sports as a priority within the Northern Ireland Tourist Board Activity Tourism Strategy 2005-2008. (AQW 981/07)

Mr Dodds: Shooting sports did not emerge as a priority for Northern Ireland's key customer segments in either extensive recent research by Tourism Ireland Limited or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's on-going work on "Product Development Priorities".

As future developments for NITB must be customer led and market focused, there are no plans to add shooting sports as a priority area within the Northern Ireland Tourist Board Activity Tourism Strategy 2005-2008.

Tourist Signage

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, further to his response to AQW 454/07, if he will review the decision not to place a 'white on brown' Northern Ireland Tourist Board sign at Hollow Farm Shooting Grounds. (AQW 1013/07)

Mr Dodds: The responsibility for deciding eligibility for tourist signing rests between NITB and Roads Service of the Department of Regional Development and is an operational matter. Hollow Farm Shooting Grounds is not considered a tourist attraction in accordance with section 1.2.p (Tourist Utility) and section 4.1.8. (Sports Facilities) and as such not eligible for tourist signing; therefore I see no grounds for review. However, the applicant may wish to discuss the signing of the facility with Roads Service in black-on-white directional signage if there are traffic management or road safety issues.

Forbairt Feirste

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of funding given by his department to Forbairt Feirste, in each year since 1998. (AQW 1034/07)

Mr Dodds: No offers of assistance have been made to Forbairt Feirste by my department since 1998. A

grant of £1,450 was paid by the Local Enterprise and Development Unit in March 1998 under a letter of offer dated November 1997. This grant was made under the Making Belfast Work Enterprise Awareness Programme.

Public-Sector Jobs

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current number of public sector jobs located in each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies, broken down by department, agency or quango. (AQW 1051/07)

Mr Dodds: Estimates of the number of employee jobs at Parliamentary Constituency level are only available from the Census of Employment which is conducted on a biennial basis with the most recent figures relating to September 2005. Estimates of the total number of employee jobs in the public sector for each Parliamentary Constituency Area within Northern Ireland at that time can be found in Table 1 below.

The Census of Employment is conducted under the Statistics of Trade and Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1988 and Article 7 of the Order prohibits the disclosure of information relating to individual undertakings except under certain conditions. It is therefore not possible to provide data on individual public sector organisations from this source.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEE JOBS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR
AT SEPTEMBER 2005 FOR EACH PARLIAMENTARY
CONSTITUENCY AREA

Parliamentary Constituency Area	Public Sector Employee Jobs at September 2005
Belfast East	13,386
Belfast North	15,609
Belfast South	32,183
Belfast West	16,629
East Antrim	5,171
East Londonderry	9,488
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	9,647
Foyle	14,721
Lagan Valley	10,707
Mid-Ulster	6,174
Newry & Armagh	14,431
North Antrim	10,814
North Down	6,490
South Antrim	12,972
South Down	7,856

Parliamentary Constituency Area	Public Sector Employee Jobs at September 2005
Strangford	10,715
Upper Bann	12,649
West Tyrone	9,761
Northern Ireland	219,403

Source: Census of Employment, DETI

Giant's Causeway Site

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline whether the Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre will be progressed in accordance with the proposed timetable; and what role his department will have in any other applications for development at the Giant's Causeway site.

(AQW 1068/07)

Mr Dodds: Although the detailed design for the replacement visitor facilities has reached an advanced stage of development, progress has not been as swift as originally anticipated. Key issues which have delayed the project have been the resolution of car parking requirements and planning considerations. We are continuing to work to resolve these issues.

Currently, my Department has no role in other applications for development at the Giant's Causeway.

Invest NI Initiatives

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, in each of the last five years, the number of jobs created by Invest Northern Ireland initiatives, broken down by District Council area. (AQW 1126/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI does not create jobs. It provides assistance for businesses to improve their competitive position, which in turn may lead to employment creation. The number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through assisted inward-investment projects since 2002/03 is presented by District Council Area in Table 1(a) and 1(b) respectively.

It should be noted that these areas are not self-contained labour markets and a project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries. Invest NI's scope to 'direct' investment to specific geographic areas is limited, although it has been able to influence the location decisions of some inward-

investment projects. Ultimately, however, the final location decision rests with the business itself.

In addition, the number of jobs expected to be created through assistance offered to new locally-owned business starts by district council area is presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 1(A):
JOBS PROMOTED THROUGH INWARD-INVESTMENT
PROJECTS (2002/03 – 2006/07)**

District Council	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Antrim	5		319	20		344
Ards	70	5			20	95
Armagh	25			84	304	413
Ballymena						0
Ballymoney						0
Banbridge			13			13
Belfast	251	884	2,561	1,073	1,694	6,463
Carrickfergus	100					100
Castlereagh			24			24
Coleraine						0
Cookstown	32		148	40		220
Craigavon	16	110		49		175
Derry	93	486	40	361	754	1,734
Down						0
Dungannon		8	17			25
Fermanagh	350	194		11	441	996
Larne		25	112	155		292
Limavady		24				24
Lisburn			16	71		87
Magherafelt			1			1
Moyle			23			23
Newry & Mourne	50			1,045		1,095
Newtownabbey		42		82		124
North Down	41	200	140		233	614
Omagh				75		75
Strabane		175	53	34	44	306
Total	1,033	2,153	3,467	3,100	3,490	13,243

Notes:

1. 2006/07 figures are provisional and subject to change.
2. Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients.

**TABLE 1(B):
JOBS SAFEGUARDED THROUGH INWARD-INVESTMENT
PROJECTS (2002/03 – 2006/07)**

District Council	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Antrim	48					48
Ards					16	16
Armagh						0
Ballymena		518				518
Ballymoney						0
Banbridge			66			66
Belfast		1,258	12	47	183	1,500
Carrickfergus						0
Castlereagh			67			67
Coleraine						0
Cookstown			118			118
Craigavon	807	680	550			2,037
Derry	1,033		117	1,258		2,408
Down						0
Dungannon			38			38
Fermanagh		214		65		279
Larne				358		358
Limavady				787		787
Lisburn			17	278		295
Magherafelt						0
Moyle			123			123
Newry & Mourne				392		392
Newtownabbey				96		96
North Down			147			147
Omagh						0
Strabane	1,127		57			1,184
Total	3,015	2,670	1,312	3,281	199	10,477

Notes:

1. 2006/07 figures are provisional and subject to change.
2. Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients.

TABLE 2:
EXPECTED JOB CREATION BY ASSISTED LOCALLY-OWNED
BUSINESS START UPS (2002/03 – 2006/07)

District Council Area	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
Antrim	60	66	108	95	107	436
Ards	124	198	202	226	131	880
Armagh	109	146	168	166	134	723
Ballymena	83	77	129	94	107	489
Ballymoney	51	49	83	85	99	366
Banbridge	87	105	137	142	127	598
Belfast	274	415	560	492	431	2,172
Carrickfergus	53	68	112	69	66	368
Castlereagh	62	92	134	108	122	519
Coleraine	82	92	161	135	134	605
Cookstown	81	98	135	117	124	554
Craigavon	122	177	255	226	122	902
Derry	182	276	468	329	303	1,557
Down	125	204	303	257	164	1,053
Dungannon	103	151	196	176	160	785
Fermanagh	121	192	295	264	285	1,157
Larne	74	79	114	103	113	484
Limavady	60	86	146	125	104	520
Lisburn	200	164	213	208	191	976
Magherafelt	133	142	170	190	134	768
Moyle	20	22	53	57	70	222
Newry & Mourne	211	189	356	265	207	1,227
Newtownabbey	109	186	181	187	125	788
North Down	105	165	178	148	129	725
Omagh	87	98	135	153	163	636
Strabane	55	81	108	103	103	449
Total	2,772	3,615	5,099	4,520	3,953	19,959

Note: 2006/07 figures are provisional and subject to change

ENVIRONMENT

Urban Streams

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if she will review the role that urban streams play in re-establishing nature corridors within

towns and cities, with particular reference to the level of inter-agency consultation that exists with regard to the processing of planning applications affecting the catchment areas of such streams. (AQW 751/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

My Department is aware of the role urban streams play in relation to nature conservation and the protection of wildlife. This is reflected in the number of key planning policy statements and protective designations, where appropriate, in area plans aimed at conserving and enhancing their biodiversity. Comprehensive inter-agency consultation between Planning Service, Environment & Heritage Service, Rivers Agency and Northern Ireland Water, in particular, has been and continues to be an integral part of the policy and plan-making process. It is also an integral part of the processing of planning applications affecting the catchment areas of such streams. While my Department is continually seeking to make operational improvements to the consultation process, I am satisfied with the current level of inter-agency consultation and have no plans to review it.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the measures of protection given to the lake and woodland area on the site of the Rathgael Training Centre in Bangor, with specific reference to the approved planning permission and the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQW 799/07)

Mrs Foster: Both the existing planning approval and the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) contain conditions and policies respectively which are intended to provide the appropriate level of protection for the lake and woodland area at Rathgael Training Centre site, Bangor.

The planning conditions attached to the approval identify among other matters a defined acceptable development area and provide for the retention and protection of trees outside that development area and the retention of the important nature conservation features of the site.

The relevant policies of draft BMAP propose the designation of the area as a Local Landscape Policy Area and as a Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance as well as specifying key site requirements which include requirements regarding the protection of landscape and vegetation and existing flora and fauna.

Road Safety Strategy

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment if she will ensure that all Northern Ireland political

parties are involved in the group that has been established to review the road safety strategy; and if she will give a timescale within which all parties will be represented on the group. (AQW 839/07)

Mrs Foster: No group has been established to review the Road Safety Strategy. As the review progresses, my Department will engage with the Environment Committee and all Northern Ireland political parties will be included in any consultation process.

I shall be meeting shortly with the Minister for Regional Development and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the key statutory partners in developing and delivering the current Road Safety Strategy, to discuss the way forward on the review including the timescale within which the process can be completed.

Road Safety Authority

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how her department intends to work the Road Safety Authority (RSA), and other relevant authorities, in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 841/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department works closely with the relevant authorities in Ireland, including the Road Safety Authority. I intend to ensure that those close working relationships continue to secure shared road safety benefits.

Tree Preservation Order

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to give an assurance that Tree Preservation Orders are not lifted on trees, because of disease, without the confirmation of an independent expert. (AQW 843/07)

Mrs Foster: In the event of consideration being given to lifting a Tree Preservation Order because of disease, it would be normal practice to seek an opinion from the Department's consultant arboriculturist. However, the Department will not seek expert advice where it is obvious that the extent of the disease has affected the structure of the tree.

Diseased trees that are dead, dying or dangerous are exempt from the provisions of a Tree Preservation Order requiring the Department's consent for works to be carried out.

Climate Change

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to state what proposals she has to

introduce a Climate Change Bill to set targets for the reduction of carbon emissions. (AQW 844/07)

Mrs Foster: The UK government and each of the devolved administrations are committed to tackling the issue of climate change. I met with my environment Minister colleagues in the other UK administrations to discuss the Climate Change Bill on 18 June. I will be meeting with the Committee for the Environment on 5 July and am currently getting feedback on the DEFRA consultation which finished on 12 June.

Once I have reflected on the matter, particularly on the issue of statutory targets, I intend to bring my policy position to the Executive for agreement.

In Northern Ireland the issue of climate change is already central to the NI Sustainable Development Strategy which identifies challenging targets on greenhouse gas reductions and a range of actions to support this.

Road Safety

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment if she can provide an indicative time-line for her review of road safety. (AQW 881/07)

Mrs Foster: I shall be meeting shortly with the Minister for Regional Development and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the key statutory partners in developing and delivering the current Road Safety Strategy, to discuss the way forward on the review including the timescale within which the process can be completed.

Water Quality at Lough Neagh

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of how the water quality standard of Lough Neagh compares to that required under EU Directives. (AQW 889/07)

Mrs Foster: Lough Neagh is designated as 'salmonid' under European Directive (2006/44/EEC) 'on the quality of fresh waters needing protection or improvement in order to support fish life'. Monitoring by Environment and Heritage Service, in the period 2000 to 2006, has shown that the quality of the water in the Lough has intermittently failed to comply with the requirements of the Directive.

Failure to comply has in the main been due to exceedences in the level of pH value. The high pH values are attributed to the effects of plant nutrients in the rivers which flow into the Lough.

Lough Neagh is 'eutrophic' which means that it contains high levels of nutrients, especially compounds of nitrogen and/or phosphorus, which

affect the balance of organisms in the water and the quality of the water itself.

The vulnerability of the Lough was recognised in 1994 when it was designated as Sensitive (Eutrophic) under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service has responsibility under the Nitrates Directive Action Programme for enforcing good practice in relation to the application of nutrients to land, and it is envisaged that work under this programme will also reduce the nutrient loadings to water bodies including Lough Neagh.

As it is a source of drinking water, Lough Neagh is also monitored by Northern Ireland Water for compliance with the European Directive (75/440/EEC) on Surface Water Abstraction. Under the terms of the Directive, water bodies are graded as Category A, B or C, and Lough Neagh is currently graded as 'B'.

Park Land, Open Space and Playing Fields

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment, with reference to the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 1973, what action she proposes to take to stop District Councils selling off park land, open space and playing fields for development. (AQW 899/07)

Mrs Foster: Both the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure and my Department have policy responsibility for local government functions concerning park land, open spaces and playing fields. District councils can apply to the Natural Heritage Grant Programme to purchase or manage open space to enable a wide range of people to enjoy and appreciate our natural heritage. However, district councils are not permitted to appropriate any part of the land aided under this scheme for any purpose other than nature conservation or to sell, lease or otherwise dispose of it without the prior consent of my Department.

In addition if councils wish to dispose of land the Local Government Act (NI) 1972 provides that except where disposal is at less than best price or rent (when the approval of my Department is required) district councils are free to dispose of any land in their ownership.

Protection of the Irish Hare

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what consultations she has undertaken with the Countryside Alliance in relation to the special protection order for the Irish hare. (AQW 935/07)

Mrs Foster: No consultation took place between my Department and Countryside Alliance prior to the publication on 15th June of the notice proposing a new Special Protection Order for the Irish Hare. In accordance with the powers contained within the 1928 Game Preservation Act, under which the Special Protection Order is made, the Department published notice of the proposal in the Belfast Gazette and the local press, providing a suitable period to receive objections to the proposal. In addition individual letters were sent to relevant interests, including Countryside Alliance, advising them of the proposal and the deadline for objections. No further consultation was considered appropriate.

The Minister is meeting Countryside Alliance in the near future.

Green Shoots Survey

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with the British Association of Shooting and Conservation regarding its Green Shoots survey for Northern Ireland; and if she will give her assessment of the content of the survey. (AQW 938/07)

Mrs Foster: I have not yet had the opportunity to discuss The Green Shoots Survey with British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). However I am aware that my officials commissioned BASC to complete a Green Shoots Survey of its members in Northern Ireland. I am delighted to learn that over 400 BASC members completed the survey, covering some 25% of Northern Ireland and generating over 16,000 wildlife records. I welcome this engagement of grass roots support within the shooting community.

I understand that BASC now wishes to encourage its members to build on these results and develop projects which would improve the biodiversity potential of large tracts of Northern Ireland. I look forward to seeing some of these projects come to fruition.

Renewable Energy

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of the Environment what is her current position on the development of renewable energy; and what considerations are in place for the inclusion of renewable energy sources in the planning application process. (AQW 949/07)

Mrs Foster: I believe that renewable energy has an important part to play in tackling climate change.

Planning policy for renewable energy is currently set out in Policy PSU 12 of the Planning Strategy for

Rural Northern Ireland which advises that proposals for the development of renewable energy sources will be assessed against the need to protect and conserve the environment.

There is currently no requirement for developers to include renewable energy sources as part of their planning application.

Dibney River

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if the Dibney River is monitored and maintained for river quality. (AQW 984/07)

Mrs Foster: It is the role of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) to conserve, protect and where possible improve both the freshwater and marine aquatic environment in Northern Ireland.

EHS protects the aquatic environment through a variety of activities including targeted programmes to conduct water quality monitoring in waterways designated under the EC Freshwater Fish Directive (2006/44/EC). The Dibney River does not have a large enough flow to be designated and monitored under this Directive and is therefore not monitored chemically.

In a 1999 review of the Northern Ireland river monitoring network, the Dibney River was investigated for inclusion in the freshwater biological river monitoring programme. For health and safety reasons related to sampling, the river was not added to the monitoring programme and as a result it is not monitored biologically.

EHS is also responsible for taking action to combat or minimise the effects of pollution on waterways and groundwater sources in Northern Ireland. Where pollution occurs it is the policy of EHS to take formal enforcement action, if this is warranted by the severity of the pollution and the circumstances which led to it occurring.

In the period 1 January 2004 to date, there were ten reports of pollution received and investigated by EHS in relation to the Dibney River. None were found to be significant enough to merit formal enforcement action.

Backlog of Planning Applications

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the number of planning applications that are currently backlogged; and to detail the length of time it will take the Planning Service to clear this backlog. (AQW 992/07)

Mrs Foster: The total number of valid applications awaiting decision at 31 May 2007 is 19,279. It is not possible to give definitive timescales for the

processing of all applications, but in an effort to ease the current operational pressures a Divisional Support Team has been established and is currently in operation in the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office. Alongside the work of the team, the Planning Service's Operations Directorate will be critically examining existing practices within Divisions with a view to changes that will further assist. Specific areas of focus include, but will not be limited to, arrangements for handling planning appeals; the approach to processing reserved matters applications; and arrangements for handling telephone contact with offices.

Recycling in the Work Place

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of businesses, in particular large businesses, regularly recycle in the workplace. (AQW 1042/07)

Mrs Foster: The Department currently co-sponsors the Business in the Community ARENA Network's Environmental Management Survey. The Survey benchmarks the environmental management performance (inclusive of solid waste) of Northern Ireland's 200 leading firms, 26 local authorities, Health Trusts and the education sector.

While it is not possible to provide separate figures for businesses, this year's Survey identified that 93% of organisations taking part collected data on the amount of waste they produced. Furthermore, 82% of participants were able to demonstrate greater diversion of waste from landfill through waste reduction and recycling.

Recycling and Domestic Waste Separation

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of District Councils currently providing information leaflets on recycling and domestic waste separation in languages other than English. (AQW 1043/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not hold this information, as District Councils are not statutorily obliged to provide it.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Industrial De-Rating

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what proposals exist to give businesses in the services sector similar tax breaks to those enjoyed

by manufacturers, in respect to industrial de-rating.
(AQO 126/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): There are presently no firm proposals to introduce local taxation breaks for businesses in the service sector. However, the Economic Research Institute has been engaged to undertake a study into small business relief, alongside the work they are undertaking into industrial derating. This is in connection with a review of the decision made by the previous administration in 2006 not to introduce a small business rate relief scheme in Northern Ireland.

Public Sector Jobs

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the number of public sector jobs, per 100 economically active people or otherwise, in each (a) travel-to-work area, (b) district council area, and (c) constituency, in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 826/07)

Mr Robinson: The number of full-time equivalent public sector jobs per 100 economically active people is as follows:

(A) TRAVEL-TO-WORK AREAS

Ballymena	16.8	Enniskillen	17.3
Belfast	28.1	Mid-Ulster	14.5
Coleraine	19.1	Newry	19.4
Craigavon	21.7	Omagh	31.0
Londonderry	25.9	Strabane	13.3
Dungannon	17.6		

(B) DISTRICT COUNCIL AREAS

Antrim	31.1	Down	17.5
Ards	11.1	Dungannon	17.9
Armagh	23.8	Fermanagh	18.1
Ballymena	21.6	Larne	10.4
Ballymoney	13.5	Limavady	17.0
Banbridge	11.4	Lisburn	17.6
Belfast	53.2	Magherafelt	15.9
Carrickfergus	10.6	Moyle	13.8
Castlereagh	32.1	Newry and Mourne	19.5
Coleraine	21.4	Newtownabbey	13.3
Cookstown	11.3	North Down	13.6
Craigavon	23.5	Omagh	30.8
Derry	29.9	Strabane	12.2

(C) CONSTITUENCIES

Belfast East	33.8	Mid Ulster	12.8
Belfast North	42.6	Newry and Armagh	27.0
Belfast South	62.3	North Antrim	18.4
Belfast West	45.6	North Down	12.9
East Antrim	10.1	South Antrim	20.4
East Londonderry	19.8	South Down	13.7
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	19.6	Strangford	18.3
Foyle	29.9	Upper Bann	22.0
Lagan Valley	17.4	West Tyrone	22.9

Notes:

1. The economically active population is taken as those economically active aged 16-74 as recorded in the 2001 census of population. Area is where the economically active population lives.
2. The estimates given of public sector jobs are from the Census of Employment and refer to the number of employee jobs in the public sector at September 2005. The public sector comprises Central Government (including bodies under the aegis of Central Government), Local Government and Public Corporations.
3. The most up-to-date employee jobs estimates for the public sector are available from the Quarterly Employment Survey (QES) with the most recent data available relating to March 2007. However these estimates are only available at Northern Ireland level. Employee jobs figures below Northern Ireland level are only available from the biennial Census of Employment with the most recent figures relating to September 2005.
4. The Census of Employment has been carried out biennially since 1987 and covers all employers in non-agricultural sectors. Results are available at detailed levels of disaggregation and geographical location (subject to confidentiality being maintained), including a split by public and private sector. Sub Northern Ireland analysis from the Census of Employment is primarily based on the location of the jobs, not on the home address of the employees. Furthermore, in a small number of instances where employers were not able to provide figures by actual location, the employees were allocated to the address where pay records were held (e.g. head office). The re-location or change of reporting procedures by large employers can therefore affect the Census of Employment sub NI analysis.
5. The Census of Employment (and the QES) collect information on the number of persons in full-time and part-time employment. The surveys both count the number of jobs rather than the number of persons with jobs. Therefore a person holding both a full-time and a part-time job, or someone with two part-time jobs, will be counted twice. Persons working 30 hours or less per week are normally regarded as being in part-time employment.
6. The sub-Northern Ireland analysis is based on 1992 ward boundaries, which have been aggregated to form Parliamentary Constituency Areas, District Council Areas and Travel-to-Work Areas. Individual companies were assigned to 1992 wards using the Central Postcode Directory. In the case of Travel-to-Work Areas (TTWAs), the 11 existing TTWAs were constructed from 1984-wards - the data presented is therefore a best fit of 1992 wards.
7. To convert employee jobs data to full-time equivalents, part-time employee jobs were considered to equal 0.5 of a full-time employee job.

Secretary of State's Financial Package

Mr Basil McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has received any assurances from the Secretary of State that there will be progress made on a suitable financial package. (AQW 884/07)

Mr Robinson: The Secretary of State played an important role in the negotiations on a financial package before the devolution of power to the Assembly and Executive. Responsibility for continuing discussions with the Treasury on a suitable financial package now lies with the Northern Ireland Executive. No further specific assurances have been received from the Secretary of State about changes to the financial package. However, the Northern Ireland Executive will continue to seek the support from the Secretary of State and other members of the Government on this matter.

Gross Domestic Product

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product produced by the agricultural sector in (a) 1996; (b) 2001; and (c) 2006. (AQW 945/07)

Mr Robinson: Estimates produced by the Office for National Statistics indicate that the percentage of Northern Ireland's Gross Value Added¹ (GVA) produced directly by the agricultural sector was 5.5% in 1996; 2.7% in 2001; and 2.6% in 2004 (the latest year for which these statistics are available).

Irish Language Film and Television Fund

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a list of the names of the companies that tendered for the preparation of the business case for the Irish language film and television fund. (AQW 971/07)

Mr Robinson: The Department of Finance and Personnel did not award a contract for the Preparation of the Business Case for the Irish Language and Television Fund. The Department did, however, act as an agent on behalf of the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, in the establishment of a contract for the provision of a Business Case and Economic Appraisal of the Minority Language Broadcasting Fund. The purpose of the Business Case was to support a bid for resources to deliver Irish language film and television production in Northern Ireland.

Three companies tendered for this contract and they were:-

- BDO Stoy Hayward;
- FPM Chartered Accountants; and
- Peter Quinn Consultancy Services.

Design and Build Contracts

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is his assessment of the transfer of risk on Design and Build contracts, with specific reference to value for money for the taxpayer. (AQW 999/07)

Mr Robinson: The purpose of Design and Build contracts is to reduce the risk to the Client and to maximise the opportunity for value for money gains in project delivery.

Integration of the design and construction functions facilitates:

- partnership working with the client team;
- innovation;
- joint commitment to best whole-life value; and
- improved risk management through early contractor involvement.

In addition, it provides the public sector client with single point responsibility for delivery on time and to budget.

Disposal of Land

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in view of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's decision to sell-off DARD property to finance the Nitrates Directive, if it is now policy across departments for land and other valuable assets to be sold in order to fund departmental initiatives. (AQW 1056/07)

Mr Robinson: All departments have a responsibility to ensure their capital infrastructure supports the delivery of effective and efficient public services. Where departments identify and dispose of surplus assets, the proceeds remain in Northern Ireland to support the delivery of public services. Decisions on the reinvestment of such proceeds are taken collectively by the Executive, in the context of strategic priorities and available resources.

Quangos

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many quangos there are in Northern Ireland; and if he will list them. (AQW 1060/07)

Mr Robinson: The latest information on all the public bodies sponsored by Northern Ireland

¹ Regional Gross Value Added is now used instead of Gross Domestic Product

departments, including the amount of government funding received by each body and the number of staff employed by each body, is contained in the Cabinet Office publication, 'Public Bodies 2006' and can be accessed through the following link:

<http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/other/agencies/publications/pdf/public-bodies/publicbodies2006.pdf>

I have placed a copy of an extract from this report referring to Northern Ireland departments in the Library.

Information on whether or not those employed are full-time or part-time is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost. However, information is currently being gathered in respect of 2007 to inform a report on public bodies sponsored by Northern Ireland departments only and I have asked to have these employment details included. The report is due to be published at the end of August.

Funding for Quangos

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of funding from the Northern Ireland Block grant used to fund quangos in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1061/07)

Mr Robinson: The latest information on all the public bodies sponsored by Northern Ireland departments, including the amount of government funding received by each body and the number of staff employed by each body, is contained in the Cabinet Office publication, 'Public Bodies 2006' and can be accessed through the following link:

<http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/other/agencies/publications/pdf/public-bodies/publicbodies2006.pdf>

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Staff Employed by Quangos

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people that are employed by quangos, both full-time and part-time. (AQW 1062/07)

Mr Robinson: The latest information on all the public bodies sponsored by Northern Ireland departments, including the amount of government funding received by each body and the number of staff employed by each body, is contained in the Cabinet Office publication, 'Public Bodies 2006' and can be accessed through the following link:

<http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/other/agencies/publications/pdf/public-bodies/publicbodies2006.pdf>

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Review into Forecasting and Monitoring

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to comment on how his department intends to address the recommendations of the PKF (UK) Review into forecasting and monitoring. (AQW 1118/07)

Mr Robinson: My officials will work with departments in taking forward all the recommendations of the review. The initial focus will be on improving the quality of financial information used by departmental boards and on training for non-finance professionals.

Financial Subvention

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to set targets for reduction in the level of financial subvention to Northern Ireland from the Treasury. (AQW 1120/07)

Mr Robinson: The size of the financial subvention, or fiscal deficit, can best be reduced by encouraging economic growth in the local private sector. A more buoyant and vibrant private sector will generate greater tax yields within Northern Ireland thereby reducing the estimated subvention.

Workplace 2010

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an assurance that Workplace 2010 will not act as a barrier to decentralisation of

civil service jobs, either in structural or financial terms, if a decision to decentralise is made by the Executive. (AQW 1122/07)

Mr Robinson: The Workplace 2010 contract, if approved by the Executive, will contain appropriate flexibility provisions to accommodate future movement of business. The price will be determined upfront in a competitive environment thus ensuring best value for money. I am satisfied that this procurement will not fetter any future decisions on the location of public sector jobs.

Gross Domestic Product

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to set targets for reduction in the public sector share of Northern Ireland's Gross Domestic Product. (AQW 1125/07)

Mr Robinson: The public sector share of Northern Ireland's Gross Domestic Product is estimated to be the highest of all UK regions. However, this is mainly due to the small scale of the local private sector. Therefore, growing the Northern Ireland private sector is crucial to reducing the public sector's relative contribution to the local economy.

Draft Regional Economic Strategy

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to revise the draft Regional Economic Strategy. (AQW 1142/07)

Mr Robinson: Public consultation on the draft Regional Economic Strategy concluded on 19 April 2007. I am currently assessing the responses and I will place a response on the DFP website after discussion with Executive colleagues. The next stage in the Regional Economic Strategy will need to await the outcome of the ongoing Varney Review which will be critical to future economic development policy in Northern Ireland.

Car Parking for Civil Servants

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount spent on car parking for civil servants, in the last five years. (AQW 1147/07)

Mr Robinson:

COST OF CAR PARKING TO DFP

Year	Cost
2003/04	£1,080,738.23

Year	Cost
2004/05	£1,205,648.21
2005/06	£1,507,055.29
2006/07	£1,353,138.64
2007/08	£948,677.02
Total	£6,095,257.39

Note:

The Department of Finance and Personnel has historically had responsibility for the provision of car parking to essential users within all the Northern Ireland Departments. The table above reflects this DFP expenditure.

When Departments require additional spaces, these are acquired from within Departmental budgets.

Rates Holiday

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether any incoming business to Northern Ireland receives a rates holiday, either now or in the past. (AQW 1170/07)

Mr Robinson: There is no provision in the rating legislation to provide for a rates holiday for incoming business to Northern Ireland, either now or in the past.

Rating of Unoccupied Non-Domestic Properties

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to introduce changes to the rating of unoccupied non-domestic properties in the near future. (AQW 1355/07)

Mr Robinson: I have no plans to do so at present. My Department is monitoring the current reforms being taken forward for England and Wales and I will examine the issue further following the outcome of the current review of industrial derating by the Economic Research Institute.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Respite Care

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are being put in place to ensure that the assessed needs of those with severe learning disabilities who require respite care are met, within each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 987/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My Department and Health and Social Care Trusts are working collaboratively to progress business cases for identified capital projects. I am also considering respite care in setting my budgetary priorities for the coming year.

Respite Care

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action being taken by each Health and Social Care Trust to ensure the availability of age appropriate facilities for those with severe learning disabilities aged 19-25, who require respite care. (AQW 988/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Places are allocated on a compatibility basis rather than by specific age bands; however age alignment takes place when respite is being planned, where possible.

As part of the current modernisation plans, Trusts are taking cognisance of age appropriateness when modernising and replacing existing residential provision.

Compensation Paid for Medical Negligence

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the amount of money paid to legal representatives, for both the claimants and Health and Social Care Trusts, in terms of claims for compensation for medical negligence made against each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1005/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Successful Recipients of Compensation Payments for Medical Negligence

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the amount of money paid out to successful claimants, in terms of claims for compensation for medical negligence made against each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1006/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested has been set out in the table below.

AMOUNTS PAID OUT TO SUCCESSFUL CLAIMANTS IN TERMS OF CLAIMS FOR COMPENSATION FOR MEDICAL NEGLIGENCE MADE AGAINST EACH OF THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES TRUSTS IN EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS

HSS Trust	2005/06 £000	2004/05 £000	2003/04 £000	2002/03 £000	2001/02 £000
Altnagelvin Hospitals	305	358	214	205	416
Armagh and Dungannon	45	132	144	147	3
Belfast City Hospital	728	548	594	797	1,526
Causeway	364	1,009	414	192	472
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	72	0	0	0	0
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	144	2,546	559	55	520
Down Lisburn	1,652	492	504	155	161
Foyle	0	10	7	3	0
Green Park Healthcare	117	37	112	2	57
Homefirst Community	6	0	0	0	0
Mater Hospital	93	61	179	279	47
Newry & Mourne	116	27	193	332	41
NI Ambulance Service	0	0	0	0	0
North & West Belfast	21	0	46	0	0
Royal Group of Hospitals & Dental Hospital	1,364	733	2,249	1,090	508
South & East Belfast	309	0	667	30	16
Sperrin Lakeland	492	75	36	122	41
Ulster Community & Hospitals	616	279	710	184	194
United Hospitals	1,187	940	115	50	652

The five new Health and Social Care Trusts came into operation on 1 April 2007. Since the information requested is in respect of the years 2001/02 – 2005/06, the answer has been given in relation to the nineteen Health and Social Services Trusts which existed prior to that.

Compensation Claims for Medical Negligence

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the number of claims for compensation for

medical negligence made against each of the Health and Social Care Trusts that are still pending determination, in each of the past five years.

(AQW 1007/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested has been set out in the tables below.

ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	43	8	3	32
2002/03	44	10	3	31
2003/04	54	5	6	43
2004/05	31	3	1	27
2005/06	46	0	0	46

ARMAGH AND DUNGANNON HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	4	1	2	1
2002/03	1	0	1	0
2003/04	3	0	0	3
2004/05	1	0	0	1
2005/06	5	0	0	5

BELFAST CITY HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	61	22	7	32
2002/03	37	9	1	27
2003/04	57	9	5	43
2004/05	50	4	2	44
2005/06	40	5	3	32

CAUSEWAY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	19	14	2	3
2002/03	15	8	0	7
2003/04	14	3	2	9
2004/05	12	2	1	9
2005/06	20	1	0	19

CRAIGAVON AND BANBRIDGE COMMUNITY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	0	0	0	0
2003/04	1	0	0	1
2004/05	0	0	0	0
2005/06	0	0	0	0

CRAIGAVON AREA HOSPITAL GROUP HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	38	9	19	10
2002/03	52	28	5	19
2003/04	40	8	8	24
2004/05	39	4	4	31
2005/06	36	1	3	32

DOWN LISBURN HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	19	12	5	2
2002/03	38	22	5	11
2003/04	28	10	3	15
2004/05	55	6	25	24
2005/06	30	4	1	25

FOYLE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	3	1	0	2
2003/04	4	0	0	4
2004/05	3	0	0	3
2005/06	3	0	0	3

GREEN PARK HEALTHCARE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	16	13	0	3
2002/03	14	7	1	6
2003/04	10	5	0	5
2004/05	10	1	1	8
2005/06	20	0	2	18

HOMEFIRST COMMUNITY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	2	2	0	0
2002/03	8	3	1	4
2003/04	5	1	0	4
2004/05	2	0	2	0
2005/06	1	0	0	1

MATER HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	30	12	7	11
2002/03	20	5	3	12
2003/04	38	7	3	28
2004/05	20	2	0	18
2005/06	30	2	0	28

NEWRY & MOURNE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	22	5	3	14
2002/03	20	4	1	15
2003/04	15	2	0	13
2004/05	14	0	1	13
2005/06	7	0	1	6

NI AMBULANCE SERVICE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	1	1	0	0
2003/04	2	1	0	1
2004/05	2	0	0	2
2005/06	1	0	0	1

NORTH & WEST BELFAST HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	7	3	4	0
2002/03	4	3	1	0
2003/04	1	0	0	1
2004/05	2	1	0	1
2005/06	7	0	0	7

ROYAL GROUP OF HOSPITALS AND DENTAL HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	77	31	10	36
2002/03	80	21	8	51
2003/04	82	14	5	63
2004/05	95	10	8	77
2005/06	77	3	0	74

SOUTH & EAST BELFAST HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	5	2	2	1
2002/03	1	0	0	1
2003/04	2	1	1	0
2004/05	1	0	0	1
2005/06	2	0	0	2

SPERRIN LAKELAND HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	17	3	6	8
2002/03	38	1	5	32
2003/04	20	3	2	15
2004/05	25	4	0	21
2005/06	26	0	0	26

ULSTER COMMUNITY & HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	42	7	5	30
2002/03	50	8	7	35
2003/04	39	3	2	34
2004/05	43	0	0	43
2005/06	49	2	0	47

UNITED HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	58	14	10	34
2002/03	43	10	7	26
2003/04	34	5	3	26
2004/05	59	4	7	48
2005/06	37	6	2	29

The five new Health and Social Care Trusts came into operation on 1 April 2007. Since the information requested is in respect of the years 2001/02 – 2005/06, the answer has been given in relation to the nineteen Health and Social Services Trusts which existed prior to that.

Compensation Paid for Medical Negligence

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made against each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1009/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested has been set out in the tables below.

ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	43	8	3	32
2002/03	44	10	3	31
2003/04	54	5	6	43
2004/05	31	3	1	27
2005/06	46	0	0	46

ARMAGH AND DUNGANNON HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	4	1	2	1
2002/03	1	0	1	0
2003/04	3	0	0	3
2004/05	1	0	0	1
2005/06	5	0	0	5

BELFAST CITY HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	61	22	7	32
2002/03	37	9	1	27
2003/04	57	9	5	43
2004/05	50	4	2	44
2005/06	40	5	3	32

CAUSEWAY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	19	14	2	3
2002/03	15	8	0	7
2003/04	14	3	2	9
2004/05	12	2	1	9
2005/06	20	1	0	19

CRAIGAVON AND BANBRIDGE COMMUNITY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	0	0	0	0
2003/04	1	0	0	1
2004/05	0	0	0	0
2005/06	0	0	0	0

CRAIGAVON AREA HOSPITAL GROUP HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	38	9	19	10
2002/03	52	28	5	19
2003/04	40	8	8	24
2004/05	39	4	4	31
2005/06	36	1	3	32

DOWN LISBURN HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	19	12	5	2
2002/03	38	22	5	11
2003/04	28	10	3	15
2004/05	55	6	25	24
2005/06	30	4	1	25

FOYLE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	3	1	0	2
2003/04	4	0	0	4
2004/05	3	0	0	3
2005/06	3	0	0	3

GREEN PARK HEALTHCARE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	16	13	0	3
2002/03	14	7	1	6
2003/04	10	5	0	5
2004/05	10	1	1	8
2005/06	20	0	2	18

HOMEFIRST COMMUNITY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	2	2	0	0
2002/03	8	3	1	4
2003/04	5	1	0	4
2004/05	2	0	2	0
2005/06	1	0	0	1

MATER HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	30	12	7	11
2002/03	20	5	3	12
2003/04	38	7	3	28
2004/05	20	2	0	18
2005/06	30	2	0	28

NEWRY & MOURNE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	22	5	3	14
2002/03	20	4	1	15
2003/04	15	2	0	13
2004/05	14	0	1	13
2005/06	7	0	1	6

NI AMBULANCE SERVICE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	1	1	0	0
2003/04	2	1	0	1
2004/05	2	0	0	2
2005/06	1	0	0	1

NORTH & WEST BELFAST HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	7	3	4	0
2002/03	4	3	1	0
2003/04	1	0	0	1
2004/05	2	1	0	1
2005/06	7	0	0	7

ROYAL GROUP OF HOSPITALS AND DENTAL HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	77	31	10	36
2002/03	80	21	8	51
2003/04	82	14	5	63
2004/05	95	10	8	77
2005/06	77	3	0	74

SOUTH & EAST BELFAST HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	5	2	2	1
2002/03	1	0	0	1
2003/04	2	1	1	0
2004/05	1	0	0	1
2005/06	2	0	0	2

SPERRIN LAKELAND HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	17	3	6	8
2002/03	38	1	5	32
2003/04	20	3	2	15
2004/05	25	4	0	21
2005/06	26	0	0	26

ULSTER COMMUNITY & HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	42	7	5	30
2002/03	50	8	7	35
2003/04	39	3	2	34
2004/05	43	0	0	43
2005/06	49	2	0	47

UNITED HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	58	14	10	34
2002/03	43	10	7	26
2003/04	34	5	3	26
2004/05	59	4	7	48
2005/06	37	6	2	29

The five new Health and Social Care Trusts came into operation on 1 April 2007. Since the information requested is in respect of the years 2001/02 – 2005/06, the answer has been given in relation to the nineteen Health and Social Services Trusts which existed prior to that.

Compensation Pending Determination for Medical Negligence

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will detail the number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made against each of the Health and Social Care Trusts that have been settled or successfully pursued through court, in each of the past five years . (AQW 1012/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested has been set out in the tables below.

ALTNAGELVIN HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	43	8	3	32
2002/03	44	10	3	31
2003/04	54	5	6	43
2004/05	31	3	1	27
2005/06	46	0	0	46

ARMAGH AND DUNGANNON HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	4	1	2	1
2002/03	1	0	1	0
2003/04	3	0	0	3
2004/05	1	0	0	1
2005/06	5	0	0	5

BELFAST CITY HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	61	22	7	32
2002/03	37	9	1	27
2003/04	57	9	5	43
2004/05	50	4	2	44
2005/06	40	5	3	32

CAUSEWAY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	19	14	2	3
2002/03	15	8	0	7
2003/04	14	3	2	9
2004/05	12	2	1	9
2005/06	20	1	0	19

CRAIGAVON AND BANBRIDGE COMMUNITY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	0	0	0	0
2003/04	1	0	0	1
2004/05	0	0	0	0
2005/06	0	0	0	0

CRAIGAVON AREA HOSPITAL GROUP HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	38	9	19	10
2002/03	52	28	5	19
2003/04	40	8	8	24
2004/05	39	4	4	31
2005/06	36	1	3	32

DOWN LISBURN HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	19	12	5	2
2002/03	38	22	5	11
2003/04	28	10	3	15
2004/05	55	6	25	24
2005/06	30	4	1	25

FOYLE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	3	1	0	2
2003/04	4	0	0	4
2004/05	3	0	0	3
2005/06	3	0	0	3

GREEN PARK HEALTHCARE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	16	13	0	3
2002/03	14	7	1	6
2003/04	10	5	0	5
2004/05	10	1	1	8
2005/06	20	0	2	18

HOMEFIRST COMMUNITY HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	2	2	0	0
2002/03	8	3	1	4
2003/04	5	1	0	4
2004/05	2	0	2	0
2005/06	1	0	0	1

MATER HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	30	12	7	11
2002/03	20	5	3	12
2003/04	38	7	3	28
2004/05	20	2	0	18
2005/06	30	2	0	28

NEWRY & MOURNE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	22	5	3	14
2002/03	20	4	1	15
2003/04	15	2	0	13
2004/05	14	0	1	13
2005/06	7	0	1	6

NI AMBULANCE SERVICE HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	0	0	0	0
2002/03	1	1	0	0
2003/04	2	1	0	1
2004/05	2	0	0	2
2005/06	1	0	0	1

NORTH & WEST BELFAST HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	7	3	4	0
2002/03	4	3	1	0
2003/04	1	0	0	1
2004/05	2	1	0	1
2005/06	7	0	0	7

ROYAL GROUP OF HOSPITALS AND DENTAL HOSPITAL HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	77	31	10	36
2002/03	80	21	8	51
2003/04	82	14	5	63
2004/05	95	10	8	77
2005/06	77	3	0	74

SOUTH & EAST BELFAST HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	5	2	2	1
2002/03	1	0	0	1
2003/04	2	1	1	0
2004/05	1	0	0	1
2005/06	2	0	0	2

SPERRIN LAKELAND HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	17	3	6	8
2002/03	38	1	5	32
2003/04	20	3	2	15
2004/05	25	4	0	21
2005/06	26	0	0	26

ULSTER COMMUNITY & HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	42	7	5	30
2002/03	50	8	7	35
2003/04	39	3	2	34
2004/05	43	0	0	43
2005/06	49	2	0	47

UNITED HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Year	Number of claims for compensation for medical negligence made in each year	Current situation of those cases as at 30 November 2006		
		Dismissed No.	Settled or successfully pursued No.	Pending determination No.
2001/02	58	14	10	34
2002/03	43	10	7	26
2003/04	34	5	3	26
2004/05	59	4	7	48
2005/06	37	6	2	29

The five new Health and Social Care Trusts came into operation on 1 April 2007. Since the information requested is in respect of the years 2001/02 – 2005/06, the answer has been given in relation to the nineteen Health and Social Services Trusts which existed prior to that.

Alcohol Related Incidents

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many alcohol related incidents have been dealt with by the A&E departments of hospitals in Northern Ireland, in each of last three years. (AQW 1028/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I am not in a position to provide the precise number of alcohol related incidents that have been dealt with by A&E departments of hospitals in the last three years.

The information requested is not held centrally by my Department.

Figures collated by my Department relate to the number of verbal and physical abusive incidents that occur within Trusts, Boards and Agency's and can only be detailed by staff group but not by hospital departments.

Financial Contributions by Care Home Residents

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to state the number of dwellings which have been acquired from care home residents by Health and Social Care Trusts to cover the cost of care, in the last five years. (AQW 1053/07)

Mr McGimpsey: This information is not collected. Care home residents are required by legislation to contribute to the cost of their care. Each resident undergoes a financial assessment to determine the level of this contribution. That assessment takes into account savings and other assets. Health and Social Care Trusts do not acquire properties to enable people to contribute to the cost of their care. It is for residents and their advisers to decide how best to meet their assessed contribution to the cost of their care.

Lurgan Hospital

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to comment on the future of Lurgan Hospital, both in the short term and long term, with specific reference to the closure of two respite care wards, and the moving of the skin clinic to Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 1164/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Lurgan Hospital will continue to provide a range of services locally including elderly care and therapy services.

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust, which is responsible for Lurgan Hospital, has recently approved proposals for a number of major service developments for older people living in the Southern

area. The proposals include moving respite care which is currently provided at Lurgan Hospital to a community setting. This is consistent with my Department's policy that high quality care should be provided in the most appropriate settings, preferably in or near people's homes. The Trust also plans to develop new services for older people, including a 'one-stop' consultant led clinic based at Lurgan Hospital.

A review of dermatology services is currently under way within the Trust to examine new ways of delivering services to improve access for patients. The review is part of the Trust's ongoing modernisation and reform programme and is focusing on how and where dermatology should be most appropriately provided in future. The process will include the introduction of a Dermatology Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service (ICATS), which will help to reduce the length of time patients wait for specialist assessment and treatment.

Availability of Drugs for Dementia

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the comparison between the availability of clinically effective drugs for dementia in Northern Ireland and their availability in England and Wales. (AQO 242/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The prescription of drugs for the Alzheimer's form of dementia in England and Wales is subject to guidance issued by NICE which recommends that certain drugs be used for treating people at the moderate stage of the disease only. The process by which NICE developed this guidance is currently subject to judicial review.

In Northern Ireland we would generally expect to apply NICE guidance on the use of drugs as this provides the most robust evidence base available to inform such decisions. However, NICE guidance on Alzheimer's drugs has not yet been applied in Northern Ireland and remains under review by my Department. Consequently a number of drugs used in treating people with Alzheimer's disease are currently more widely available in Northern Ireland compared to England and Wales.

NHS Direct

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will undertake to extend NHS Direct to Northern Ireland to enable patients to have 24 hour access to NHS staff and advice. (AQO 231/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I am interested in developing an NHS Direct-type service for the people of Northern Ireland. I believe this would provide improved access to advice and information on health matters, enabling people to deal with many issues at home, thus avoiding attendance at their Doctor or A & E services. However, this will, quite properly, have to be considered by the Executive against a range of priorities as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Dental Patients

Ms Carmel Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the number of dental patients in receipt of NHS funded treatment, broken down by Trust area. (AQO 206/07)

Mr McGimpsey: By Trust area, the numbers of patients receiving Health Service dental treatment in 2006/07 were as follows:

Belfast Trust:	176,273
Northern Area Trust:	180,685
South Eastern Area Trust:	123,671
Southern Area Trust:	136,097
Western Area Trust:	95,189
These total	711,765.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Spending on Consultancy and Public Relations

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent by his department in each of the last five years on (a) public relations, and (b) other consultancy services. (AQO 288/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In 2002/03, £1,009,481 was spent on external consultancy.

In 2003/04 £1,590,641 was spent on external consultancy, including £1,435 on public relations.

In 2004/05, £1,885,458 was spent on external consultancy, including £6,197 on public relations.

In 2005/06, £2,173,702 was spent on external consultancy, including £6,894 on public relations.

In 2006/07, £2,502,487 was spent on external consultancy.

Cost of Drugs Wastage

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the total cost to the Health Service in relation to the annual cost of drugs wastage, and what measures he is taking to address this wastage. (AQO 217/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested on cost is not routinely collected. On the basis of figures extrapolated from Great Britain, it is estimated that the cost of unused medicines in Northern Ireland amounts to approximately £2.5million per year. I should add, however, that even this is an inaccurate figure as it represents only those unused drugs returned to pharmacies for disposal. It is impossible to estimate accurately how much people dispose of privately. However, even £2.5m is a tiny fraction – about 0.7% - of the total drugs bill for NI, which stands at some £354million.

To reduce drugs wastage, my Department is pursuing a number of initiatives. These include medicines management initiatives, where patients are provided with information and support by their pharmacist on when and how to take their tablets and so reduce the opportunities for medicines to be wasted. In addition, repeat dispensing is currently being rolled out across Northern Ireland – this allows patients to get their repeat medicines for up to a year from their community pharmacy, under careful monitoring by the pharmacist, without having to contact their GP.

We are also rolling out an Integrated Medicines Management initiative, which includes promoting, where appropriate, the use of patients' own drugs during a hospital stay, thereby contributing to a reduction in medicines wastage.

Re-Branding of Hospitals

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the cost and value for money of re-branding hospitals, following reconstitution of the Health Trusts. (AQO 236/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The changes to the health and social care structures in Northern Ireland as a result of the Review of Public Administration provided an opportunity for a single identity to be developed. For the first time patients and staff can recognise that organisations belong to one coherent system delivering consistent, high quality services across Northern Ireland.

In terms of cost, and regardless of re-branding, the reduction in the number of Trusts from 19 to 6 necessitated a change to the corporate identity of all the health and social care facilities and buildings across Northern Ireland. Every effort has been made

to minimise costs in this area including keeping all design within the Service and using up existing stocks of stationery where possible. The only separately identifiable cost to date has been for signage at just over £33,000.

I am satisfied that to date the process for re-branding is beneficial, should be applied to other areas as appropriate and represents value for money. I have made it clear that as the process rolls out cost must be kept to the absolute minimum.

Autism

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an update on his approach to autism. (AQO 212/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The steep rise in diagnosed cases of autism in the past few years has placed considerable pressure on the services available. I share in the cross party support for improving these services and to that end my Department will shortly be undertaking a review of autism service provision to identify gaps, share best practice and promote innovation.

New Acute Hospital at Enniskillen

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what services will be available to the new acute hospital at Enniskillen when it is completed. (AQO 270/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The new acute hospital at Enniskillen will provide a wide range of acute services for the people of the south west including Accident and Emergency, inpatient medicine and surgery, critical care and maternity. It will also provide day case surgery and day procedures together with a comprehensive range of diagnostics, including radiology and laboratory tests and a comprehensive range of outpatient services.

Enabling works have already begun on the selected site at Wolf Lough to the north of Enniskillen and it is expected that the hospital will be completed in 2011.

Mental Health

Mr Samuel Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an update on his department's approach to mental health. (AQO 211/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Bamford Review has made recommendations on the future configuration of mental health services. My officials are currently developing detailed proposals for handling Government's

response to the Review's recommendations as a whole, including the resource implications over coming years although we have already begun to implement a number of the recommendations from reports received to date.

Cushendall Fire Station

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Fire and Rescue Service will provide a new fire station in Cushendall, Co. Antrim. (AQO 205/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service has identified Cushendall Fire Station as a high priority for rebuild on the existing site in its current Strategic Infrastructure Development Plan. The timing of the new build will depend on the successful completion of work currently being jointly undertaken by my Department, the Fire and Rescue Service and the Strategic Investment Board to secure the funding which has been identified in the current Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland for the modernisation of emergency services,

Investment Package for Dentistry

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce an investment package for dentistry to ensure that dental practices can invest in oral health promotion. (AQO 230/07)

Mr McGimpsey: My officials are currently engaged in negotiations with the British Dental Association on the development of a Dental Contract which will underpin the Primary Dental Care Strategy and provide a framework for the delivery of primary dental services. The contract will enable both independent contractors and commissioning authorities to further enhance and develop the role of dentistry in improving the health and well being of the Northern Ireland population, including oral health promotion.

Hospital Performance

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency measures he plans to put in place to ensure a better performance from hospitals in Northern Ireland. (AQO 232/07)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is currently finalising challenging efficiencies of £338m for the period 2008/09 to 2010/11, as part of the Executive Committee's agreed approach to the Comprehensive Spending Review. This builds on existing efficiencies of £146m to be achieved by 2007/08.

Savings will be attained through a range of measures such as improved procurement; more efficient prescribing and dispensing of medicines; improved productivity and reduced administration.

My Department is also currently working on an updated set of financial rules to govern transactions between commissioners and providers. This will enhance the efficiency of the service by improving the link between the level and appropriateness of services provided and the income of the provider.

Carrickfergus Fire Station

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of the current condition of Carrickfergus fire station. (AQO 251/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has confirmed that the condition of the Fire and Rescue Station at Carrickfergus is adequate for the immediate needs of the Fire and Rescue Service.

However, Carrickfergus Fire Station has been identified by NIFRS as High Priority for the construction of a new station in a new location in its Strategic Infrastructure Development Plan. In the interim further minor improvements to the condition of the Station are planned in this financial year, which will accommodate NIFRS plans for changes in the duty system where fulltime fire fighters will provide an enhanced attendance time at incidents.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Civil Servants' Car Share Scheme

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the incentives made available by the Northern Ireland Civil Service, in order to encourage staff to share vehicles when travelling to work. (AQW 636/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The promotion of car sharing is a matter for my Department's Roads Service.

A car share scheme was introduced in June 2005 to encourage Civil Service staff to share the journey to work on the basis that it reduces traffic congestion, saves on fuel costs, and contributes to a reduction in exhaust emissions. In Clarence Court, the Headquarters of my Department, 23 spaces in the car park are reserved for car sharers.

A free on-line car-share scheme is promoted across the Civil Service through my Department's Travelwise initiative. Participating staff can register their journey details on the car share website. The system then automatically searches for potential journey partners travelling in the same direction and allows individuals to contact each other via email or telephone. Staff can register by logging on to www.travelwisenicarshare.com or by contacting the Travelwise NI information line on 0845 378 0908. More than 1050 Civil Servants are currently registered on the scheme. I can also advise that the Travelwise Car Share Scheme has now been rolled out to businesses and the public.

Roads Service also promotes the use of free Park & Share sites, where staff and the public may park their cars, meet their car share partners and continue the journeys to work.

Street Lighting

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will conduct a new survey in relation to the request for lighting along the coast road from Larne to Drains Bay, in particular before and after the Black Arch area, due to the popularity of this route with walkers, runners and cyclists. (AQW 782/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that there is a 300m length of road with a 30 mph speed limit on the Larne side of the Black Arch at Drain's Bay. While there has been no recent development on this section of road, Roads Service's current policy would allow street lighting to be installed from the Arch up to end of the 30mph speed limit.

There are, however, some strong arguments against extending the lighting on this rural road which is in a particularly scenic setting. I have therefore asked Roads Service officials to arrange to meet some of the Larne Borough Councillors to discuss these arguments and agree a course of action. If it is agreed that the street lighting should be extended to the end of the 30 mph limit, Roads Service will also discuss the siting of columns close to the Black Arch, so that they do not detract from its appearance.

Maintenance of Drainage Systems

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to have a clearance of gullies undertaken to prevent blockages after the recent storms, within (a) Ards Borough, and (b) Strangford. (AQW 820/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me 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 which apply equally to the Ards Borough and Strangford areas. 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.

In addition to the scheduled operation, further cleaning is carried out to deal with blocked gullies, particularly at locations where fallen leaves represent an ongoing problem at certain times of the year, or where there has been a history of gullies becoming blocked for other reasons.

I have been assured that Roads Service's local staff are in the process of identifying and cleaning any gullies or storm drainage systems that became blocked during the recent storms.

Cycle Lane in Carrickfergus and Larne

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his strategic plan for cycle lanes in Carrickfergus and Larne. (AQW 827/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department, which continues to promote cycling as a sustainable mode of travel, has a number of high-level policy documents that deal with cycling. These include the Northern Ireland Cycling Strategy, the Regional Transportation Strategy, the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan which includes Carrickfergus, and the Sub-Regional Transport Plan which includes Larne.

The Department's strategic plan for cycle lanes in Carrickfergus is set out in Chapter 8 of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. In summary, the thrust of the proposals is to improve facilities along the A2 coast road, with appropriate linkages into Carrickfergus and beyond to the B90 (Middle Road).

The Sub Regional Transportation Plan outlines the Strategic Plan for cycle lanes in Larne. The plan contains a blueprint for Larne that outlines the existing and proposed cycle infrastructure for the town. A significant amount of the plan contained in the blueprint has been delivered by Roads Service, working in conjunction with Larne Borough Council and Sustrans over the past number of years, for example, a new off-road shared use facility was provided along the A8 from the Old Belfast Road to Pound Street during 2004/05 at a cost of some £60,000.

Road Works, Larne

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm when work will be completed on the main road that is to connect Walnut Hollow,

Oakdene, and Hampton Manor in Larne. (AQW 828/07)

Mr Murphy: These streets are in a large residential development, known locally as Larne West, which is to be served by a main housing distributor road. In accordance with the overall concept plan, individual housing developers are constructing sections of this main road as part of their planning approvals, with the final desired outcome being the complete delivery of the road. As such, the timing of the delivery lies outside my Department's direct control, and depends on suitable housing proposals being brought forward by developers through the planning process. I am unable therefore, to give a definite date for overall completion.

Light Rail System for Belfast

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to set out the progress which has been made in providing a light rail system for the Greater Belfast area. (AQW 830/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department is currently examining the feasibility of two pilot rapid transit routes in the Belfast Metropolitan Area (BMA): EWAY, which would serve the Newtownards corridor; and the CITI Route (City Airport Titanic Quarter route) as a new route linking Belfast city centre and George Best Belfast City Airport through the Titanic Quarter and the new retail development in the Belfast Harbour Estate. The study is also looking at routes through the City centre to the Queens University area of South Belfast and to West Belfast.

While the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, published in 2004, suggested that Rapid Transit should be bus-based, the current study is considering both light rail and a variety of bus-based rapid transit options to determine the most appropriate technology for the BMA. The study is due to make an initial report in the summer on the EWAY and CITI routes, with a supplementary report in the autumn on the feasibility of routes through the City centre to South and West Belfast.

Belfast to Derry / Londonderry Railway Line

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps that have been taken to minimise breakdowns on the Belfast to Derry/ Londonderry and Portrush railway lines. (AQW 831/07)

Mr Murphy: NIR currently operates 7,248 services from Belfast and Derry each year. During the period July 2005 to June 2006 there were 62 cancellations

and 178 delays on services due to technical faults on trains. In the period July 2006 to June 2007 this fell significantly to 17 cancellations and 72 delays.

The trains currently used on the Derry line are a combination of the Class 80 trains and the new C3K trains. The use of the new trains has helped combat breakdowns on the line and NIR continues to work with the train manufacturer, CAF, to further improve fleet reliability. Translink also proposes to undertake a programme of works between June and December of this year in order to improve the reliability of the remaining class 80 trains. This will have a beneficial impact on the Portrush line where services are mainly provided by the class 80s.

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Railway Line

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of mechanised defects which led to (a) cancellations, and (b) late arrivals, of the trains operating on the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry and Portrush lines in the last two years. (AQW 832/07)

Mr Murphy: Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) operates a total of 7248 services per year from Belfast and Derry/Portrush. During the period July 2005 to June 2006 there were 178 delays and 62 cancellations to these services and, in the period July 2006 to June 2007, 72 delays and 17 cancellations. The improvement in service reliability is a direct result of the deployment of the class 3k trains on services to the North West.

Parking Facilities at Prior's Lea, Holywood

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to put in place better parking facilities for residents, particularly the elderly residents, of Prior's Lea in Holywood. (AQW 833/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service, has previously received requests from residents and elected representatives for the conversion of a grassed area to allow a new access road from Palace Grove and additional parking facilities at Prior's Lea, Holywood.

These requests were assessed using established guidelines, which have been agreed with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), for use when considering the provision of car parking facilities in existing NIHE housing areas, such as Prior's Lea, Holywood.

Under these guidelines the Housing Executive processes all requests for such facilities and decides,

in consultation with Roads Service, where additional parking areas/lay-bys should be provided. If a scheme is deemed to be justified by both parties and duly agreed, it is then financed jointly by Roads Service and the Housing Executive, subject to the availability of funds, with the necessary work executed by Roads Service.

Whilst Roads Service has in the past contributed towards the cost of improved parking provision within some housing estates, such contributions have been restricted to routes where there is a significant traffic progression difficulty to through traffic, or where road safety is compromised. Where this is not the case, the provision of additional parking facilities is the responsibility of the landowner.

As part of a full assessment of this request, a site inspection and traffic surveys were carried out at various times of the day at Palace Grove/Prior's Lea. These surveys indicated that traffic progression was not a significant problem at this location. It was also noted that there were no recorded personal injury collisions in this area and that the conversion of the grassed area at Prior's Lea would result in the removal of existing parking bays on Palace Grove, which provides 11 marked parking spaces for the residents of Prior's Lea. It was therefore considered that the expenditure of limited public funds to provide additional car parking at Prior's Lea could not be justified.

However, an additional traffic survey was carried out between 10.00am & 10.30pm at Palace Grove, at the request of residents, who believed that any traffic progression problems would be evident at this time. The results of this survey were considered as part of an independent review of this case. This review was carried out in March 2007, by a senior Roads Service official not previously involved in the matter. He considered all the relevant facts and procedures used to assess this request, along with the additional survey results which did not highlight any significant traffic progression problems for through traffic on Palace Grove, and agreed with the decision not to provide additional parking facilities at Prior's Lea, Holywood.

As the facts surrounding this request have not changed since the March 2007 review, I can confirm that there are no current plans to provide additional parking facilities at Prior's Lea, Holywood.

Improvements to Abercorn Bridge

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development what plan he has to make improvements to the Abercorn Bridge, Castle Brae, Newtownstewart. (AQW 834/07)

Mr Murphy: I understand that Abercorn Bridge, Castle Brae, Newtownstewart, has deteriorated significantly in recent years. Following an assessment

carried out in December 2006, a 3T weight restriction was imposed on the bridge and traffic was reduced to single lane operation. These restrictions have not had as severe an effect on traffic as they would have had a few years previously, due to the construction, by my Department's Roads Service, of the Newtownstewart Bypass, in December 2002. This provided additional linkages between Plumbridge Road and the town centre.

I am advised that it would be neither practical nor economical to repair the bridge, and that a replacement bridge is estimated to cost in the region of £1million. As with any of my Department's functions, bridge improvement works have to be prioritised. A scheme to replace Abercorn Bridge is currently approximately five years away.

A32 Omagh to Enniskillen

Mr Tom Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place for the upgrade of the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen route, particularly in relation to the recent announcement of two new hospitals for the south-west region of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 838/07)

Mr Murphy: In July 2006, my Department's Roads Service issued a consultation document entitled 'Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015', which contained a number of road improvement proposals including a £10 million programme of single carriageway improvement and realignment schemes including guaranteed overtaking sections (2+1s) for the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen.

Roads Service is currently considering responses to the consultation document. Work on the assessment of this Programme is at an advanced stage, and as it has not yet been finalised, I am presently not in a position to advise on details of its content or timing.

I am advised that, the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety will contribute £5 million towards upgrading this route as a result of new hospital provision in Enniskillen.

A5 Dual-Carriageway

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an outline plan of how officials from road services will liaise with their counterparts in the National Road Authority for the proposed A5 dual-carriageway from Londonderry/Derry to Aghnacloy.

(AQW 882/07)

Mr Murphy: You may be aware that as part of the Chancellor's package announced on 22 March the Irish Government confirmed its intention to make available a contribution of £400 million to fund an

unprecedented package of infrastructure investment, including a major new roads programme to provide dual carriageway standard on routes within the North serving the North West Gateway of Letterkenny/Derry and on the eastern seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne.

As management arrangements have not yet been finalised I am not in a position to provide an answer to your question at present.

However, I can advise you that senior officials in my Department's Roads Service currently meet regularly with their counterparts in the National Roads Authority and that there is precedent for excellent working relationships in projects such as the Newry-Dundalk dual carriageway, which is due to be completed shortly.

Northern Ireland Water Customer Service

Mr John McCallister asked the inception of Northern Ireland Water a) what is the target time for the Northern Ireland Water Customer Relations Centre to reply to queries from customers b) what percentage of replies to queries are reached by way of a 'holding letter' c) on how many occasions 'holding letters' have been issued and d) how many customers have received more than one 'holding letter'

(AQW 885/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW).

I have, however, contacted NIW in relation to this matter and the Director of Customer Services has advised me that the target times for Northern Ireland Water to reply to customer queries are in line with the standards that apply for service delivery in the water industry in England and Wales. The target response time for billing queries is 5 days and for complaints is 10 days. Response times for other customer queries range from 10 days for general correspondence and up to 60 days for adoptions of sewers under Article 167 of The Water & Sewerage Service (NI) Order 2006.

Since the inception of Northern Ireland Water on 1 April 2007, a total of 314 holding letters have been issued to customers. This represents just under 1.8% of all queries received in writing. During this period, only 3 customers received more than one holding reply.

Belfast to Derry / Londonderry Railway Line

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment has been made of the condition of track on the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry rail line, with particular reference to the Ballymena to Derry/Londonderry section; and what money has been earmarked to invest in renewing and replacing track on the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry rail line. (AQW 887/07)

Mr Murphy: The network of continuous welded track is inspected twice per week and ultrasonic rail inspections, which check the integrity of the rails, are undertaken every 6 months. Permanent Way Inspectors walk their respective track sections on a quarterly basis and ad hoc train cab rides permit additional track evaluation. During April and May of this year, NIR's Professional Head of Track and the District Engineer also completed a full inspection of the tracks between Ballymena and Londonderry on foot.

As a result of its examinations, Translink has assessed that the line between Ballymena and Londonderry is in poor condition and the speed limit for the overall line has been reduced from 70mph to 60mph. In areas of particularly poor condition the speed limit has been further restricted.

Following the carrying out of an appraisal which assessed the merits of a range of options for future railways provision, the Department is bidding for additional funding to upgrade the Derry line as part of the second Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, work between Belfast and Derry is planned to maintain services at existing levels in accordance with the Railways Review Group Report published in 2004. Translink have recently submitted to the Department an economic appraisal of options in support of a £12.0million project to deliver track life extension on parts of the Ballymena to Derry Line. This is currently with the Department's Economists who are carrying out an evaluation of the business case before inviting DFP approval.

Finally action is currently being taken to address problems which have arisen on the line close to Ballymoney where wet beds are leading to deterioration of the track. The Department has approved capital grant of £489 thousand in this regard.

Public Transport

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his department has taken to address the public transport needs of residents in (a) Ballymena Borough Council area; (b) Ballymoney Borough Council area; and (c) Moyle

District Council area, in each of the last two years. (AQW 907/07)

Mr Murphy: Public transport needs have been addressed through the development and publication of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan, published in March 2005 and the Sub-Regional Transport Plan (SRTP), published in June 2007. Specifically the SRTP proposes infrastructure improvements and service improvements in the Ballymena Borough Council, Ballymoney Borough Council and Moyle District Council areas.

During the last two years my Department's Roads Service has introduced a number of measures to improve the transport needs of residents in Ballymena, Ballymoney and Moyle Council areas. These measures are as follows:

Council Area	Year	Costs	Measures
Ballymena Borough Council	2006/07	£3,000	Direction signage to Ballymena Bus Station; direction signage to a new park and ride facility adjacent to Ballymena Bus and Railway station; and hardstand area at bus stop at Largy Road/Kilcurry Road junction.
	2005/06	£18,000	Footway links at Tullygarley bus shelter; footway links and central reservation crossings provided to a number of bus stops along the Lisnevenagh Road.
Ballymoney Borough Council	2006/07	£9,000	Footway link at junction of Craig's Road at Drumack Road to bus shelter; footway link at Vow Road to bus shelter; footway link at Clintyfinnan to bus shelter; footway link on Kilraughts Road at junction of Boyland Road to bus shelter; and hardstand area on Frosses Road at Burnquarter at bus stop.
	2005/06	£6,000	Footway link at Derrykeighan to bus shelter; footway link at Knockahollet Primary School to bus stop; any footway link at Bellaghy Road at junction of Bellaghy Road at bus stop.
Moyle District Council	2006/07	£12,000	Bus Stop Upgrades, including footway links, Giant's Causeway
	2005/06	£Nil	

Residents of the Ballymena Borough Council, Ballymoney Borough Council and Moyle District Council have also benefited from general expenditure

on public transport services. In the past two years my Department's expenditure on public transport services has been as follows:

	2005-06 £000	2006-07 £000
Railway Services	60,382	36,026
Road Passenger Services	58,132	61,214

Part of this expenditure is aimed specifically at residents of the three Council areas.

My department provides support to North Antrim Community Transport and Coleraine Area Rural Transport. These are community based transport partnerships which offer a range of transport options, including door-to-door (demand responsive to members) transport and group hire services to rural dwellers.

The door-to-door transport scheme was introduced in Ballymena and Ballymoney on 27 April 2007. The door-to-door scheme is a transport service for people living in urban areas (defined as areas whose population is in excess of 10,000), who through disability find it difficult or impossible to use mainstream public transport.

Public Transport at Rathlin Island

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what new initiatives his department has introduced to address the public transport needs of residents of Rathlin Island, in the last two years. (AQW 908/07)

Mr Murphy: No new initiatives have been introduced in the last two years. Rathlin Island is served by a ferry service which is provided under long term contract and this is currently under review.

Public Transport Needs in Craigavon and Banbridge

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he has taken to address the public transport needs of residents in (a) Craigavon Borough Council; and (b) Banbridge District Council, in each of the last two years. (AQW 919/07)

Mr Murphy: Public transport needs have been addressed through the development and publication of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan, published in March 2005 and the Sub-Regional Transport Plan (SRTP), published in June 2007. Specifically the SRTP proposes infrastructure improvements and service improvements in the

Craigavon Borough Council and Banbridge District Council areas.

I understand that my Department's Roads Service has spent approximately £100,000 over the last two financial years in providing and improving bus lay-bys and shelters in the Craigavon and Banbridge Council areas. The breakdown of this investment, which involves improving linkages to bus shelters, is as follows:

Council Area	Year	Costs	Measures
Craigavon Borough Council	2006/07	£32,000	Bus lay-bys have been provided at Drumgor 2 and Tullygalley East.
	2005/06	£41,200	Bus lay-bys have been provided at Drumgor 1, Moyraverty Road, Main Street Waringstown and Lake Street Lurgan Footway Link.
Banbridge District Council	2006/07	£21,000	A bus stop and lay-by have been provided at Lawrencetown.
	2005/06	£6,000	A bus lay-by has been provided at Ballybrick/ Glenburn/ Mays Corner.

Residents of the Craigavon Borough Council and Banbridge District Council areas have also benefited from general expenditure on public transport services. In the past two years my Department's expenditure on public transport services has been as follows:

	2005-06 £000	2006-07 £000
Railway Services	60,382	36,026
Road Passenger Services	58,132	61,214

Part of this expenditure is aimed specifically at residents of the two Council areas. My department provides support to Down Armagh Rural Community Transport, a community based transport partnership which offers a range of transport options, including door-to-door (demand responsive to members) transport and group hire services to rural dwellers in both the Craigavon Borough Council and Banbridge District Council areas.

The door-to-door transport scheme was introduced in Craigavon on 11 May 2007 and in Banbridge on 30 March 2007. The door-to-door scheme is a transport service for people living in urban areas (defined as areas whose population is in excess of 10,000), who through disability find it difficult or impossible to use mainstream public transport.

Traffic Calming Measures

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent on traffic calming measures in Carrickfergus and Larne in 2006/07; and what plans there are for providing traffic calming measures for these areas in 2007/08. (AQW 921/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established. I should also explain that the funding for traffic calming measures is allocated on a Divisional basis and not by individual Council area. Within each of Roads Service's four Divisions schemes compete for inclusion within a minor works programme on the basis of merit. Implementation is then subject to the successful completion of resident's consultation and legislative process.

The table below outlines the spend in both the Carrickfergus and Larne areas in 2006/07 and the proposed spend for 2007/08.

Area	Year	Cost	Scheme
Carrickfergus	2006/07	£Nil	
	2007/08	£30,000	Alexander Road. Barn Road.
Larne	2006/07	£Nil	
	2007/08	£45,000	Drumahoe Road/Gardens, Millbrook. The Upper Waterloo Road/ Recreation Road area of Larne. Ballycarry village.

Ownership of Land

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that his department owns the land upon which garages are built at the rear of Shannagh Park, Carrickfergus; and if so, to detail the planned maintenance programme for the removal of litter at this site. (AQW 922/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department does not own the unregistered land upon which the garages at Shannagh Park, Carrickfergus are built. However, the surfaced area to the rear of Shannagh Park, Carrickfergus is adopted by Roads Service and is therefore part of the public road network.

Under Article 7 of The Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, responsibility for litter removal from a 'relevant road' is a function of the appropriate district council (every road is a 'relevant road' unless specifically designated otherwise by the Department).

Bus Service in Ballymena and Moyle

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last three years, the amount spent by his department on (a) improving bus services; (b) providing, repairing or improving bus lay-bys and shelters; (c) establishing new conventional bus services linking isolated communities to villages and towns; and (d) developing innovative demand-responsive services for residents in deep rural areas in (i) Ballymena Borough Council area; and (ii) Moyle District Council area. (AQW 929/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service introduces a number of measures each year aimed at improving access to bus services. Work is carried out in liaison with local councils and is frequently aimed at locations where the local council has provided bus shelters.

In the Ballymena Borough Council area during the last three years the following works have been carried out:

Year	Costs	Measures
2006/07	£3,000	Direction signage to Ballymena Bus Station; direction signage to a new park and ride facility adjacent to Ballymena Bus and Railway station; and hardstand area at bus stop at Largy Road/Kilcurry Road junction.
2005/06	£18,000	Footway links at Tullygarley bus shelter; footway links and central reservation crossings provided to a number of bus stops along the Lisnevenagh Road.
2004/05:	£47,000	New bus lay-by and turning area between Crebilly Road and Old Crebilly Road in Ballymena, removing the need for buses to turn in area of heavy pedestrian movement; bus boarder provided at bus stops at Ballymoney Road, Ballymena; footway links at Mount Pleasant, Craig's Road to a bus shelter; footway link on Ballnafie Road at Tully Road to a bus shelter; footway link on Whitesides Road at Caddy Road to a bus shelter; and footway link on Grove Road at Dunclug Gardens to bus stop removing need to use steps.

In the Moyle District Council area during the last three years the following works have been carried out:

Year	Costs	Measures
2006/07	£12,000	Bus Stop Upgrades, including footway links, Giant's Causeway
2005/06	£ NIL	
2004/05:	£ NIL	

During the past three years my Department has provided support to road passenger services as follows:

Year	Amount
2004/05	£36,967,000
2005/06	£58,132,000
2006/07	£61,214,000

Part of this expenditure has been aimed specifically at residents of the two council areas.

My Department has supported the provision of services for residents in deep rural parts of the Council area through providing Rural Transport Fund support to North Antrim Community Transport as follows:

Year	Amount
2004/05	£61,687
2005/06	£60,000
2006/07	£130,150

Rural Transport Funding support was also provided Translink to support services which are uneconomic but socially necessary as follows:

Year	Ballymena Borough Council	Moyle District Council
2004/05	Nil	Nil
2005/06	£1,863	£8,415
2006/07	£3,591	£47,685

In 2006/07 my Department spent £17,501.70 on door-to-door transport services in the Ballymena urban area. The door to door scheme is a transport service for people living in urban areas (defined as areas whose population is in excess of 10,000), who through disability find it difficult or impossible to use mainstream public transport.

Parking Meters in Belfast

Ms Carmel Hanna asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of parking meters in Belfast; and (b) the number that are not working at present. (AQW 933/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises that there are 158 pay and display machines in Belfast, of which 152 are located on-street and 6 are located in off-street pay and display car parks.

The machines are fitted with a report-back facility that details faults as they occur, to a back-office monitoring system. At the time of investigating this request, on Thursday 21 June 2007, 8 on-street machines were not working.

Planning Policy Statements

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what are his plans for future planning policy statements. (AQW 944/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department is currently preparing four Planning Policy Statements (PPSs), which are at different stages of development. They are a revision of PPS 12 (Housing in Settlements), PPS 5 (Retailing Town Centres and Commercial Leisure Developments), PPS 20 (The Coast), and PPS 14 (Sustainable Development in the Countryside). There are presently no plans to prepare further Planning Policy Statements.

Road Closures in Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to address the closure of roads within (a) the Ards Borough Council area; and (b) the Strangford constituency, as a result of bad weather and storms; and to detail the number of roads in these areas that have been closed, in each of the last three years. (AQW 957/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, whilst several roads in the Ards Borough Council area were flooded as a result of the recent prolonged and intense rainfall, none were deemed to be fully closed. The situation on the ground was that although a small number of vehicles became stranded having attempted to drive through the floods, the majority of drivers were able to negotiate the flood water and the roads were passable with care. This is clearly not an ideal situation and Roads Service staff are working closely with staff in the Rivers Agency to determine if any steps can be taken to avoid this happening again or, at the very least, reduce the risk in the future.

Although I am unable to provide exact details of the number of roads which have been closed as a result of bad weather in the past three years, I understand that there is some history of flooding on the A20 between Newtownards and Portaferry which has resulted in the road having to be closed. This tends to occur on one or two occasions during the year when heavy rain and strong winds coincide with abnormally high tides. Unfortunately there is little that can be done to combat these combined forces of nature and closing the road is the only option and this is done in the interests of motorists' safety.

In the Strangford constituency, one road, Park Drive, Dundonald, was closed to traffic for a relatively short period of time on Tuesday, 12 June 2007, as a result of the heavy rain. Roads Service aims to inspect and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas

between once and twice per annum depending on local circumstances. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned on average once per annum. 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.

Residents' Parking Schemes

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the measures his department is taking to ensure that residents are able to park outside their homes; and to outline the steps taken to provide residents with parking permits. (AQW 966/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has received numerous requests from elected representatives and community groups to introduce Residents' Parking schemes in areas subjected to all day commuter parking. Following a public consultation on a draft Residents' Parking policy, which was completed in February 2007, Roads Service is now finalising a policy, which will facilitate the introduction of such schemes. Subject to my approval of this policy, Roads Service expects to introduce the first Residents' Parking schemes towards the end of 2007.

I understand that operating times for Residents' Parking schemes will be designed to reduce commuter parking in residential areas during weekdays. However, outside the operating times, normal parking will be permitted, unless no other waiting restrictions are in place.

Prior to the introduction of a Residents' Parking scheme, residents will be consulted on the scheme design. Once a Residents' Parking Order has been introduced, Roads Service will issue a letter to residents explaining how the scheme will operate and how to apply for a Residents' permit.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria that are applied in assessing the requirement for representatives from Northern Ireland Water to attend District Council meetings. (AQW 978/07)

Mr Murphy: There is no statutory requirement under the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 for representatives from Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to attend District Council meetings. I have asked the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you about any operational approach taken by NIW.

Road Signs

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps she is taking to introduce signs detailing the number of road deaths in each county in Northern Ireland, similar to those in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 983/07)

Mr Murphy: As road signage is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been passed to me, as Minister responsible, to answer.

Signs of this nature have been erected by the National Roads Authority (NRA) in the South, generally on each National Primary approach road to each county, to indicate the number of road deaths in each county. I am advised that the NRA has concerns about the use of such signs, is unconvinced of their value and is proposing to remove them. My Department's Roads Service has, therefore, no plans to introduce such signs in the North.

Road Signs

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce road signs detailing distances in kilometres, in addition to the existing signs showing distances in miles. (AQW 985/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has no plans to introduce road signs detailing distances in kilometres in addition to miles for cost, safety and amenity reasons.

The inclusion of a metric (km) equivalent on road signs in the North, which currently carry the distance in miles, would incur a significant capital cost, as all existing signs would need to be retrofitted or replaced. These costs would be disproportionate to any overall benefit to be derived from the change and, given the current budgetary pressures on the Department, would be difficult to justify.

From a safety aspect, there is the potential for driver confusion where distances are given in both metric and imperial units.

The addition of a metric equivalent on road signs would require the use of larger signs and would increase the visual intrusion on the landscape, particularly in rural areas.

Disabled Parking Facilities

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of applications received in each year from 2000 to 2006 inclusive, for disabled parking facilities, made by non-disabled

drivers of people with disabilities; and how many of these applications were successful. (AQW 1002/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that applications for disabled parking bays are made by the person with the disability, giving details of the requested location, their vehicle (and details of the driver, if the latter is not the applicant) and other relevant details.

Complete statistics of the number of these applications received by my Department's Roads Service, where the driver of the vehicle was not the applicant, and those subsequently successful, are only available from 2002, as detailed in the table below:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Applications where the driver of the vehicle was not the applicant	115	131	126	129	133
Successful Applications	34	26	32	27	25

Residents' Disabled Parking

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of applications received in each year from 2000 to 2006 inclusive, for disabled parking facilities outside peoples' homes; and how many of these were rejected. (AQW 1003/07)

Mr Murphy: Complete statistics of the number of applications for disabled parking bays received by my Department's Roads Service, and those subsequently rejected, are only available from 2002, as detailed in the table below:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Applications for disabled parking facilities outside homes	278	333	347	355	336
Rejected Applications	180	208	218	198	187

Applications are made by the person with the disability giving details of the requested location, their vehicle (and details of the driver, if the latter is not the applicant) and other relevant details.

Free Travel for Women Aged 60

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when free travel for women aged 60 will become available. (AQW 1041/07)

Mr Murphy: I have no current plans to introduce free travel for women aged 60 and over. However,

following a review of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme, I have made bids as part of the Budget 2007 process to secure the resources to extend the Scheme in a number of ways, including lowering the eligible age for free travel for all men and women to 60. Any extension of the scheme will be dependent upon securing the necessary resources which means that the case for such an extension will need to be considered alongside not only other possible changes to the scheme, but against many other spending priorities which will be put before the Executive later this year. An extension of the scheme would also require that both equality impact and public consultation processes were successfully completed.

Severance Package to Former Chief Executives

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline whether his department has endorsed the salary and severance package levels paid to the last two chief executives of Translink. (AQW 1054/07)

Mr Murphy: Salary levels and the terms of reference for Translink Chief Executives are determined by the Remuneration Committee of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC).

The financial framework, within which NITHC and its subsidiary companies is required by the Department to operate, is set out in the Financial Memorandum implemented in July 2006. While there is no provision for the Department to endorse salary levels, recommendations of the NITHC Remuneration Committee in respect of periodic reviews of Directors' remuneration and the award of annual bonuses must be submitted to the Department prior to adoption. The Department reserves the right to direct the Remuneration Committee in relation to remuneration levels.

Regarding severance any proposal by NITHC to pay any redundancy or compensation for loss of office over and above the standard terms requires the approval of the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Consequently the Department did not endorse the salary packages paid to the last two Chief Executives of Translink. It was aware of the baseline salary for Mr Moffatt, the last Chief Executive, and did approve his severance package. However, it did not approve the severance package for the previous Chief Executive Mr Hesketh who retired in March 2003, prior to the implementation of the Financial Memorandum.

Severance Package to Head of Infrastructure

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether any severance or enhanced retirement package was paid to Translink's Infrastructure and Property Executive on his retirement in 2002; and, if so, what was the amount of this payment. (AQW 1055/07)

Mr Murphy: There was no severance or enhanced retirement package paid to the former Head of Infrastructure on his departure from the Northern Ireland Holding Company (NITHC) in March 2002. However, he did receive an exgratia payment of £28,500 under an agreement with NITHC that he would stay to March 2002 instead of leaving the company in July 2001 as he had originally intended.

Comber Bypass

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will enhance safety and security for pedestrian and vehicular users of the second phase of the Comber Bypass, now known as the Cherryvalley Line, by providing additional lighting. (AQW 1066/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the 800 metre unlit section of the Cherryvalley Line between the Copeland Link Roundabout and Killinchy Road Roundabout is covered by a 50mph speed limit, which defines it as "semi-urban". It is Roads Service policy that semi-urban roads may only be considered for road lighting if there is continuous frontage development beyond the urban limit, there is another lighted area within 300 metres, or night-time collision statistics indicate that lighting is justified as a collision remedial measure.

As this section of the Cherryvalley Line does not meet any of these criteria, Roads Service cannot consider providing road lighting along this stretch.

Water Treatment Facilities at Lisbarnett and Ringneill

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the upgrade of waste water treatment facilities at Lisbarnett and Ringneill will go ahead this year, as originally planned. (AQW 1067/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and

sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issues raised are operational matters, I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Street Lighting

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's expenditure on street lighting, broken down by Divisional Roads Office, in the last four years. (AQW 1099/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's expenditure on street lighting in the last four years, broken down by the four Roads Service Divisions, is detailed below:

Division	Year			
	03/04 (£m)	04/05 (£m)	05/06 (£m)	06/07 (£m)
Northern	4.2	5.5	5.2	4.4
Eastern	6.1	8.7	9.5	7.5
Southern	4.0	4.9	5.0	4.6
Western	2.2	2.9	2.8	2.6
Totals	16.5	22	22.5	19.1

NB: The figures shown in the table consist of all expenditure recorded against street lighting operations in the last four financial years. These include, capital street lighting works, operation and maintenance activities, electricity costs, Strategic Investment Programme funding where granted, and costs related to street lighting operational activities by Roads Service Direct (internal contractor).

Motorway Lighting

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's expenditure on motorway lighting, broken down by each motorway in Northern Ireland, for the last four years. (AQW 1100/07)

Mr Murphy: I must advise that my Department's Roads Service does not maintain specific details of expenditure on motorway lighting. However, in my recent answer to AQW 1099/07, I detailed the overall expenditure on street lighting in each Roads Service Division for the last four years.

Park and Ride Facilities at Lisburn

Mr Trevor Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on plans to improve park and ride facilities at Lisburn, in connection with the Belfast-Portadown railway line. (AQW 1101/07)

Mr Murphy: Translink is currently evaluating options to improve park and ride facilities at Lisburn

station by providing up to 200 extra spaces. The economic appraisal will then be submitted to the Department for approval. If approved Translink hopes to complete the project in 2011.

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Railway Line

Mr David Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on plans to improve the railway timetable on the Belfast-Londonderry railway line. (AQW 1102/07)

Mr Murphy: Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) currently operates 9 trains each way daily Monday to Saturday between Belfast and Derry plus two trains daily between Belfast and Portrush.

Additional temporary speed restrictions between Ballymena and Coleraine have recently resulted in extended running times on some services by up to 8 minutes. The Department is currently considering a Business Case for remedial work to the line. If approved this work, which is likely to take until 2010 to complete, is expected to yield journey time improvement of 10-15 minutes.

In the short term, Translink proposes to commence additional commuter services between Ballymena and Belfast, commencing 2 September 2007 (two extra morning Ballymena to Belfast services and two extra Belfast to Ballymena evening services).

In the longer term, subject to a detailed feasibility review, Departmental approvals and funding, NIR plans to upgrade the infrastructure and rolling stock fleet to deliver an hourly frequency service between Derry-Coleraine and Belfast with half-hourly frequencies between Belfast and Ballymena.

Public Transport

Mr David Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on the relative percentage split of the transport budget between public transport and private transport. (AQW 1103/07)

Mr Murphy: From this year's total budget allocation for transport of £452.5 million, 39% (£178.6 million) has been allocated to public transport. This will be the largest spend on public transport since the introduction of the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS).

The Department does not directly fund private transport; however 61% (£273.9 million) of this year's transport budget has been allocated to roads which benefits all transport users and includes walking and cycling.

The RTS set out the spending priorities for transport to tackle the historic underinvestment in roads and public transport. It suggested a spending ratio for roads to public transport of 65: 35.

Park and Ride Facilities at Bangor

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on plans to improve park and ride facilities, in connection with the Bangor-Belfast railway line. (AQW 1107/07)

Mr Murphy: Translink is currently assessing options to improve park and ride facilities at Bangor railway station; these options include the possibility of providing up to 120 additional spaces.

Exploratory discussions are also underway about the possibility of leasing up to 20 car parking spaces to provide a park and ride facility at Bangor West railway halt. In addition Translink is also hoping to provide up to 15 additional spaces at the Holywood park and ride facility on the Belfast to Bangor line. All of these projects will be subject to economic appraisals being approved by the Department.

Park and Ride Facilities at Larne

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister for Regional Development to report on plans to improve park and ride facilities, in connection with the Belfast-Larne railway line. (AQW 1112/07)

Mr Murphy: Plans to improve park and ride facilities, in connection with the Belfast to Larne railway line are as follows:

Greenisland

The Department has already approved funding for the provision of 72 additional spaces.

Whitehead

There are approximately 20 additional spaces planned.

Carrickfergus

Between 100 and 150 additional spaces are planned.

Jordanstown

There are plans for up to 46 additional spaces.

Whiteabbey

There are plans for up to 58 additional spaces.

The planned Whitehead, Carrickfergus, Jordans-town and Whiteabbey projects will be subject to economic appraisals being approved by the Department.

Trooperslane

In the longer term, the possibility of providing up to 20 additional spaces is being considered.

Translink is also liaising with Roads Service about the possibility of providing an overflow car park in Carrickfergus for the life of the A2 (Greenisland) roadworks which are due to commence next year.

New Traffic Management System

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development to give details of traffic attendant patrols in the Moyle District Council area; giving specific dates, times and areas in which patrols have taken place; and to list traffic enforcements in the area, since the implementation of the new traffic management system. (AQW 1146/07)

Mr Murphy: As you will be aware, Traffic Attendants are employed by National Car Parks Services (Ltd), who are contracted to my Department's Roads Service, to provide parking enforcement and car park management services.

Since the commencement of the new Parking Enforcement Contract on 30 October 2006 several towns and villages in the Moyle District Council area have been patrolled by Traffic Attendants. The following information summarises the enforcement carried out in these towns and villages, broken down by street and time period, and identifies the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) that have been issued under each type of contravention.

Ballycastle

BALLYCASTLE HAS BEEN PATROLLED 62 TIMES FROM 9 NOVEMBER 2006 TO 28 JUNE 2007.

Ann Street 45 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	2
Re-parked in the same parking place within prohibited time	2
Not wholly parked within the markings of the bay or space	1
Vehicle not parked close to the kerb	1
Parked for longer than permitted	23
Parked in a disabled bay without displaying a Blue Badge	7
Stopped on a crossing marked by zigzags	9
Castle Street 34 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	2
Parked for longer than permitted	25
Parked on a restricted bus stop	7

Clare Street 1 PCN has been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	1
Fair Hill 2 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	2
Market Street 3 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	1
Parked in a parking place not designated for that class of vehicle	1
Parked in a loading bay without loading	1
North Street 2 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked for longer than permitted	1
Parked in a disabled bay without displaying a Blue Badge	1
Quay Road 1 PCN has been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a disabled bay without displaying a Blue Badge	1
The Diamond 16 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	5
Not wholly parked within the markings of the bay or space	1
Parked for longer than permitted	7
Parked in a disabled bay without displaying a Blue Badge	3

Bushmills

BUSHMILLS HAS BEEN PATROLLED 6 TIMES FROM 14 APRIL 2007 TO 27 JUNE 2007.

Main Street 2 PCNs have been issued for the following contraventions:	
Parked in a prohibited street during prescribed hours	1
Parked on a restricted bus stop	1

Giant's Causeway

Giant's Causeway has been patrolled 3 times from 28 May 2007 to 27 June 2007. No PCNs have been issued.

Railway Station at George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will allocate the required resources in order to enable Translink to provide a station at the George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQW 1185/07)

Mr Murphy: There are no immediate plans to commit resources to provide a station at the George Best Belfast City Airport.

The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) does however include a 'longer-term' proposal for a single new railway station at Tillysburn. If this went ahead it could serve both the Holywood Exchange and George Best Belfast City Airport. However, a new station located directly opposite the City Airport would be very close to the existing, relatively well used, Sydenham station. Given their proximity it could be difficult to operate services calling at both stations in an efficient manner. The Sydenham station would therefore have to be closed or significantly downgraded in status – causing substantial disbenefits to existing rail users.

At present a feasibility study for a pilot rapid transit scheme linking Belfast city centre to Titanic Quarter, George Best Belfast City Airport and the retail development in the Belfast Harbour Estate is underway. It is due to report around August 2007 and is expected to provide a view of the various route options and technologies. The outcome of the study cannot yet be anticipated, but it may offer an alternative public transport connection to the George Best Belfast City Airport.

Public Spending on Transport

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the ratio of public money spent on roads to that spent on public transport. (AQO 240/07)

Mr Murphy: From this year's budget allocation for transport of £452.5 million in total, 61% (£273.9 million) has been allocated to roads and 39% (£178.6 million) to public transport. This will be the largest spend on public transport since the introduction of the Regional Transportation Strategy.

The Regional Transportation Strategy sets out the spending priorities for transport in the north to tackle the historic underinvestment in its roads and public transport. It suggested a spending ratio for roads – including walking and cycling – to public transport of 65:35.

Rights of Rural Dwellers

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to state when he expects to restore the rights of rural dwellers to live in the rural community by removing Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside. (AQO 261/07)

Mr Murphy: Ensuring that appropriate rural planning policy is devised is a priority for me, and I shall be giving due consideration to the full range of views expressed during the public consultation on the draft policy, including the conclusions of the Report of the Programme for Government Committee on RPA and Rural Planning.

Planning Policy Statement 14 is a complex and topical issue. It was also subject to a judicial challenge, the Hearing of which concluded on 27 June 2007. However, judgement was reserved. The timing and outcome of this Judicial Review will impact upon the publication of a final policy.

Nonetheless, and in the interim I am considering the way forward on this important issue. To this end I will be submitting a paper to the Executive Committee later this week. I also intend to initiate further debate on the issues with key stakeholders, via 'round-table' discussions, some of which will be chaired by me.

Review of Water Rates

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the absence of conservation and sustainability of water issues from the terms of reference for the review of water rates. (AQO 243/07)

Mr Murphy: Naomi Long, raised a similar issue on Monday 11 June after my Statement to the Assembly and I will reaffirm now what I said then.

Conservation and sustainability of water are important considerations in examining the financing of water and sewerage services and will form part of the review.

Water Charges

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to review the policy relating to water charges that arise from undetected leaks in the supply to farms and commercial businesses. (AQO 209/07)

Mr Murphy: Under the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006, which was introduced on 1 April this year, responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services transferred from the Department for Regional Development to a statutory water and

sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water, was appointed as the undertaker from that date with direct responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services.

However, I have raised this question with Northern Ireland Water and the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water has advised me that the Company plans to carry out a review of this policy commencing in January 2008.

Road Schemes

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of road schemes that ran over their expected completion date, in each of the last three years. (AQO 226/07)

Mr Murphy: I assume the Question relates to major road schemes. I can report that seven major road schemes have exceeded the date of completion that was expected at the outset of the works, over the course of the last three financial years. The schemes are:

- A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill;
- A5 Omagh Throughpass - Stage 3;
- Foyle Bridge, Londonderry – Strengthening;
- A1 underpass at Hillsborough Road junction, Dromore;
- Bann River Bridge, Portadown – strengthening;
- A8 Belfast to Larne Road - dual carriageway from Doagh Road to Hillhead Road; and
- M1 Blacks Road to Stockmans Lane.

In the same period 3 other major schemes were completed on or ahead of schedule. These were the A6 Toome Bypass; the A1 Flyover at Rathfriland Road Junction, Banbridge; and the A8 Belfast to Larne Road, Ballynure.

There are legitimate contractual reasons that have attributed to the majority of these extensions, and which may have been permissible under the terms of the contracts. For example, unforeseen ground conditions; adverse weather conditions; archaeological finds; and additional works, which have accrued additional benefits.

Furthermore target completion dates for major road schemes are deliberately set to be challenging in order to encourage early completion of the works.

Ferry Passengers to Rathlin Island

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people who travelled on the Ballycastle to Rathlin Island ferry in 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQO 225/07)

Mr Murphy: In 2005/06 there were 47,742 single tickets issued for passenger journeys. This number increased to 49,516 in 2006/07.

Belfast-Dublin Rail Link

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development what meetings he has had in relation to disruption to the Belfast-Dublin rail link.

(AQO 228/07)

Mr Murphy: I have had no meetings in relation to disruption to the Belfast – Dublin rail link. However, I hope to meet the Southern Minister for Transport and the Marine in the near future and will discuss this amongst other public transport issues.

Where disruption arises as a result of civil unrest Northern Ireland Railways follows PSNI advice in relation to the closure of the line.

A55 Knock Road

Mr Alex Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail concerns raised by local residents in relation to the proposed A55 Knock Road widening scheme; in particular, concerns raised by the Residents' Associations of Cherryvalley, Kensington, and Shandon. (AQO 208/07)

Mr Murphy: Over the past year my Department's Roads Service has been developing a number of options for the A55 Knock Road widening scheme, to be considered in more detail upon commencement of the formal statutory procedures, which I announced on 14 May 2007.

As part of this work Roads Service officials held an informal two day public consultation in June 2006; public meetings were held on 11 November 2006 and 17 January 2007 and a further meeting with residents on 27 March 2007.

Roads Service is fully aware of the concerns that local residents have in relation to the proposed road improvements. In particular, the speed and volume of traffic using local residential streets, such as Shandon Park, Kensington Road and Cherryvalley, and the further impact that the proposed right-turning facilities on the A55 Knock Road may have.

Now that the statutory procedures have formally commenced, Roads Service will be carrying out a detailed evaluation of the environmental impacts of the scheme, including a further evaluation of alternative options assessing criteria such as the provision of right-turn facilities and the traffic impacts on the surrounding area. This work will be used to prepare an Environmental Statement, which will be published for public consultation.

Concurrent to this, detailed land vesting proposals will also be published. Following receipt of all objections and comments to these proposals, I am advised that Roads Service may then decide to hold a public inquiry. It is only after receipt of the Public Inquiry Inspector's report that a final decision will be taken on the scheme's progression.

I can confirm that no final decision has been taken on the scheme implementation. All those affected by the A55 Widening Scheme, including local residents, will have a formal opportunity to express their views on the proposals when the Environmental Statement and other Statutory Orders are published in due course.

Ports in Northern Ireland

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake an evaluation of the impact of the development of the new port at Bremore in the Republic of Ireland on ports in Northern Ireland, including Belfast, Larne and Warrenpoint. (AQO 258/07)

Mr Murphy: I am aware that consideration is being given to development of new port facilities at Bremore. However there are, as yet, no definitive plans upon which an evaluation could be made. Ports in the north currently make their own assessments of the commercial threats and opportunities that they face. I would expect them to continue to do so.

Northern Ireland Water

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give a commitment that he will require Northern Ireland Water to implement (a) a full equality impact assessment, and (b) full public consultation, on its Debt Management Policy. (AQO 280/07)

Mr Murphy: On 10 May the Executive agreed not to introduce domestic charges in 2007/08 and to conduct a comprehensive review to address the approach that should be adopted to financing water and sewerage services. In light of this decision NIW will not be implementing any domestic debt arrangements this year.

On 11 June I announced the Terms of Reference of the review and have since appointed Professor Paddy Hillyard as chair.

The Terms of Reference are broad and the review can look at this and other issues of concern.

Rural Non-Trunk Roads

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development (a) what plans he has to bring all the rural non-trunk roads in the North Antrim constituency up to an acceptable standard; (b) what is the timetable for doing this; and (c) what is the estimated cost. (AQO 216/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service prepares annual work programmes covering the development and maintenance of the network, which reflect the availability of finances. This year's work programme is currently being finalised in preparation for presentation to the respective district councils.

In the North Antrim constituency, Roads Service currently plans to spend in excess of £4 million in the 2007/2008 financial year on structural maintenance of the rural road network. This includes resurfacing/strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage.

Of course, it is always the case that if more funding was available, more maintenance work would be carried out and I can assure you that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds. In the meantime, Roads Service will continue to make best use of the resources available to it to develop and maintain the road network.

A2 Carrickfergus-Newtownabbey Road Widening Scheme

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what progress has been made to date with the A2 Carrickfergus-Newtownabbey road widening scheme. (AQO 227/07)

Mr Murphy: I can confirm that the A2 Shore Road Carrickfergus – Newtownabbey scheme is included in my Department's Roads Service, Major Works Preparation Pool, at an estimated cost of £41.1million.

In March 2007 the Statutory Orders for the proposed road improvement scheme were published. These comprised of an Environmental Statement, a Notice of Intention to Make a Direction Order and a Notice of Intention to make a Vesting Order. A two day public exhibition was held over 21-22 March 2007 in the Clarion Hotel, Carrickfergus to explain the Department's proposals. Following the publication of the Statutory Orders, 69 formal comments were received, 48 of these objecting to the proposals.

Bearing in mind the nature of the proposals and the likelihood that a number of the objections would not be resolved, I announced, on 19 June 2007, that a Public Inquiry will be held in October this year to hear the objections and comments received on the scheme.

Arrangements are now being made for this, and a formal notification with details of the inquiry will be published in due course.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Tenders for Installing Gas Appliances

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm the amount of public money expended under the original tenders for installing gas appliances, broken down by Northern Ireland Housing Executive district; and to identify the successful bidders in each tender. (AQW 778/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Gas appliances were installed prior to March 2001 using the traditional contract arrangements. These contracts also included solid fuel appliance renewal in some homes to accord with individual tenants' wishes. These contracts for combined gas and solid fuel installations are detailed below:

NIHE District	Project	Contractor	Amount Expended (£)
Belfast 1	District 1 Phase 1	H & A	315,026
Belfast 1	Roden Street/ Grosvenor Road	Danros	121,959
Belfast 1	Suffolks/Blacks Road	H & A	497,331
Belfast 1	Lenadoon	Utilicom	573,031
Belfast 2	Short Strand	H & A	468,873
Belfast 2	Knocknagoney	HGS	236,804
Belfast 2	Garnerville	HGS	279,817
Belfast 2	Clarawood	H & A	300,361
Belfast 2	Lower Newtownards Road	H & A	414,010
Belfast 3	Turf Lodge Phase 2	George Nelson	359,736
Belfast 3	District 3 Phase 4	Utilicom	518,400
Belfast 3	Ballymurphy District 3	HGS	549,392
Belfast 3	Turf Lodge Phase 1	Danros	479,826
Belfast 3	District 3 Phase 3	H & A	396,063
Belfast 3	District 3 Phase 2	H & A	320,683
Belfast 3	Lower Falls	Danros	212,900

NIHE District	Project	Contractor	Amount Expended (£)
Belfast 3	District 3 Phase 1	Danros	132,371
Belfast 4	Duncairn Phase 1	H & A	615,360
Belfast 4	Duncairn Phase 2	George Nelson	625,187
Belfast 4	Duncairn Phase 3	George Nelson	389,735
Belfast 4	Duncairn Phase 4	P E Keenan	476,862
Belfast 4	District 4 Mount Vernon	HGS	345,678
Belfast 4	Skegoneill	H & A	463,350
Belfast 5	Woodvale	Danros	271,295
Belfast 5	District 5 Phase 5	H & A	330,160
Belfast 5	District 5 Phase 1	George Nelson	323,056
Belfast 5	District 5 Phase 3	George Nelson	354,537
Belfast 5	District 5 Phase 4	Danros	312,062
Belfast 5	District 5 Phase 2	George Nelson	418,379
Belfast 5	Lawnbrook District 5	Utilicom	401,031
Belfast 5	Cambrai	Utilicom	545,178
Belfast 5	Lower Shankhill	Danros	345,332
Belfast 5	District 5 Phase 4	H & A	662,086
Belfast 6	Ardoyne Phase 1	H & A	571,670
Belfast 6	Ardoyne Phase 2	HGS	550,075
Belfast 6	Ardoyne Phase 3	P E Keenan	653,464
Belfast 6	Ardoyne Phase 4	HGS	400,464
Belfast 6	Cliftonville Phase 1	M & H Heating	352,483
Belfast 6	Cliftonville Phase 2	George Nelson	477,324
Belfast 6	Cliftonville Phase 3	Litton Group	465,616
Belfast 6	Westland District 6	HGS	372,606
Belfast 6	Ballysillan	Danros	265,670
Belfast 7	Willowfield	H & A	257,326
Belfast 7	Annadale Flats	Utilicom	364,295

NIHE District	Project	Contractor	Amount Expended (£)
Belfast 7	Lower Ormeau 2	George Nelson	272,950
Belfast 7	Lisburn Road	Utilicom	439,696
Belfast 7	Taughmonagh	Utilicom	402,887
Belfast 7	Finaghy	Utilicom	448,144
Belfast 7	District 7 Phase 2	Utilicom	664,108
Belfast 7	District 7 Phase 3	Utilicom	539,208
Belfast 7	District 7 Phase 1	HGS	149,485
Belfast 7	Donegall Road	Utilicom	190,200
North East	Newtownabbey 1 RHR Phase 1	G Nelson	74,825
North East	Newtownabbey 1 RHR Phase 2	HGS	173,284
South East	Laurelbank/Glenwood, Poleglass	G Nelson	568,999
South East	Cherry/Aspen (Twinbrook)	HGS	1,546,408
South East	Woodside Poleglass RHR	H & A	425,202
South East	Juniper & Jasmine	H & A	192,000
South East	Lisburn 'A'	H & A	252,000
South East	S'Hill/Glasvey/Broom	H & A	603,000
		Rounded Total	24,729,272

District	Number
Belfast South	2,879
Belfast West	3,129
Belfast North	4,189
Area Total	14,531
Bangor	896
N'ards	1,252
C'reagh	1,367
Lisburn (A/S)	1,570
Lisburn (D/F)	1,167
Area Total	6,252
F'managh	1
Area Total	1
B'mena	75
Antrim	3
N'abbey 1	1,059
N'abbey 2	852
Carrick	1,128
Larne	575
B'castle	2
B'money	135
C'rairie	7
Area Total	3,836
Waterside	111
Limavady	34
Area Total	145
NI Total	24,765

Gas Installations

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of gas installations installed in social housing per Housing Executive district; and the number of gas installations deemed unsafe or dangerous per Housing Executive district. (AQW 779/07)

Ms Ritchie: As at 11 June 2007 the Housing Executive has installed 24,765 gas heating systems. None of these are deemed unsafe or dangerous. The number of gas installations in each District is detailed below.

District	Number
Belfast East	2,136
Belfast 5	2,198

Repair and Replacement of Gas Installations

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of public money, over and above that provided under the tenders, expended on repairing and replacing gas appliances that had been incorrectly installed, or were otherwise unsafe due to faulty workmanship, broken down by Northern Ireland Housing Executive district. (AQW 780/07)

Ms Ritchie: Under the pre-Egan contract arrangements the Housing Executive expended £185K, in 2001 and 2002, in Belfast District 5, in repairing and replacing gas appliances that were incorrectly installed, or were otherwise unsafe due to faulty workmanship.

Repair and Replacement of Gas Installations

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what action has been taken to recover public money which has been expended on repairing and replacing gas appliances in public housing, that had been incorrectly installed, or were otherwise unsafe due to faulty workmanship.

(AQW 781/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has entered into legal action against two contractors (pre Egan contracts in 1999) in respect of recouping monies expended on faulty workmanship and redecoration grants. In the case of one Contractor, in the region of £60K has been recovered. The case involving the other is currently at litigation to recoup a further £125K.

Maintenance of Bonfire Sites

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the planned maintenance programme, after 12 July, for the clean-up of bonfire sites on land owned by the Housing Executive.

(AQW 786/07)

Ms Ritchie: While the Housing Executive does not include the maintenance of bonfire sites within its planned maintenance programmes, it will, in co-operation with local Councils and with the support of the local community, remove items which represent a health & safety issue, on request, from the site of a bonfire.

The clearances of bonfire sites, identified as being greater than 1.5 square metres in diameter, is dealt with as part of the Housing Executive's Grounds Maintenance contract. All burnt litter and debris in areas less than 1.5 square metres will be considered to be part of the normal litter lifting operation, through its response maintenance programme.

Within 7 days of a bonfire being burnt, all bonfire debris (including ashes and material not burnt, or scattered) are removed. Damaged grass areas will be made good.

Allocation of Public Housing

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of the points system that is used for the allocation of public housing by the Housing Executive.

(AQW 787/07)

Ms Ritchie: All social housing in Northern Ireland is allocated in accordance with the Housing Executive's Housing Selection Scheme which is based on the principle of need and availability. From time to time

the Selection Scheme has been changed to reflect changes in standards and in society. However for more than 30 years the Scheme has fundamentally withstood the test of time. The Housing Executive is currently undertaking a review of the Common Waiting List, including in particular the level of the applicants on the list deemed to be in housing stress. This is expected to come before me in the autumn. Dependant on the outcome it may be necessary to look once again at the points system while holding rigidly to the fundamental principle of housing need which underpins it.

Maintenance of Bonfire Sites

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the planned maintenance programme, during the run up to 12 July, for the removal of litter and household waste from bonfire sites on land owned by the Housing Executive.

(AQW 790/07)

Ms Ritchie: While the Housing Executive does not include the maintenance of bonfire sites within its planned maintenance programmes, it will, in co-operation with local Councils and with the support of the local community, remove items which represent a health & safety issue, on request, from the site of a bonfire.

The clearances of bonfire sites, identified as being greater than 1.5 square metres in diameter, is dealt with as part of the Housing Executive's Grounds Maintenance contract. All burnt litter and debris in areas less than 1.5 square metres will be considered to be part of the normal litter lifting operation, through its response maintenance programme.

Within 7 days of a bonfire being burnt, all bonfire debris (including ashes and material not burnt, or scattered) are removed. Damaged grass areas will be made good.

Dunclug Action Plan

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the implementation of the Dunclug Action Plan.

(AQW 797/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Dunclug Action Plan was launched on 17 January 2007. Of the 22 actions contained within the plan, 3 have been delivered, 10 are on track for delivery within the envisaged timescale and 9 will be delivered with some minor delays. I have placed a full report on the implementation of the Dunclug Action Plan up to 20 June 2007 in the Assembly library.

Neighbourhood Renewal Scheme

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to state when action plans for long-term funding to address multiple deprivation, arising from the neighbourhood renewal scheme, will be provided to those communities who are at present still receiving short-term funding or funding extensions.

(AQW 846/07)

Ms Ritchie: Neighbourhood Renewal works across Government to tackle the root causes of deprivation, it is a move away from short term funding to a more strategic and co-ordinated response. Government Departments and Public Bodies are presently in discussions about how they can best respond to the priorities identified in Action Plans developed by Neighbourhood Partnerships. I expect that all statutory providers will have finalised their responses to Action Plans well in advance of March 2008 to enable a long term strategic approach to Neighbourhood Renewal funding beyond that date.

Urban Renewal Scheme

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide details of all urban renewal area schemes that have undergone economic appraisals in North Belfast.

(AQW 847/07)

Ms Ritchie: Urban Renewal proposals which are currently under consideration include New Lodge (Upper) comprising improvements to some 300 homes, Queen Victoria Gardens/Fortwilliam Parade, comprising the demolition of 75 dwellings and 4 commercial, new build 24 homes, Parkside, comprising the demolition of 95 dwellings and 7 commercial, new build 69 homes and Stanhope, comprising the demolition of 13 dwellings, new build 24 homes

Urban renewal which is currently in progress includes Torrens. This was vested in 1998 and two phases of social housing have been completed, with a third phase, incorporating the former Finiston school site, programmed for 2008/09. The total new social housing units provided will be 168. Grove was vested in 1999 and three phases of social housing have been completed. Phase 4 (private housing) is on site. The total new social housing units provided is 126. Gainsborough was vested in 2003 and Phase 1, which included 26 new social housing units has been completed. A development brief for private housing is being prepared for part of the remaining cleared area.

A further 5 social units proposed in an infill site are programmed for 2008/09. Mountcollyer Urban Renewal Assessment was approved by the Housing Executive's Board in May 2001, and vested in 2003. Phase 1, comprising 35 social housing units is

currently on site. A development brief has been issued for private housing on the remainder of the cleared land. Glenbryn Urban Renewal Assessment approved by the Board in March 2001, and vested in 2002. Phase 1 which comprises 30 social housing units is complete. Phase 2, which comprises 55 units of private housing, is currently on site.

Urban renewal which has been completed includes Rosewood/Crumlin, which was vested in 1995 and completed in 2000, providing 43 units of new social housing. North Queen Street, which was vested in 1999 and completed in 2002, providing 22 units of new social housing. New Lodge (Lower) was vested in 1996 and completed in 2004, providing 90 units of new social housing. Clifton/Oldpark was vested in 1999 and completed in 2005, providing 95 units of new social housing.

Local Community Fund for West Tyrone

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how much funding has been made available in west Tyrone from the local community fund in 2005, 2006 and 2007, and to list each project funded.

(AQW 848/07)

Ms Ritchie: The total allocations from the Local Community Fund for West Tyrone in respect of the last three financial years is; 2004/2005- £301, 952; 2005/06-£364,056; 2006/07-£254, 239. The projects funded for this period are as follows;

Year	Project
2004/05	Midulster Community & Arts Trust
2004/05	Sunflower Playgroup
2004/05	Fintona C.C Youth Club
2004/05	Fintona Soccer Club
2004/05	Setenta Hurling Club
2004/05	Fintona Pearses
2005/06	Sunflower Playgroup
2005/06	Fintona C.C Youth Club
2005/06	Fintona Soccer Club
2005/06	Setenta Hurling Club
2005/06	Camowen Partnership
2006/07	Lisanelly Regeneration Group
2004/05	Aghyaran GAC - St Davog's
2004/05	Border Arts
2004/05	Kilclean Orange Lodge
2004/05	Killeter & District Development Trust
2004/05	Kilclean Women's Group

Year	Project
2004/05	Millbrook
2004/05	Shanaghey Clay Pigeon Club
2004/05	Termonamongan Bowls Club
2004/05	Castlederg Anglers
2004/05	Killeter Youth Club
2004/05	Coolcreaghy Community Association
2004/05	Derg Parish Bowling Club
2004/05	Ballycolman / Linkside CDA
2004/05	Sigersons
2004/05	Calverts
2004/05	Lisnafin / Ardnalee / Trust CCDA
2005/06	Strabane Sigersons GAA
2005/06	Ballycolman/Linkside CDA
2005/06	Naiscoil an tSraitha Báin
2005/06	Lisnafin Ardnalee Trust
2005/06	Lisnafin Ardnalee Trust
2005/06	Friends of Knockavoe
2005/06	Killeter/Aghyaran Collaboration project
2005/06	Castlederg Anglers Club
2005/06	Shanaghey Clay Pigeon Club
2005/06	Kilclean Women's Group
2005/06	Killeter PWA
2005/06	Kilclean Orange Hall
2005/06	Lislaird Pipe band
2005/06	Killeter Youth Club
2005/06	Millbrook Comm Assoc.
2005/06	Garvagh & District CA
2005/06	Lislaird Orange Hall
2005/06	Aghyaran Lodge
2005/06	Aghyaran Accordion Band
2006/07	Naiscoil na Deirge
2006/07	Royal British Legion Women's section
2006/07	St Eugene's Youth Centre
2006/07	Teen Zone Kids Zone
2006/07	Castlederg Young Loyalists Flute Band
2006/07	Border Arts
2006/07	Castlederg Youth Forum
2006/07	Pride of the Derg Flute Band
2006/07	MourneDerg Partnership
2006/07	Castlederg Youth Forum

Year	Project
2006/07	Naiscoil na Deirge
2006/07	St Eugene's Youth Centre
2006/07	Ardbarron Pipe Band
2006/07	Killen Youth Football
2006/07	Killen Ladies Football
2006/07	Coolcreaghy Community Assoc
2006/07	Spamount CCA
2006/07	Killen Pipe Band
2006/07	Killen Women's Group
2006/07	Killen District Dev Assoc
2006/07	Whitehouse Pipe Band
2006/07	First Steps Day Care
2006/07	Garvetagh Pipe Band
2006/07	Killen District Dev Assoc
2006/07	Donemana Playgroup
2006/07	Castle Lough Out of Schools
2006/07	Dennett Interchange
2006/07	Donemana Cricket Club
2006/07	Drummond Centre
2006/07	Clann na nGael
2006/07	Donemana Cricket Club
2006/07	Glebe Community Association & Youth Club & Glebe United Football Club
2006/07	Happy Faces Playgroup
2006/07	Clady Community Association
2006/07	Urney GFC
2006/07	Glebe Community Association & Youth Club
2006/07	Mary Gray Farm Services Ltd
2006/07	Newtownstewart Leisure Complex
2006/07	Strawhill Pipe Band
2006/07	St Eugene's GAC
2006/07	Carebears Playgroup
2006/07	Newtownstewart Parent & Toddler Group
2006/07	Ardstraw & Baronscourt Youth Club
2006/07	Drumlegagh Pipe Band
2006/07	Sinclair Memorial Pipe band
2006/07	Ardstraw & Baronscourt Youth Club & Newtownstewart Parent & Toddler Group
2006/07	Carlton Drive/Greeves Park
2006/07	Lisnafin Ardnalee Trust CCDA

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Statistics

Mr George Savage asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each Northern Ireland Housing Executive office, (a) the number of houses let; (b) the number of houses occupied; (c) the number of transfers; and (d) the number of average points required to be provided with accommodation, broken down by month, in each year from 2005 onwards.

(AQW 898/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to reduce the potential for inequality to occur between those living in designated areas of neighbourhood renewal, and those living in areas that have been designated an area of risk.

(AQW 901/07)

Ms Ritchie: Neighbourhood Renewal works across Government to tackle the root causes of deprivation in areas suffering the worst levels of deprivation and the greatest inequality in Northern Ireland. Thirty six areas, identified using the Noble multiple deprivation measure as suffering the highest levels of deprivation in Northern Ireland, are being targeted for intervention. The focus of Neighbourhood Renewal is to address the core causes of deprivation in a targeted way where the need is greatest. It is, however, recognised that there are other areas falling outside the top 10% which are also at risk of decline, and it is these areas which are targeted through the Areas at Risk programme.

Payment of Social Security Benefits

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, taking into account the amount of money saved through unclaimed benefits, her department's commitment to invest in advice services to ensure that those in the North Belfast area who are in most need, have access to information and entitlements.

(AQW 902/07)

Ms Ritchie: The framework for public expenditure is divided between Departmental Expenditure Limit and Annually Managed Expenditure. All social security benefits are paid out of the Annually Managed Expenditure. Monies from this fund are not transferable to the Departmental Expenditure Limit from which the advice services are funded.

My Department is committed to supporting advice services and will shortly, subject to Executive

approval, launch a comprehensive strategy to support the delivery of voluntary advice services to the community. This strategy is Northern Ireland wide and will encompass the North Belfast area.

I have also recently launched the Benefit Uptake Programme for 2007/08 which includes tendering for the delivery of six targeted exercises. Contracts for these exercises have been awarded to Citizens Advice and Advice NI and will include those targeted clients living within areas of North Belfast.

As part of the work of my Department, the North Belfast Community Action Unit also provides support to a thematic Community Empowerment Partnership, North Belfast Independent Advice Partnership which provides comprehensive advice services to those in need within that geographic area.

Urban Development Grant

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Social Development how he proposes to roll-out the Urban Development Grant Scheme in the future; and to detail when (a) applications will be considered; and (b) awards will be made.

(AQW 910/07)

Ms Ritchie: Urban Development Grant commenced in December 1982 with the aim of stimulating urban regeneration in inner city commercial areas and Enterprise Zones in Belfast and Londonderry in partnership with the private sector.

A pilot extension of the Urban Development Grant scheme was launched in May 2006 in five target towns; Ballymoney, Dungannon, Larne, Lurgan and Strabane. Thirteen applications have been received – two in Ballymoney, one in Dungannon, two in Larne, three in Lurgan and five in Strabane. To date two of these applicants has been granted an award.

My Department will consider a further extension of the UDG scheme to all regional towns when a full review of the programme, including the pilot scheme, is carried out. As the applications for the pilot scheme are at various stages of the assessment process it is unlikely that the review will take place before the end of 2008. Any decision to extend the scheme to new applicants will only be made after this review is complete.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive in Strabane

Mrs Claire McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the capital cost of the new Northern Ireland Housing Executive offices in Strabane; and (b) her commitment to maintain the current level of services and staffing at the new

facility, including the Housing Benefits section.
(AQW 927/07)

Ms Ritchie: In 2004 the Housing Executive estimated the capital value of the existing office at £190,000. Since then a total of £400,000 has been spent on major refurbishments in 2005 when additional space was leased in a new adjoining building. The annual cost of the lease is £29,000 per annum.

The matter of effective use of staff and resources is an issue for the Housing Executive. A local office will be retained in Strabane which will provide a response maintenance service, deal with housing allocations and homelessness, estate management, schemes and development of the community network. Housing Benefit and Rent Accounting will be processed in a new Area Service Centre in Derry but members of the public will still be able to call into the Strabane office for advice and assistance on these matters. A number of staff will move to the Area Service Unit but the majority of staff will remain in Strabane.

Regeneration of Former Military Sites

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what progress she has made in attempting to secure the transfer to the Executive of the redundant Lisanelly and St. Lucia Ministry of Defence military sites in Omagh. (AQW 940/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department for Social Development has taken a particular interest in the regeneration of a number of former military sites throughout Northern Ireland. This includes the two sites at Lisanelly and St Lucia in Omagh.

Officials from my Department are continuing to work with Omagh District Council and their counterparts in other Departments, in particular the Department of Education, to seek to explore the possible acquisition of both the Lisanelly and St Lucia sites for the benefit of the people of Omagh. The acquisition of these sites by the Department for Social Development, would allow a Masterplan for each to be prepared, with subsequent controlled disposal for a range of uses. Business Cases for the acquisition of both sites have been prepared but affordability will need to be considered by the Executive.

I remain concerned that sites have to be acquired at market cost which seems to go against the stated position in the 2003 Joint Agreement by the British and Irish Governments, in which there is a clear implication that redundant sites will be transferred, at no cost, to the Northern Ireland Administration, in order to enhance the asset base at our disposal, to revitalise and regenerate the Northern Ireland economy.

The Lagan Weir

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development if he will report on the contribution of the Lagan weir to flooding in south and east Belfast.
(AQW 952/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Lagan Weir did not contribute to the flooding that occurred in south and east Belfast. During the recent heavy rainfall, the Lagan Weir was operated to ensure that the risk of further flooding in the area was minimised. The drainage infrastructure such as road gullies and storm culverts were unable to cope with the unusually high levels of run off caused by the exceptionally high level of rainfall in a short period of time.

The sewerage pumping station at River Terrace (Lower Ormeau) has an overflow pipe to the river to provide protection in case of a sewer blockage or pump failure. This pipe was designed and constructed to operate by gravity and cannot discharge if the river level is too high. At the request of Water NI, the Weir was used as a tidal barrier as a precaution on 13, 14, 19 and 20 June with the gates raised to maximum height in order to keep the water level as low as possible and allow the gravity over flow pipe to operate if their system became overloaded or failed.

Housing Association New Builds

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to address the fact that there have been only 61 new builds by Housing Associations in the Ards Borough Council area in the past six years, compared to 129 in the Down District Council area, and 149 in the Castlereagh Borough Council area. (AQW 956/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Social Housing Development Programme is formulated by the Housing Executive on the basis of demonstrated need in each local area. The Housing Executive does recognise that housing need in the Ards area has shown a marked recent increase and has programmed a total of 310 additional houses to be provided over the current five-year planning period. Of these, 136 are scheduled to start in the current financial year.

There have been problems in securing land for social housing in the area. The Housing Executive is actively pursuing the possibility of earmarking sites of surplus land in the ownership of Ards Borough Council.

Disabled Bungalow at Grey's Park, Helens Bay

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why there has been a twelve week delay in the completion and allocation of a disabled bungalow at Grey's Park, Helen's Bay; and to give a timescale for the allocation of this accommodation. (AQW 1014/07)

Ms Ritchie: This delay was caused by obtaining necessary approvals for water connections to this property.

The Water Service has confirmed that the connections will be made during the week commencing 2 July 2007. The Housing Executive anticipates that the property will be available during the week commencing 23 July 2007.

Refusal of NIHE to the Purchase of Property by Tenants

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications from tenants for the purchase of property have been turned down or refused by the Housing Executive Land and Property Section at Craigavon for a) the Ards Borough Council area; and b) the Strangford constituency, in the last 3 years. (AQW 1019/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information is not readily available in the form requested.

The number of applications rejected by the Housing Executive in the last 3 years for areas defined as Castlereagh, Newtownards and Downpatrick was as follows:

	Castlereagh District	Newtownards District	Downpatrick District
2004/05	34	30	57
2005/06 46	46	68	42
2006/07 35	35	43	32

Total no. of cases - 387

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to advise of any mechanism through which a school that falls outside the neighbourhood renewal boundary by a matter of yards, and has pupils from within neighbourhood renewal areas, can access such funding. (AQW 1135/07)

Ms Ritchie: Neighbourhood Renewal works across Government to tackle deprivation where the need is

greatest. 36 areas across Northern Ireland have been identified for intervention and Neighbourhood Partnerships have been established to develop action plans to address the key priorities for each area. Poor educational attainment is a significant problem in most Neighbourhood Renewal areas. It is the statutory responsibility of the Department of Education to consider and deliver appropriate actions through whichever delivery mechanism they consider appropriate. This can be through mainstream funding or with the support of the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund. Support is not necessarily based on whether schools are physically situated within a Neighbourhood Renewal boundary, but on the catchment area of the school. Therefore, it is possible that funding could be provided to support a school outside a Neighbourhood Renewal area, but which will have a positive impact on pupils living within that area.

Shared Equity Schemes

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the shared equity schemes that are available in Northern Ireland; and to detail the uptake of these schemes in the last three years. (AQW 1139/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Co-ownership scheme which is operated by the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association (NICHHA) is the only shared equity scheme in Northern Ireland. It operates on the basis of funding from the Department for Social Development in the form of Housing Association Grant (HAG) augmented by surpluses which the Association makes on equity sales to participants.

The aim of the scheme is to provide assistance to those on marginal incomes who would not be eligible to obtain a full mortgage, to allow them to become homeowners. Participants join on a 50/50 equity sharing basis and then purchase further tranches of equity – a process known as staircasing – at the prevailing market value, as and when their circumstances permit.

The uptake of the scheme for the last three years is detailed in the table below:

	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05
No. of Participants	325	504	502

Charities Bill

Mr Alex Attwood asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the forthcoming Charities Bill. (AQO 274/07)

Ms Ritchie: I intend to introduce a draft Charities Bill for consideration by the Assembly before the summer recess, subject to agreement from the Executive Committee. This legislation will ensure that we have a robust regulatory framework in place for charities in Northern Ireland who do an immense amount of good work for some of the most disadvantaged in our communities

Social Housing

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what measures and time-frames she is putting in place, as part of a strategic response, to address the shortages in social housing that exist in North Belfast. (AQO 215/07)

Ms Ritchie: Housing in North Belfast is being addressed through the North Belfast Housing Strategy which set out to address two chronic housing problems, acute housing shortages (in Catholic areas mainly) and poor housing conditions (in Protestant areas mainly).

Its aims were to invest around £133m and provide 1,750 new social homes over the 7 year lifetime of the Strategy concluding in March 2008.

1,248 homes have been started and £113.7m has been invested in new housing in the first 5 years of the Strategy.

A Review of the Strategy is already underway and a final report is due by the end of the summer. This final report will identify the next steps to be taken.

Affordable Housing Crisis

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister for Social Development what role she envisages for private developers and builders in solving the affordable housing crisis. (AQO 262/07)

Ms Ritchie: Sir John Semple in his Review into Affordable Housing considered that developers have an important and varied role to play in solving the affordable housing crisis. These included –

- building a range of housing types from affordable through to executive homes;
- providing developer contributions of 20% of the houses provided in any housing development granted planning permission for affordable housing through Article 40 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 and building relationships with housing associations, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Northern Ireland Co-ownership housing to assist with this;

- working with the Planning Service and other key partners to develop a better relationship to assist in the planning and development process;
- developing more sustainable buildings that incorporate modern methods of construction and renewable technologies; and
- working with others to help develop the necessary skills in their labour forces to deliver new homes.

I will be considering all of Sir John Semple's recommendations through the Inter Departmental Group I will be chairing and which will convene on 5 July.

Social Housing

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans to ensure that applicants for social housing, who have severe physical and/or mental health conditions, are properly assessed and given a range of options before being offered temporary accommodation. (AQO 223/07)

Ms Ritchie: A detailed housing needs assessment is carried out on all applicants for social housing under the Common Selection Scheme. This includes a Health and Social Wellbeing assessment to gauge the applicant's ability to function in their current accommodation and their support and/or care needs. Points are awarded in recognition of a wide range of health and social factors relevant to each individual's circumstances.

In the event that any such applicant is threatened with homelessness, the needs identified will be considered by the Housing Executive in deciding the most appropriate form of temporary accommodation to be offered. Care is taken to balance the needs of the application in terms of the physical layout and location of this accommodation.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the effects of the Review of Public Administration on her department. (AQO 278/07)

Ms Ritchie: The key decisions announced by Direct Rule Ministers affecting my Department were:

- the transfer of significant Urban Regeneration and Community Development and Housing functions from the Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to local councils;
- the transfer of the Appeals Service to a new Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service; and
- the closing of a small number of Arms Length Bodies, namely the Northern Ireland Housing

Council and the Northern Ireland Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board.

However, the Executive recently announced its intention to undertake a review of the Review of Public Administration decisions relating to local Government and I will use this review to protect the integrity of my Department and of the Housing Executive.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the levels of benefit fraud in Northern Ireland. (AQO 221/07)

Ms Ritchie: The estimated levels of fraud in benefits administered by the Social Security Agency have reduced by over half since 2001/2002 from £60.9m or 1.9% of benefit expenditure to £28m which equates to 0.8% of expenditure in 2005/2006. My Department also administers housing benefit and the equivalent estimate for housing benefit fraud is £4m, equivalent to 1.1% of housing benefit expenditure in 2005/2006.

Disability Living Allowances

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to account for the variations between constituencies in terms of the numbers of those in receipt of Disability Living Allowances. (AQO 275/07)

Ms Ritchie: There is no single definitive reason to account for the differences in Disability Living Allowance uptake between constituencies. Contributing factors may include differences in population size, health and the level of deprivation within particular constituencies.

Mixed-Religion Social Housing

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what plans she has to promote mixed-religion social housing. (AQO 247/07)

Ms Ritchie: In Northern Ireland social housing applicants exercise their choice by identifying where they want to live. Through Shared Future my Department is working to ensure that social housing applicants have the opportunity to exercise real choice free of fear.

Shared housing is not about socially engineering communities or neighbourhoods. Trust and safety will dictate the pace of change. Together with my Ministerial colleagues I will be working to create a climate where trust and safety can grow and thrive in our community.

The Housing Executive's duty is to ensure housing is provided on the basis of need. There is no doubt that community division and segregation exerts a high price, in housing terms, preventing the best use being made of existing housing and land.

Shared Future states that the Housing Executive should bring forward as soon as is practicable its proposed 2 shared-future pilot housing schemes. The 2 pilot areas which have been chosen are Enniskillen, which is complete, and Loughbrickland. The Housing Executive is also in the process of examining the 5 year Social Housing Development Programme to identify further schemes which would be appropriate for the Shared Future model.

Property Held by the Department for Social Department

Mr Alban Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development what lands are held by her department. (AQO 285/07)

Ms Ritchie: A list of lands held by my Department has been placed in the library.

Workforce Under-Representation of Protestants

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Social Development if she will work with the Equality Commission and the main organisations in the voluntary sector, to address the imbalances which exist in the workforces of many of these organisations, especially the significant under-representation of members of the Protestant community. (AQO 279/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Equality Commission has not approached my department regarding any perceived imbalance in the workforce of any voluntary and community sector organisation. If the Equality Commission made such an approach I would of course assist it so far as I could within my responsibility as Minister for Social Development.

Social Housing Waiting Lists

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will give a commitment to address the waiting list for social housing in the Strangford constituency by building 250-300 homes, over the next 6 years. (AQO 220/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Social Housing Development Programme is managed on a 5 year basis. The programme contains proposals for 426 homes (27 schemes). 205 homes (11 schemes) are programmed to start in 2007/08 with the remainder over the following

4 years. However, sites have not yet been acquired for 4 schemes for the 2007/08 year.

In addition to the schemes formally programmed, Housing Associations have registered a further 47 sites within the Strangford constituency. 33 of these are within the Ards Borough Council area. Associations are currently working with the Housing Executive to confirm support and to determine whether the sites should be acquired.

A detailed site investigation programme is currently under way in areas of housing need across the Province as a whole. More than 30 potential sites within the Strangford constituency have been identified so far for further examination.

Shared Housing Estates

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on further provision of shared housing estates in line with the policy document 'A Shared Future'. (AQO 241/07)

Ms Ritchie: In Northern Ireland social housing applicants exercise their choice by identifying where they want to live. Through Shared Future my Department is working to ensure that social housing applicants have the opportunity to exercise real choice free of fear.

Shared housing is not about socially engineering communities or neighbourhoods. Trust and safety will dictate the pace of change. Together with my Ministerial colleagues I will be working to create a climate where trust and safety can grow and thrive in our community.

The Housing Executive's duty is to ensure housing is provided on the basis of need. There is no doubt that community division and segregation exerts a high price, in housing terms, preventing the best use being made of existing housing and land.

Shared Future states that the Housing Executive should bring forward as soon as is practicable its proposed 2 shared-future pilot housing schemes. The 2 pilot areas which have been chosen are Enniskillen, which is complete, and Loughbrickland. The Housing Executive is also in the process of examining the 5 year Social Housing Development Programme to identify further schemes which would be appropriate for the Shared Future model.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 3 August 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Investigation of Public Authorities

Mr Paul Butler asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many investigations the Equality Commission has generated into public authorities; and to provide details of all those investigations and their outcomes. (AQW 428/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): We are advised by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland that it has conducted the following Investigations involving public authorities.

14 Investigations have been authorised under Schedule 9 of s. 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. Of these, 10 have been in respect of complaints under Paragraph 10 of the Schedule, as follows:

- Leeson & Dept. of Finance and Personnel. Outcome 8/9/04 - Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme
 - McCartney & Northern Ireland Office. Outcome 23/6/04 - Failure not established to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Allen & Fire Authority for Northern Ireland. Outcome 27/10/04: Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Beattie & Fire Authority for Northern Ireland. Outcome 27/10/04: Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Children's Law Centre & Northern Ireland Office. Outcome 27/04/05: Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Finlay & Dept. Regional Development. Outcome 27/04/05: Failure not established to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Allen & Fire Authority for Northern Ireland. Outcome 30/06/05: Complaint withdrawn
 - Butler & Lisburn City Council. Outcome 28/06/06: Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Marshall & Omagh District Council. Outcome 28/02/07: Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme.
 - Steer & Queen's University Belfast. - Investigation in progress.
- In addition, 4 investigations have been authorized under Paragraph 11 of Schedule 9 to s. 75 of the Northern Ireland Act into potential failures to comply with approved Equality Schemes:
- Belfast Education and Library Board. Outcome – Failure to comply with approved Equality Scheme. (Lack of consultation on closure of an educational establishment).
 - Dept. of Social Development Outcome – Failure not established to comply with approved Equality Scheme. (Screening of criteria for funding).
 - Northern Ireland Office. Outcome - Failure not established to comply with approved Equality Scheme. (Time allowed for consultation on ASBOs).
 - Dept of Finance and Personnel. Investigation in progress. (Consultation and whether EQIA needed for legislative proposal on reasonable chastisement of minors).
- The Equality Commission has also conducted Formal Investigations under anti-discrimination legislation; in particular:
- A general investigation under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, into the Accessibility of health information, is currently under way, and focuses on public health service providers.
 - In 2005, the Equality Commission concluded an investigation under Article 71(3) of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order into the exception from the Order of employment as a teacher in a school, and made recommendations.
 - Completed Section 75 investigation reports (including recommendations made where failure established) are available on ECNI web-site at http://www.equalityni.org/sections/default.asp?cms=Publications%5FStatutory+duty_investigation+reports&cmsid=7_43_50&id=50&secid=8
 - The report of the Investigation into the schoolteachers' exemption from the fair Employment and Treatment Order is available on the ECNI website at <http://www.equalityni.org/archive/word/TeacherExceptionInvestigation1003.doc>

North West Gateway Initiative

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the projects undertaken to date by the North West Gateway Initiative; and (b) how these projects are being resourced. (AQW 620/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The North West Gateway Initiative was taken forward by the British and Irish Governments during Direct Rule and was intended to provide a strategic approach to encouraging a more integrated and joined up approach to economic growth in the North West region.

The initiative has helped to **encourage practical co-operation from existing** Departments and agencies in developing a range of projects for the benefit of the region including; an Integrated Spatial Planning Development Framework, a cross-border tourism framework, the establishment of the North West Workforce Development Forum, and a number of cross border health initiatives.

The financial resources for these projects are provided from within existing Departmental budget allocations.

The recent agreement in the NSMC about funding for a major roads programme to provide dual carriageway standard on the route serving the North West area will also have a major impact by improving roads infrastructure in the region.

North West Gateway Initiative

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the efforts that have been made to date by the North West Gateway Initiative to identify and develop specific projects between Strabane District Council and Donegal. (AQW 621/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The North West Gateway Initiative was taken forward by the British and Irish Governments during Direct Rule and was intended to provide a strategic approach to encouraging a more integrated and joined up approach to economic growth in the North West region.

It aimed to encourage economic growth and development for the mutual benefit of both jurisdictions including those living in the Strabane and Donegal Council areas. There have to date been no specific proposals for projects between Strabane and Donegal though the recent agreement in the NSMC about funding for a major roads programme to provide dual carriageway standard on the route serving the North West area will of course have a major impact by improving roads infrastructure in the region.

Ulster Defence Regiment Memorial

Mr Paul Butler asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps the Equality Commission has taken to investigate Lisburn City Council's decision to erect an Ulster Defence Regiment memorial on land owned by the Council. (AQW 647/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: As this is an operational matter for the Equality Commission, I have asked the Chief Executive to respond to you directly. I understand that the Chief Executive will respond in the following terms:

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has passed to the Equality Commission for reply your question (AQW 647/07) asking what steps we have taken to investigate Lisburn City Council's decision to erect an Ulster Defence Regiment memorial on land owned by the Council.

When you raised concerns about this with the Commission last year you were advised of the procedure for taking a formal complaint. While no such complaint has since been received the issue remains on file as a potential investigation on which we have provided advice. The Commission had sought clarification from Lisburn City Council in relation to the issue you raised as it related to the Council's Equality Scheme.

The Commission, conscious of its powers to initiate an investigation of its own volition under Paragraph 11 of Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, has kept the issue of a potential failure to comply with an approved scheme under consideration.

The Commission is also writing to Lisburn City Council requesting an update on this matter.

Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is it's assessment of the disproportionate number of people from the Catholic community experiencing poverty and disadvantage. (AQW 665/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The government's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy "Lifetime Opportunities" is based on an analysis of disadvantage wherever it occurs.

This analysis illustrates the risks faced by different types of household and shows that age, gender, marital status, qualifications, location, tenure, family size, health, disability and other factors are associated with disadvantage.

It is known that the risks are higher among the Catholic population but also that significant proportions of both communities face disadvantage. "Lifetime Opportunities" acknowledges that these risks need to be addressed within both communities.

Equality Impact Assessment

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will explain the failure to apply to high level decision making, such as spending priorities, the Review of Public Administration and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, the equality requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 666/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: In the early stages of implementation of Section 75, the full seven stage Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) process was not applied to some high level policies, including spending priorities, Review of Public Administration and the Investment strategy for Northern Ireland. In the case of the Review of Public Administration and Priorities and Budget high level EQIAs were carried out, along with consultation with relevant stakeholders.

Departments involved in the implementation of RPA decisions are mainstreaming their statutory obligations arising from Section 75 into their decisions, through screening and EQIA, where appropriate. OFMDFM is continuing to work with Departments to promote a coordinated approach to mainstreaming equality and other considerations into RPA implementation.

In relation to inherited spending priorities, a high level EQIA was carried out on spending allocations from the 2006-2008 budget process prior to restoration, using a high level impact assessment (HLIA) process agreed with the Equality Commission. This included pre-consultation and formal consultation with key stakeholders, including representatives of groups across Section 75 categories. A similar exercise was conducted in late 2006 in relation to the current 2007 budget process.

Work is currently under way to produce a new programme for Government for this Executive which will set policy and spending priorities for 2008 and beyond, and to prepare a ten-year Investment Strategy which will be published for consultation in the Autumn and forwarded to the Assembly for consideration in December 2007. In line with Section 75 obligations, full consideration and due regard will be given to the need to promote equality of opportunity in all decisions taken in these two areas. This will involve an EQIA or HLIA process, as appropriate, and full consultation with key stakeholders and the Equality Commission.

Vacancies in the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many vacancies there are in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in each government department at (a) Administrative Officer, (b) Executive Officer II, (c) Executive Officer I, and (d) Staff Officer grades. (AQW 855/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The number of vacancies in permanent posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service at the grades of (a) Administrative Officer, (b) Executive Officer 2, (c) Executive Officer 1 and (d) Staff Officer is set out in the attached table. The figures, on a full time equivalent (FTE) basis, are broken down by each of the eleven NI Departments and their Agencies, and show the position at 1 July 2007.

NUMBER OF NICS PERMANENT POST VACANCIES IN SPECIFIC GRADES AT 1 JULY 2007, BY DEPARTMENT.

Department	Number of vacancies			
	(a) Administrative Officer	(b) Executive Officer 2	(c) Executive Officer 1	(d) Staff Officer
Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD)	13	3	9	6
Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL)	5	3	2.5	2
Education (DE)	13	6	5	5
Employment and Learning (DEL)	22.64	19.5	7.5	20
Enterprise, Training and Investment (DETI)	3	8	4	5
Finance and Personnel (DFP)	6.75	2.89	3.86	9.65
Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)	5	4	1	10
Environment (DOE)	34	6	10	24
Regional Development (DRD)	29	12	11	13
Social Development (DSD)	158.8	186.10	19.43	45.51
Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)	2	1	1	6
Total	292.19	251.49	74.29	146.16

Slavery Booklet

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how the text of the booklet 'Slavery: marking the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act' was produced. (AQW 863/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The booklet was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland prior to the restoration of devolution, and was produced jointly by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Office as a contribution to the UK-wide commemoration of the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act on 25 March 2007.

The text of the booklet was based on original material provided by the historian, Dr Nini Rodgers, an acknowledged expert on this topic. The material was edited to make it suitable for a target audience of children of Key Stage 3 age.

North West Gateway Initiative

Mr John McCallister asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what work is being done to develop the Strabane-Lifford Gateway and what assessment it has made to the potential impact this initiative will have on the North-West Region; and to detail which groups and individuals have been consulted. (AQW 886/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The North West Gateway Initiative was taken forward by the British and Irish Governments during Direct Rule and was intended to provide a strategic approach to encouraging a more integrated and joined up approach to economic growth in the North West region which includes Strabane/Lifford.

The initiative has helped to **encourage practical co-operation from existing** Departments and agencies in developing a ranges of initiatives for the benefit of the region including; an Integrated Spatial Planning Development Framework, a cross-border tourism framework, the establishment of the North West Workforce Development Forum, and a number of cross border health initiatives. It has also helped to identify a range of potential cross-border roads infrastructure projects and has supported the establishment of a communications link between the North West Institute of Technology and the Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

The recent announcement of the funding to provide dual carriageway standard on routes within Northern Ireland and in particular the route serving the North West Gateway area will of course have a major impact by improving roads infrastructure in the region.

The joint group of officials responsible for taking the Initiative forward consulted a wide range of stakeholders during the development of the initiative, including with representatives of the four Councils, the North West Stakeholders Alliance, the North West Region Cross Border Group, the Ilex Urban Regeneration Company, the Strabane Employment Taskforce and representatives of local political parties.

Environmental Impact Assessment

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail whether an environmental impact study has been carried out on the site for the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze, and, if so, if this will be made available to elected representatives. (AQW 923/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: An environmental impact assessment of the potential implications of the Maze/Long Kesh Masterplan, published last year, is currently being undertaken. This will be available to elected representatives as and when any planning application is submitted for the regeneration of the former prison site.

Default Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what facility exists, at present, for members of staff in the department to continue to work in their existing post beyond the default retirement age. (AQW 934/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Since 1 October 2006 staff wanting to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

Maze Stadium Business Case

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many hours the staff of the Strategic Investment Board have devoted to preparing a business case for a multi-sports stadium at the Maze. (AQW 972/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The outline business case for a Multi Sports Stadium at Maze/Long Kesh is the responsibility of the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure. The Strategic Investment Board's (SIB) contribution to the preparation of the

outline business case for the stadium has comprised some 1000 hours.

Monitoring Reports on Human Rights Instruments

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will ensure that there is full engagement with the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council and the Ulster-Scots community in any future consultations on monitoring reports, for international human rights instruments that contain cultural rights. (AQW 995/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Monitoring reports on the United Kingdom's implementation of international human rights instruments are, of course, matters for the UK Government. Consultations on these reports are conducted either by the lead UK government department or by the lead department here, or both. In any case we would hope to ensure that they consult all key stakeholders.

We will seek to ensure that the Department for Culture Arts and Leisure liaises, as appropriate, with the relevant United Kingdom or Northern Ireland department so that account is taken of the views of all interested parties here, including the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council and the Ulster-Scots community.

United Nations Convention

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how the 57 non-governmental organisations invited to attend the consultation meetings at Stormont on 14 and 23 February 2007, on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, were selected. (AQW 996/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The organisations selected to attend the consultation meetings on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, were drawn mainly from a list of key children's and young people's groups and those representing their interests that make up the membership of the All Party Group on Children and Young People. That generic consultee list was approved by direct rule Ministers in August 2005 for the purposes of discussing matters of interest to children and young people. Any groups wishing inclusion on the OFMDFM mailing list should contact the Department.

Young People Advisory Forum

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) when the Young People's Advisory Forum was

established; (b) what is the role and remit of the forum; (c) which organisations are on the list of nominating organisations to the forum; and (d) how many members are on the forum. (AQW 997/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Young People's Advisory Forum was established on a time-limited basis in October 2002 and ran until June 2004, when it was considered that it had fulfilled its remit. It had two key roles. First, to help in the appointment process for the first Commissioner for Children and Young People, Nigel Williams, who took up office in October 2003. Second, to contribute ideas to and assist in the consultation on a ten-year strategy for children and young people. The latter was published on 20 June 2006.

The ten year strategy makes clear our intention to embed a culture of engaging with children and young people and involving them in decision-making. As part of the implementation of the strategy a participation network has been established. Its aim is to support statutory agencies, local and central government and fulfil their duties to effectively engage children and young people in public decision making.

It is our intention, in accordance with Articles 3 and 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that children and young people are routinely involved in the public decision making process.

Anti-Poverty Strategy

Mrs Mary Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will formally take ownership of the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy, and its targets to halve child poverty by 2010, on the way to eradicating child poverty by 2020; and to oversee the development and implementation of a cross-departmental approach to achieve those targets. (AQW 1000/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Section 16 of the Northern Ireland St Andrews Agreement Act 2006 places a statutory obligation on the Northern Ireland Executive Committee, to adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need.

The process to obtain Executive Committee agreement on an anti-poverty strategy has begun, however the Executive Committee has still to formally consider the adoption of 'Lifetime Opportunities' - Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland, together with its associated priorities, objectives, goals and targets, including child poverty reduction targets.

In adopting an Anti-Poverty Strategy the Executive Committee will also consider monitoring and reporting arrangements. This would be to ensure that all Departments take due cognizance of the issues of poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland in planning their own Programmes, and contribute to the overall effectiveness of Government in tackling these issues.

British - Irish Council

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what east-west meetings have been held by the department, either independently or through the British-Irish Council, since 8 May 2007. (AQW 1072/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: In the ten weeks since restoration, Government Departments have continued to work on East West issues across a range of sectors of mutual interest and benefit. Within OFMDFM, officials have had a series of meetings with participating administrations about the work of the British-Irish Council leading to our hosting the 9th BIC Summit meeting in Belfast on 16 July. A copy of the Summit communiqué has been placed in the Library.

In addition, seven BIC sectoral meetings have been held covering the range of BIC activities. In June we had a meeting with the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond and had separate discussions with the Prime Minister and the heads of the other administrations during the BIC Summit in Parliament Buildings in July.

Staffing in the Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps it is

taking to ensure that additional commissioners are employed in the Planning Appeals Commission; and also to ensure that the nine commissioners working on development plans and other issues are redeployed to help clear the backlog of appeals. (AQW 1080/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: In recognition of the growing backlog of planning appeals facing the Planning Appeals Commission, we have agreed with the Department of Finance and Personnel to commission a review of the Commission's funding and pressures. This review will inform future decisions on levels of support for the Commission. The Chief Commissioner is aware of the position and has been fully involved in developing terms of reference for the review.

As the Commission is an independent tribunal, the deployment of Commissioners is a matter for the Chief Commissioner to determine and I understand she has written to the member on this issue. A copy of her response has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Good Relations

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to report on the amount of resources allocated to each District Council for good relations programmes, for the 2007/08 financial year. (AQW 1105/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The table below provides the detail of resources made available to district councils in support of community relations and good relations programmes in 2007/08 and in each of the five previous financial years.

Council	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Antrim	66,670	68,294	54,451	54,595	46,004	46,050
Ards	55,206	59,450	55,080	52,673	56,123	56,300
Armagh	93,163	88,916	82,875	84,000	83,794	83,800
Ballymena	75,519	68,004	67,798	67,519	65,685	73,520
Ballymoney	74,250	78,125	73,724	72,285	72,272	72,282
Banbridge	83,274	85,011	81,847	85,883	75,046	75,063
Belfast	Non participant	229,985	235,991	261,401	329,918	302,650
Carrickfergus	51,024	64,201	57,043	57,674	48,408	48,725
Castlereagh	77,166	81,633	74,866	70,221	64,623	64,670
Coleraine	81,725	76,199	70,829	69,996	69,233	69,295
Cookstown	69,975	72,300	67,792	73,917	73,919	73,930
Craigavon	6,180	54,464	49,949	38,574	32,625	37,530

Council	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Derry	122,699	121,147	117,988	120,225	124,654	138,310
Down	84,474	83,624	84,251	87,898	86,729	86,771
Dungannon	80,255	84,973	80,564	78,062	77,886	77,933
Fermanagh	62,925	63,230	58,802	66,008	83,859	63,932
Larne	60,991	64,437	61,301	52,388	52,035	52,045
Limavady	68,088	71,590	74,396	75,960	58,227	58,260
Lisburn	55,405	56,467	51,405	45,225	47,934	48,005
Magherafelt	72,739	74,655	73,727	74,959	74,992	75,005
Moyle	57,542	59,466	54,922	55,793	50,185	50,447
Newry & Mourne	70,645	68,331	66,762	67,014	81,189	82,001
Newtownabbey	68,728	Non participant	52,817	68,217	67,668	67,725
North Down	56,453	64,472	61,072	55,013	53,250	53,295
Omagh	75,977	71,911	70,945	47,579	45,000	45,005
Strabane	85,122	85,545	76,165	77,363	75,045	75,085
Total	1,756,195	1,996,430	1,957,362.00	1,960,442	1,996,303	1,977,634

Good Relations

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to report on the amount of resources allocated to each District Council for community relations programmes, for the last five financial years.

(AQW 1106/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The table below provides the detail of resources made available to district councils in support of community relations and good relations programmes in 2007/08 and in each of the five previous financial years.

Council	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Antrim	66,670	68,294	54,451	54,595	46,004	46,050
Ards	55,206	59,450	55,080	52,673	56,123	56,300
Armagh	93,163	88,916	82,875	84,000	83,794	83,800
Ballymena	75,519	68,004	67,798	67,519	65,685	73,520
Ballymoney	74,250	78,125	73,724	72,285	72,272	72,282
Banbridge	83,274	85,011	81,847	85,883	75,046	75,063
Belfast	Non participant	229,985	235,991	261,401	329,918	302,650
Carrickfergus	51,024	64,201	57,043	57,674	48,408	48,725
Castlereagh	77,166	81,633	74,866	70,221	64,623	64,670
Coleraine	81,725	76,199	70,829	69,996	69,233	69,295
Cookstown	69,975	72,300	67,792	73,917	73,919	73,930
Craigavon	6,180	54,464	49,949	38,574	32,625	37,530
Derry	122,699	121,147	117,988	120,225	124,654	138,310
Down	84,474	83,624	84,251	87,898	86,729	86,771
Dungannon	80,255	84,973	80,564	78,062	77,886	77,933
Fermanagh	62,925	63,230	58,802	66,008	83,859	63,932
Larne	60,991	64,437	61,301	52,388	52,035	52,045

Council	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
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Lisburn	55,405	56,467	51,405	45,225	47,934	48,005
Magherafelt	72,739	74,655	73,727	74,959	74,992	75,005
Moyle	57,542	59,466	54,922	55,793	50,185	50,447
Newry & Mourne	70,645	68,331	66,762	67,014	81,189	82,001
Newtownabbey	68,728	Non participant	52,817	68,217	67,668	67,725
North Down	56,453	64,472	61,072	55,013	53,250	53,295
Omagh	75,977	71,911	70,945	47,579	45,000	45,005
Strabane	85,122	85,545	76,165	77,363	75,045	75,085
Total	1,756,195	1,996,430	1,957,362.00	1,960,442	1,996,303	1,977,634

Integrated Schools

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail whether a target has been set for the expansion of the percentage of children attending integrated schools, as part of the series of indicators for assessing the health of good relations.

(AQW 1108/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The good relations indicators baseline report January 2007 does not set targets. Rather, as the title of the report suggests, the intention is to monitor progress against a number of general and specific indicators. These include:

- number and proportion of first preference applications to post-primary integrated schools that do not result in admissions;
- proportion of people who would send their children to mixed schools;
- proportion of people who believe government is actively encouraging integrated schools;
- of pupils enrolled at grant aided schools, the proportion enrolled at integrated schools;
- proportion of pupils enrolled in Catholic managed schools who are Protestant, and
- proportion of pupils enrolled in controlled schools who are Catholic.

Finally, all schools have an important role to play in promoting good relations.

Good Relations Proofing of Policies

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to report on the good relations proofing of policies.

(AQW 1110/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) places a duty

on public authorities in carrying out their functions to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

The Equality Commission has a duty to offer advice to public authorities and others in connection with the statutory equality and good relations duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). The Commission is also required to keep under review the effectiveness of these duties.

The Commission has a statutory duty under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order (1997) to promote good relations between persons of different racial groups.

The equality proofing mechanism (through the existing process of screening and equality impact assessment) is intended to ensure that equality and good relations are mainstreamed into all levels of decision making as set out in guidance provided by the Commission. It regards the two duties of Section 75 as complementary.

The screening process specifically asks policy makers to consider whether there is an opportunity to better promote equality of opportunity and good relations by altering the policy or working with others in Government or in the larger community.

Because of the difficulties in subjecting high level strategies and policies to equality impact assessment, a high level equality impact assessment process was designed specifically to mainstream equality, good relations and other considerations into the Priorities and Budget process. This process was agreed by the Equality Commission.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is committed to a shared future and to racial equality and supports Departments to mainstream good relations in the development of their policies and specific intervention. Ministers have given a commitment that the Executive and the Assembly will

wish to consider carefully the progress to date and bring forward detailed plans, consistent with the pledge of office, to promote the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

The mainstreaming of the good relations duty and the practical outworking of actions to support good relations interventions are evidenced by the Commissions publication of

- (a) annual implementation reports;
- (b) 'Good Relations in Practice' and 'Section 75, Keeping it Effective';
- (c) the Equality Impact Assessments and screening outcomes; and
- (d) the forthcoming 'outcomes report' on implementation of a shared future and the racial equality strategy action plans. This will be published by the Department for consideration by Ministers, the Executive and the Assembly.

Equality Impact Assessments

Mrs Naomi Long asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give a commitment that all equality impact assessments for future policies will take into account those people who do not align with the two main religious or political traditions. (AQW 1113/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Equality Impact Assessments currently carried out by all the Northern Ireland Departments follow the Equality Commission's guidance on implementing the duties under Section 75, which defines religious belief and political opinion more broadly than the two main religious or political traditions in Northern Ireland. Future EQIAs will also adhere to this guidance and its definitions.

Devolution of Policing and Criminal Powers

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to report on any discussions it has had with the Northern Ireland Office or Treasury, regarding the financial arrangements and implications of the devolution of policing and criminal justice powers to the Assembly. (AQW 1124/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Officials from the relevant Departments including OFMDFM, have begun consideration with NIO on the full range of implications of the potential devolution of criminal justice and policing to the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, no specific or substantive discussions have

at this stage taken place on the financial arrangements and implications.

Good Relations Indicators

Ms Anna Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if targets have been set for decreasing the number of people living within segregated housing areas, as part of the series of indicators for assessing the health of good relations. (AQW 1156/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The good relations indicators baseline report [January 2007] does not set targets. Rather, as the title of the report suggests, the indicators are designed to measure progress over time towards achieving the priority outcomes that link directly to the aims and objectives of a shared future and the racial equality strategy.

In that regard it has established 'that Northern Ireland is a place where people of all backgrounds work, live, learn and play together' as one of its priorities. Under this priority our department will monitor progress against a number of general and specific indicators. These include:

- (a) proportion of people living in mixed / segregated areas;
- (b) number of housing executive transfer requests due to: (i) intimidation (ii) fear without violence;
- (c) number of homes purchased by the housing executive because of sectarian intimidation of the occupants: (ii) number of houses purchased and cost; (iii) number of applications;
- (d) number of houses protected under the protection of private property initiative (POPPI);
- (e) proportion of children (age 16) who think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years ago;
- (f) Proportion of adults who think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years ago;
- (g) proportion of people who would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood;
- (h) proportion of people who would accept minority ethnic people as residents in their area;
- (i) proportion of people who would define the neighbourhood where they live as a 'neutral' space;
- (j) proportion of people who define their local shops as a 'neutral space';
- (k) proportion of people in favour of greater mixing in sports / leisure activities;

- (l) number of mixed marriages;
- (m) proportion of people who would mind if a close relative married someone of a different religion; and (ii) proportion of people who think other people would mind if one of their relatives married someone of a different religion;
- (n) proportion of people who would accept minority ethnic people as relatives by marrying a member of their family;
- (o) proportion of people who have friends of the same religion;
- (p) proportion of people who believe that better relations will come about through more mixing;
- (q) proportion of people who believe that the government is actively encouraging shared communities where people of all backgrounds can live, work, learn and play together.

Economic Growth

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to confirm that economic growth is a priority for the department. (AQW 1166/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Executive is determined to deliver a better future for all our people. We recognise the need for the creation of a dynamic and competitive economy if we are to deliver a prosperous and stable society which benefits everyone. In this context, addressing the economic challenges we face and providing the conditions for economic growth will be a key priority for the Executive. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will play its part in delivering the Executive's priorities.

National Stadium

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if alternative plans for the use of the Maze/Long Kesh site have been considered, if the National Stadium is not to go ahead. (AQW 1179/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The current proposals for the Maze/Long Kesh are rooted in the unanimous report of the multi-party Maze Consultation Panel. Masterplanners appointed under direct rule to explore the potential to turn the Panel's vision into reality considered a number of options based on the report's central recommendations for a multi-sports stadium and an international centre for conflict transformation.

Cross-Border Reconciliation

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if there are any plans to improve cross-border reconciliation, in addition to the recommendations of the 'Study of Obstacles to Cross Border Mobility', by addressing matters such as the recovery of the bodies of the 'disappeared'. (AQW 1180/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Responsibility for the recovery of the bodies of the 'disappeared' lies with the Northern Ireland Office and not with OFMDFM.

Cross-Border Projects

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on the projected spend that is to be made available from the Republic of Ireland's National Development Plan, with specific reference to cross-border projects; and to detail the projects that will receive such funding. (AQW 1183/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The North South Ministerial Council discussed this matter at its recent Plenary meeting in Armagh, and a copy of the Joint Communiqué setting out the agreed position has been placed in the Library.

Breach of Ministerial Code

Mr David Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, with reference to recent comments made by the deputy First Minister in an interview with broadcaster Stephen Nolan on 30 May 2007, what is the department's assessment of whether or not this constitutes a breach of the Ministerial Code. (AQW 1256/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The First Minister and deputy First Minister are fully committed to the Ministerial Code and see no need for any assessment of the remarks.

Community Relations Funding

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the amount of community relations funding the department has provided to the Community Relations Council, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1351/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The table below provides details of the amount of community relations funding provided by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the

Community Relations Council in each of the last five financial years. These figures are confirmed, with the exception of 2006/2007, in the Council's published audited financial statements.

Financial Year	Amount
2002/03	£2,708,587
2003/04	£3,111,523
2004/05	£3,111,670
2005/06	£3,107,019
2006/07	£3,249,250

Good Relations and Reconciliation Programme

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of the allocation of the contributions made by the Good Relations and Reconciliation Division to each of the District Councils in 2006/2007; and to outline the proposed allocation for the 2007/2008 financial year. (AQW 1376/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The table below provides the detail of resources made available to district councils in support of community relations and good relations programmes in 2006/2007 and 2007/08 financial years.

Council	2006/07	2007/08
Antrim	46,004	46,050
Ards	56,123	56,300
Armagh	83,794	83,800
Ballymena	65,685	73,520
Ballymoney	72,272	72,282
Banbridge	75,046	75,063
Belfast	329,918	302,650
Carrickfergus	48,408	48,725
Castlereagh	64,623	64,670
Coleraine	69,233	69,295
Cookstown	73,919	73,930
Craigavon	32,625	37,530
Derry	124,654	138,310
Down	86,729	86,771
Dungannon	77,886	77,933
Fermanagh	83,859	63,932
Larne	52,035	52,045

Council	2006/07	2007/08
Limavady	58,227	58,260
Lisburn	47,934	48,005
Magherafelt	74,992	75,005
Moyle	50,185	50,447
Newry & Mourne	81,189	82,001
Newtownabbey	67,668	67,725
North Down	53,250	53,295
Omagh	45,000	45,005
Strabane	75,045	75,085
Total	1,996,303	1,977,634

Planning Appeals

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the backlog of planning appeals at the end of June 2007, in (a) the Omagh District Council area; and (b) the Strabane District Council area; and to detail the number and percentage of these planning appeals that were successful in the 2006/2007 year. (AQW 1377/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body, and I understand the Chief Commissioner has written to the member in the following terms:

"At the 30th June 2007 there were 199 appeals outstanding which relate to the Omagh District Council area and 172 outstanding for the Strabane District Council area.

From 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2007 there were 11 successful appeals out of the 28 decisions made in the Omagh District Council area, which equates to a success rate of 39%. During the same period there were 3 successful appeals out of the 27 decisions made relating to the Strabane District Council area, this equates to a success rate of 11%.

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable."

North-South Ministerial Council

Mr Alex Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (a) if it intends to produce a new work programme for the North-South Ministerial Council; (b) to outline the proposed timescale for this; and (c) what additional initiatives

are being proposed on a North-South basis.
(AQW 1437/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: A Plenary meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) took place on 17 July 2007 in Armagh, at which Ministers agreed a schedule of NSMC meetings for the period July to December 2007. The Joint Communiqué from the Plenary meeting is attached. This provides details of decisions on a range of issues which Ministers agreed at the meeting.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Water Level at Shrigley

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on whether a minimum water level was agreed for the Claylakes at Shrigley, Killyleagh, in light of the agreement on a maximum water level.
(AQW 1151/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The historic agreement between the then Ministry of Agriculture and the undertaking at the Clea Lakes provided only for maximum water levels in the Lakes and did not specify a minimum water level. The agreement was aimed at ensuring a balance between the needs of the previous industrial Tannery operation for water, and avoidance of flooding of surrounding land. I am aware that environmental concerns have been raised about lower water levels in the lakes and officials in Rivers Agency have recently met with officials of DOE Environment and Heritage Service and local landowners, to discuss a possible way forward. The position is that, if agreement can be reached to transfer responsibility for maintaining the maximum water levels to Rivers Agency, subject to availability of funding, they will undertake remedial work to the existing control structures in the Clea Lakes. If that proves possible, the exceptional minimum levels currently being experienced, due to leaking structures, will be significantly improved. However, it should be noted that it is impossible to guarantee a minimum level for the lakes as this is dependent on weather conditions. Neither Rivers Agency nor EHS has any statutory responsibility to maintain minimum water levels.

Sheep Industry

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has for the marketing of Northern Irish lamb, to enable

it to compete with the market for New Zealand and Welsh lamb.
(AQW 1173/07)

Ms Gildernew: I am committed to supporting local produce and can advise that my Department is actively involved in work to assist our sheep industry. The Department and industry stakeholders have formed a Red Meat Task Force to develop a long term strategy for the local beef and sheepmeat industry. The consultants appointed in April to carry out this work are due to report later this year and will provide an action plan for this important sector. In addition, under the European Protected Food Names Scheme, the LMC has produced an application to register 'Northern Ireland Lamb' as a Protected Geographical Indicator (PGI). The Red Meat Task force will also examine how best to utilize a PGI. The aim is to position NI lamb in the market where returns can be maximised. Furthermore, in October, lamb will be included in LMC's programme of activities at Anuga (the international food and drink exhibition in Cologne attracting international traders). LMC also conduct market research and provide pricing and marketing information to assist our industry in remaining competitive.

DARD Consultancy Services

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's projected spend on consultancy services, in the 2007/2008 financial year.
(AQW 1176/07)

Ms Gildernew: The estimated projected spend for the financial year 2007/08 is £781,450.

Voluntary Modulation

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of stakeholders that were consulted prior to her announcement on voluntary modulation; and to detail the number of those consulted who made proposals that were later reflected in her decision to increase the current rate of modulation.
(AQW 1190/07)

Ms Gildernew: I consulted the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and met with 12 organisations representing environmental, agri-food and wider rural interests. I also received two written submissions.

All of the organisations expressed a view on the level of voluntary modulation rates - ranging from maintaining the higher Voluntary Modulation rates set by David Cairns to having no Voluntary Modulation at all. In making my decision to reduce the rates set by David Cairns, I took into account the full range of views.

Sustrans Scheme

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the Sustrans scheme for safety at schools; and to provide details of (a) the primary schools involved in the scheme; and (b) the funding that each school will receive. (AQW 1203/07)

Ms Gildernew: Sustrans have been awarded £936,531 under Measure 4.9 of the EU Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity (PBSP) of the Rural Development Programme through DARD. This funding allows for the development and implementation of a project known as the Rural Safe Routes to School Project. The total cost of the Project is approximately £1.25m and is being delivered in partnership with other key stakeholders/match funders including the Department of Regional Development, Roads' Service, the Department of Education and the Department of Environment, Road Safety Unit.

Cattle Exports

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress made on marketing since the removal of the live exports ban; and to outline the short-term and long-term prospects of the live export trade. (AQW 1236/07)

Ms Gildernew: Since the lifting of the European Commission's ban on live cattle exports in May 2006, 2,648 consignments totalling 51,900 animals have been exported from the North of Ireland to Member States.

These figures demonstrate that there is a significant demand in Europe for cattle from here.

In the short-term, I am planning to meet key stakeholders at the end of July to discuss a range of trade issues.

In the longer term, I will be working closely with the industry and my counterparts in GB, to ensure industry concerns are raised with the Commission and to secure a level playing field across Europe.

I will also be engaging with my Ministerial colleague in the south of Ireland, to explore ways of securing the freer movement of animals on the island of Ireland within the framework of the All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy.

Capital Expenditure on Opening Forests

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's capital expenditure on opening up forests for leisure and recreation, for the last five years; and to detail the

proposed capital expenditure for the next financial year. (AQW 1237/07)

Ms Gildernew:

2002/03	£169k
2003/04	£268k
2004/05	£12k
2005/06	£24k
2006/07	£6k
2007/08	No expenditure budgeted for recreation activities.

The main areas of capital expenditure included development of the Walkway at Glenarriff Forest and improvements to shower and toilet facilities in forest parks.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that the Countryside Management Scheme, or a similar scheme, will be introduced in the near future. (AQW 1251/07)

Ms Gildernew: The Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan (NIRDP) 2007 - 2013 may be approved by the European Commission in late July 2007. Local legislation will follow, but is unlikely to come into operation before October 2007. The proposed Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) in the North of Ireland is an integral part of the NIRDP. I can confirm that this scheme will be introduced in the near future; however it is unlikely that this will be in 2007.

Single Farm Payment Land Inspections

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total number of land inspections associated with Single Farm Payments, that were carried out in the month ending 31 May 2007. (AQW 1254/07)

Ms Gildernew: There were no land inspections, associated with the 2007 Single Farm Payment, carried out in the month ending 31 May 2007.

Import of Cattle from Scotland

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the import of cattle from Scotland to processing plants in Northern Ireland, with specific reference to the impact of the price paid by Northern Ireland Meat Plants for

Scottish cattle, when compared to Northern Irish cattle; and what plans she has to address this issue.
(AQW 1281/07)

Ms Gildernew: During the year from 3 May 2006 to 14 May 2007 9,820 cattle were imported from Great Britain for direct slaughter at Meat Plants in Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge the valuable contribution that the red meat sector makes to the local economy. With regards to pricing, you will be aware that prices paid for cattle are a commercial matter between Meat Processing Plants and their customers and government cannot interfere with normal market forces.

The situation suggests that there may be over capacity across Meat Processing Plants in the North and this is an area that needs to be addressed. My Department is currently involved in a wide ranging review of the red meat sector along with key stakeholders representing both Producers and Processors interests and this is one of the areas that will be addressed in that review. It will also look at the long-term future of this important sector, help to bring together a fragmented industry and clarify priorities for both the industry and government providing a much needed focus on how public money could be used most effectively to support the industry and aid sustainability.

Sustrans Scheme

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to roll out the Sustrans scheme for cycle paths in rural towns and villages.
(AQW 1336/07)

Ms Gildernew: There are currently no plans for the Department to roll out this project throughout rural towns and villages.

The Safe Routes to Schools project is led by Sustrans, the Sustainable Transport Charity. It is funded under Measure 4.9 of the EU Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity (PBSP) of the Rural Development Programme through DARD.

As part of the project an evaluation will be carried out towards the end of 2008. If this evaluation is positive, it is anticipated that Sustrans will be well placed to pursue further funding opportunities to develop this type of work in both rural and urban schools across the North of Ireland.

Review of Planning Applications

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister for Regional Development regarding

a review of the criteria to be applied to planning applications for single homes in the countryside from farmers and those involved in the agricultural industry.
(AQW 1362/07)

Ms Gildernew: I have discussed Planning Policy Statement 14 with the Minister for Regional Development on a number of occasions, including at the Executive Committee Meeting on 5 July

As a representative on the inter-Ministerial group on this issue, I will continue to ensure that the rural issues related to PPS14, including the criteria to be applied to farmers and the agriculture industry, are taken into account.

Common Agriculture Policy

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the effect that the decision of EU Ministers to simplify and improve the Common Agricultural Policy's cross-compliance system will have on farmers in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1383/07)

Ms Gildernew: The proposals, as presented by the Commission and considered by the Council, will be a helpful contribution to simplifying the system of cross compliance. There will be benefits for farmers in Northern Ireland, such as the non application of penalties which fall below €50, the possibility of a points system for cases of non compliance, and 14 days advance notice of some inspections. Simplification of the ten month rule will be welcome provided it delivers an easier system. The use of warning letters for minor breaches is already deployed in Northern Ireland. The proposals represent modest gains and I would have liked more to have been delivered.

Maintenance of Water Levels at Clea Lakes

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to maintain the water levels in the Clea Lakes at Shrigley, Killyleagh.
(AQW 1403/07)

Ms Gildernew: Responsibility for maintenance of maximum water levels in the Clea lakes currently rests with the private owners of the water rights and DARD Rivers Agency has no statutory responsibility. In response to environmental representations about lower water levels, recent meetings were held involving Rivers Agency and DOE Environment and Heritage Service officials, local land owners and businesses and a further meeting has been arranged for later in July.

If agreement to transfer responsibility for water level management can be reached, Rivers Agency,

subject to the availability of funding and Drainage Council approval, will undertake remedial works to the existing control structures. It is hoped that these would curtail leakage which is occurring at present and improve maintenance of water levels in the Lakes. It should be noted that it is not possible to guarantee a minimum level for the Lakes as this is dependent on weather conditions.

Illegal Trade of Exotic Wildlife Products

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to revise the current list of regulated plants and animals, to help prevent growth in the illegal trade of exotic wildlife products; and to detail the number of seizures of regulated flora and fauna, intended for illegal trade, that have taken place in the last five years. (AQW 1457/07)

Ms Gildernew: My Department does not have a remit covering measures to prevent the illegal trade of exotic wildlife products. I am aware that the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the UK Management Authority for CITES, (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). The Department of the Environment is responsible for prohibitions on the trade or sale of a limited number of species of animals and plants that are of European importance. I have been informed by DOE that there is no significant incidence of illegal trade of these species in the North. DOE have noted that they have never prosecuted anyone in the North of Ireland for sale of European protected species and, as such, there are no figures available on levels of incidence.

Indigenous Bee Population

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (a) what estimate her department has made of the indigenous bee population of Northern Ireland; (b) if any assessment has been made of the threat of Colony Collapse Disorder against the indigenous bee population of Northern Ireland; and (c) what measures her department has put in place to safeguard Northern Ireland's native bee colonies against Colony Collapse Disorder. (AQW 1460/07)

Ms Gildernew: My Department does not monitor the indigenous bee population in the North of Ireland and has not therefore made any assessment of the threat to it from Colony Collapse Disorder. Consequently, my Department has not considered measures to safeguard native bee colonies. My inspectors check "managed" bees for certain notifiable diseases. While

Colony Collapse Disorder is not recognised as a disease in the UK or Ireland, unexplained colony collapse is investigated to ascertain the cause. There is no evidence that Colony Collapse Disorder is present in the North of Ireland.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Funding for Ulster Grand Prix

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to state what support, including financial support, has been given to the Ulster Grand Prix over the past five years; and what financial support it will receive from his department in 2007. (AQW 400/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): In 2007, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), provided an additional £150,000 funding to the 2&4 Wheel MSG. Of this, £50,000 was made available to the NW200 for the upgrading of health and safety at the site and £100,000 was used to purchase safety equipment such as bales, pole protectors and safety fencing which is available for use by any of the motorsport organisations. SNI is currently assisting 2&4 Wheel MSG with the preparation of a business case setting out further funding requirements.

Gaelic Language Network

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the Northern Ireland members on the board of the Gaelic language network Colmcille; and to explain how they were recruited and appointed. (AQW 1031/07)

Mr Poots: I am aware that this question was due for answer on 9th July and I apologise for the delay.

There are currently three Northern Ireland Board members. Risteard MacGabhan serves as an ex-officio member due to his position as Chair of the Northern Ireland Regional Committee of Colmcille. At the time of the formation of the Board in April 2002, Aodán Mac Póilín served as NI Regional Committee Chair, resulting in his appointment as a Core Director of the Board. Róise Ní Bhaoill was appointed as DCAL's nomination to the Board.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the recruitment

process used to appoint the second interim chief executive of the Ulster- Scots Agency; (b) when he took up the appointment; and (c) when he left the position. (AQW 1033/07)

Mr Poots: Following the resignation of the first Interim CEO of the Ulster-Scots Agency in August 2001, a second interim CEO was appointed. An advisor working with the Agency was appointed with the Board's approval as the second interim CEO. He was informed of the CEO's responsibilities on 3 September 2001 and advised of the Accounting office role of the CEO on 20 September 2001. The Board of the Ulster-Scots Agency terminated his contract on 28th March 2002 on the grounds of non-availability.

Promotion of Ulster-Scots Linguistic Projects

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount his department has spent on Ulster-Scots linguistic projects activity, on a project-by-project basis, in the last five years. (AQW 1071/07)

Mr Poots: DCAL's expenditure on the promotion of the Ulster-Scots linguistic projects activity is via organisations such as the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group. The amount spent by both these organisations on linguistic projects over the past 5 years is shown in the table below:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Ulster-Scots Agency	£100k	£500k	£103k	£198k	£345k
Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group				05-06 £134k	06-07 £392k

There would be a disproportionate cost to show these figures over the past 5 years on a project-by-project basis.

Promotion of Non-Linguistic Ulster-Scots Projects

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the amount his department has spent on non-linguistic Ulster-Scots projects activity, on a project-by-project basis, in the last five years. (AQW 1082/07)

Mr Poots: DCAL's expenditure on the promotion of non-linguistic Ulster-Scots projects is via organisations such as the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Events Company. The amount spent/allocated by these organisations over the past 5 years is shown in the table below:

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Ulster-Scots Agency	£1.44m	£1.67m	£1.81m	£1.94m	£2.23m
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Arts Council for N.I	£914k	£650k	£846k	£365k	£357k
Comments DCAL pays to the Agency in each Calendar year. *The 2007 amount is the allocated figure in line with the business plan.					

Under the Community Festivals Fund administered by the Northern Ireland Events Company, projects which including elements of Ulster Scots entertainment and celebration have received payments of £50k in 2006-07 and £41k in 2007-08 (tranches 1 and 2 only).

If required the Ulster Scots Agency could supply details of its funding in relation to a specific project, however, there would be a disproportionate cost to show these figures over the past 5 years on a project-by-project basis. The table below shows a breakdown of the Ulster Scots Agency's expenditure/allocation on non-linguistic projects under its four main strategic themes over the past five years as defined in its business plans.

Strategic Theme	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Culture	£610k	£627k	£650k	£493k	£590k
Education	£280k	£288k	£482k	£547k	£430k
Public Awareness	£200k	£205k	£200k	£180k	£325k
Corporate Affairs	£350k	£481k	£479k	£672k	£886k

Rural Community Festivals

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what strategy there is to ensure future sustainability of community festivals in rural areas of Northern Ireland. (AQW 1138/07)

Mr Poots: The Community Festivals Fund (CFF) policy and guidance framework came into operation on 1 April 2006. The aim of the policy is to improve the capacity of community festivals, to make them more sustainable and less reliant on public funding.

In 2006/07 the CFF provided financial support to 42 festivals, which were from both urban and rural areas of Northern Ireland, helping existing festivals to grow and emerging festivals get off the ground.

CFF staff regularly attend information sessions throughout Northern Ireland to promote the Fund. They also provide an extensive package of training to build capacity amongst festival organisers.

The current arrangements apply for 2007/08. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will bring forward proposals in respect of policy arrangements for community festivals later this year.

Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what engagement the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group (ICIG) has had with representative organisations, such as the Ulster-Scots Language Society and the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council, in regard to the preparation of the content of the Northern Ireland element of the periodic report for the Committee of Experts, for the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 1161/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) acting on behalf of the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group (ICIG) Secretariat, as part of the periodic report, identified to the Committee of Experts (COMEX) organisations that had an interest in Ulster-Scots Language issues. The Ulster Scots Language Society and the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council were referred and invited to meet with COMEX on 5th December 2005.

DCAL Spend on Consultancy Services

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his department's projected spend on consultancy services, in the 2007/2008 financial year. (AQW 1178/07)

Mr Poots: The projected spend on consultancy services within DCAL in the 2007/08 financial year is as follows:

	Projected expenditure Amount £000's
Arts	35
Museums	27
Libraries	200
Languages	9
Waterways and Fisheries	150
Sports	45
Multi Sports stadium	2800
Internal Governance	252
Total DCAL projected Consultancy spend	3518

Safety at Sports Ground Programme

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding that has been provided as part of the Safety at Sports Grounds programme, and to list those in receipt of such funding. (AQW 1202/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the provision of funding under the Stadia Safety Programme. The following details the amounts of funding and those in receipt under the Stadia Safety Programme up to 31 March 2007

Total Funding Provided Per Programme	
Interim Safe Sports Ground	£4,704,483
Stadia Safety Programme	£5,124,756

Total Funding Provided Per Governing Body	
Irish Football Association	£4,604,828
Ulster Council GAA	£3,278,420
UB Irish Rugby Football Union	£1,945,991

Summary: Interim Safe Sports Grounds & Stadia Safety Funding by Soccer Club

ARDS FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	August 2003	40,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£40,000

ARMAGH CITY FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	September 2002	15,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	November 2001	15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£30,000

BALLYCLARE COMRADES FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	January 2002	463
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£463

BALLYMENA UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001 August 2003	200,000 20,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2001	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected August 2003	161,636
	Total	£406,636

BANGOR FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	July 2002 April 2004	14,807 14,663
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£29,470

CARRICK RANGERS FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2002	15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£15,000

CLIFTONVILLE FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001	250,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	November 2001	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected 2008	800,000
	Total	£1,075,000

COLERAINE FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	May 2002 June 2004	130,000 70,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	January 2002	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£225,000

CRUSADERS FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	September 2001 June 2002	5,000 77,450
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	January 2002	23,156
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£105,606

DERRY CITY FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	December 2002	9,724
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£34,724

DUNGANNON SWIFTS FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	August 2002 January 2003	13,233 12,133
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£25,366

GLENAVON FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001 August 2003	235,000 70,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2001	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£330,000

LIMAVADY UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	May 2002 September 2002	15,000 15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£30,000

GLENTORAN FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001 December 2002	217,000 25,597
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2002	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£267,597

LINFIELD FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001 August 2003	150,000 85,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2001	23,941
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£258,941

INSTITUTE FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	September 2002 September 2002 August 2003	18,000 12,000 11,900
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£41,900

LISBURN DISTILLERY FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002	12,384
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£12,384

LARNE FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	January 2001	15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£15,000

NEWRY CITY FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	September 2002 November 2002	250,000 27,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	November 2001	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£302,000

OMAGH TOWN FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	October 2002	199,201
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2001	23,290
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£222,491

PORTADOWN FOOTBALL CLUB

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001 August 2008 June 2003	5,000 245,256 65,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2001	21,994
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected 2008	800,000
	Total	£1,137,250

TOTAL AWARDS FOR SOCCER £4,604,828**Interim Safe Sports Grounds & Stadia Safety Funding by GAA Club/County Ground****ANTRIM GAA COUNTY BOARD**

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	June 2003	65,650
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	January 2002 February 2002 September 2002 September 2002	25,000 15,000 24,650 15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£145,300

ARMAGH GAA COUNTY BOARD

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	August 2001 January 2001 June 2003	40,000 60,000 100,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002 February 2002 August 2002 September 2002	25,000 15,000 15,000 25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£280,000

DERRY GAA COUNTY BOARD

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001	210,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002 September 2002	25,000 15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£250,000

DOWN GAA COUNTY BOARD

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001	235,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	December 2001 January 2002 September 2002	25,000 15,000 15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected 2007	800,000
	Total	£1,090,000

FERMANAGH GAA COUNTY BOARD/ENNISKILLEN GAELS GAA

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2001 August 2003	210,000 65,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	July 2001	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected 2008	349,350
	Total	£649,350

LISNASKEA EMMETTS GAC

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002	15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
	Total	£15,000

ST COLMS GAC

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	N/A	Nil
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002	15,000
Stadia Safety Programme	N/A	Nil
Total		£15,000

TYRONE GAA COUNTY BOARD

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	August 2003 August 2003	100,000 40,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	February 2002 February 2002 August 2002 September 2002	15,000 25,000 15,000 25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected 2007	613,770
Total		£833,770

TOTAL AWARDS FOR GAA: £3,278,420

Summary: Interim Safe Sports Grounds & Stadia Safety Funding by Rugby Club

UB IRISH RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

Programme	Completion Date	Grant Awards (£)
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (MW)	November 2002 December 2002 June 2003	220,991 10,000 90,000
Interim Safe Sports Grounds (UW)	November 2001	25,000
Stadia Safety Programme	Expected 2008	1,600,000
Total		£1,945,991

TOTAL AWARDS FOR RUGBY: £1,945,991

Safety at Sports Ground Programme

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the budget for the Safety at Sports Grounds programme. (AQW 1206/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the administration of the Stadia Safety Programme. The programme's current operating budget from 2005/06 to 2007/08 is £8.1m. This is broken down as follows:

2005/06	£4,660,335
2006/07	£1,888,003
2007/08	£1,597,773
Total	£8,146,111

World Pipe Bands Championship

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to North Antrim as a suitable venue for the World Pipe Bands Championship. (AQW 1262/07)

Mr Poots: I plan to meet with representatives of the Northern Ireland Branch of the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association next week to discuss the possibility of bringing the World Pipe Band Championships to Northern Ireland.

In the event that the Championships were to be held in Northern Ireland, I would hope that North Antrim would be considered as a possible venue. However, this would be a decision for the organisers of the event to take after giving careful consideration to the area's capacity to host the event.

World Pipe Bands Championship

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what efforts he is making to bring the World Pipe Bands Championship to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1264/07)

Mr Poots: I plan to meet with representatives of the Northern Ireland Branch of the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association next week to discuss the possibility of bringing the World Pipe Band Championships to Northern Ireland.

Castle Gardens Site, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of car parking spaces that will be available at the new library for Newtownards, at the Castle Gardens School site. (AQW 1308/07)

Mr Poots: The Castle Gardens School site option in the draft Economic Appraisal, which is currently under consideration by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, indicates that on site parking can be accommodated. The number of car parking spaces will be determined as the project proceeds to planning and design stage.

Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether his department consulted the Ulster Council of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCE) about the Smithsonian Folklife Festival; and whether any attempts were made by his department to involve and include CCE in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. (AQW 1319/07)

Mr Poots: A number of performers invited to the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival are members of CCE and they were consulted as individuals by the Smithsonian in terms of the programme of performance that they would present at the Festival to explain their performing traditions. These performers are from Armagh, Down, Antrim and Fermanagh. The Festival focuses on the individual participants rather than the organisations to which they belong.

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of grant aid or financial assistance provided by his department to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 2006/2007. (AQW 1320/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure does not directly fund Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. The Department is aware that Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish Language Agency, which is co-sponsored by DCAL and Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the Republic of Ireland, has approved sponsorship of €15,000 for Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 2006 and for the same amount in 2007. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland awarded funding through the Awards for All programme to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 2006/07 totalling £19,780.

Athlete Support Programme

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is his assessment of how the grants paid by Sport Northern Ireland, as part of the Athlete Support Programme, compares to those paid by equivalent sports bodies in the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 1329/07)

Mr Poots: The grants paid by Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), as part of the Athlete Support Programme, differ significantly to those paid by equivalent sports bodies in the rest of the United Kingdom (UK). Unlike SNI, equivalent bodies in the UK do not invest in individual athletes. SNI grants are not the same as those paid by equivalent bodies and

are also intended to help Northern Ireland athletes reach a level to be eligible for UK Sport investment.

Stadia Safety Programme

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the recipients of grants paid out under (a) phase one; and (b) phase two of the Stadia Safety Programme; and to detail the amount of funding paid to each recipient. (AQW 1330/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the payment of grants under the Stadia Safety Programme. The following details the recipients of grants paid out under (a) phase one; and (b) phase two of the Stadia Safety Programme and the amount of funding paid to each up to 31 March 2007.

Architecture and Built Environment Ministerial Advisory Group

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has selected candidates for the new Architecture and the Built Environment Ministerial Advisory Group, announced by his direct rule predecessor; and if he will list these candidates. (AQW 1334/07)

Mr Poots: Interviews have recently taken place for the selection of candidates for the Ministerial Advisory Group. The outcome of the selection has not yet been finalised.

Default Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what facility currently exists for members of staff in his department to work in their current post, beyond the default retirement age. (AQW 1343/07)

Mr Poots: Since 1 October 2006 staff wanting to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

Irish Language Act

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, further to his answer to AQW 372/07, to outline the timescale for completion of the analysis of responses to the consultation on the proposed Irish Language Act. (AQW 1349/07)

Mr Poots: It is my intention to bring a paper on this issue to the Executive in the autumn.

Understanding Cultural Traditions

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding made available by his department to help promote understanding of cultural traditions in Northern Ireland; and the amount of this funding that was allocated to single identity initiatives, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1350/07)

Mr Poots: Expenditure on the promotion of understanding of cultural traditions in Northern Ireland by the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure is shown in the tables below:

FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR PROMOTION OF THE IRISH LANGUAGE:

Calendar Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Foras na Gaeilge	£2.64m	£2.85m	£3.09m	£2.97m	£3.26m

Calendar Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Financial Year	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Colmcille*	£177k	£180k	£180k	£180k	£180k
Irish Language Broadcast Fund	£63,394	£11,730	Nil	£2,999,874	£3,057,242

* Colmcille funding is not solely for the promotion of Irish Language projects

FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR PROMOTION OF THE ULSTER-SCOTS LANGUAGE:

Calendar Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Ulster-Scots Agency	£100k	£500k	£103k	£198k	£345k
Financial Year				05-06	06-07
Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group				£134k	£392k

FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR PROMOTION OF NON-LANGUAGE IRISH CULTURAL TRADITIONS:

Financial Year	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Northern Ireland Events Company Community Festivals Fund (for Irish cultural festivals and festivals containing elements of Irish Culture)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	£127,000
Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure transitional funding for festivals	N/A	N/A	£40,000	£36,513*	£106,550*
Arts Council of Northern Ireland funding for Irish cultural projects	£747,976	£1,552,739	£811,400	£1,219,732	£860,825
Sport Northern Ireland funding for Gaelic Games	£568,559	£217,111	£140,839	£1,004,081	£2,701,488

* This may not be the final amounts as the accounts have not yet closed

FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR PROMOTION OF NON-LANGUAGE ULSTER-SCOTS CULTURAL TRADITIONS:

Calendar Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Ulster-Scots Agency	£1.44m	£1.67m	£1.81m	£1.94m	£2.23m
Financial Year	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	£914k	£650k	£846k	£365k	£357k
Northern Ireland Events Company Community Festivals Fund (for festivals containing elements of Ulster Scots Culture)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	£50k

FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR ORANGE CULTURAL ACTIVITY:

Financial Year	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure	N/A	N/A	£35,000	£50,165	£30,000
Northern Ireland Events Company Community Festivals Fund (for Orange cultural festivals)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	£26,000
Arts Council of Northern Ireland (Art of Regeneration Fund through - Belfast City Council)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	£6,333

FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR THE MAIDEN CITY FESTIVAL:

Financial Year	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure	N/A	N/A	£50,000 (through NI Events Company)	£50,000	N/A

In addition to this the Department provided funding to support the promotion of Cultural Diversity through the Diversity 21 Initiative and other programmes, but a breakdown of this funding is not readily available.

Funding for Coleraine and Limavady Councils

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the level of funding for events made available to (a) Coleraine Borough Council; and (b) Limavady Borough Council, in the last five years.

(AQW 1357/07)

Mr Poots: The level of funding for events made available to Coleraine Borough Council and Limavady Borough Council for events in the last five years is detailed in the tables below.

COLERAINE BOROUGH COUNCIL – FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE BY THE ARTS COUNCIL

Year	Detail	Amount of funding offered
02/03	Annual support for Organisations Programme	£5,400
03/04	Annual support for Organisations Programme	£8,000
04/05	Annual support for Organisations Programme	£12,000
05/06	Multi Annual Programme	£18,100
06/07	Multi Annual Programme	£18,100
06/07	Craft Start Up Support and Residency	£22,500

COLERAINE BOROUGH COUNCIL APPLICATIONS – FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE BY NORTHERN IRELAND EVENTS COMPANY

Year	Detail	Amount of funding offered
03/04	Coleraine Choral Festival	£4,000*
04/05	Coleraine International Choral Festival	£3,600*
04/05	NI D-Day Air Spectacular	£30,000*
06/07	NI International Air Show	£30,000*

The level of funding for events made available to Limavady Borough Council by the Northern Ireland Events Company since 2005 is detailed in the table below.

LIMAVADY COUNCIL APPLICATIONS - FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE BY NORTHERN IRELAND EVENTS COMPANY

Year	Event /Detail	Amount of funding offered
05/06	Danny Boy Festival	£18,000*
06/07	Danny Boy Festival	£15,000*

* **Note** these amounts are indicative of applications made directly from each council for funding from the Northern Ireland Events Company .

2012 London Olympic Games

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is his assessment of the impact that the increased lottery funding for the 2012 London Olympic Games will have on the amount of money available for lottery grants, to be distributed in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1360/07)

Mr Poots: An additional contribution from the Lottery of £675m is required over the four years 2009 to 2012 for the 2012 London Olympic Games.

In Northern Ireland this means a direct loss to the non-Olympic good causes of £26.6m over the period 2009-2012. Each distributor will, based on the existing share of Lottery proceeds, contribute:

Big Lottery Fund	£19.1m
Heritage Lottery Fund	£ 2.7m
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	£ 2.5m
Sport Northern Ireland	£ 2.3m

People Registered at Rugby Clubs

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of people registered at rugby clubs in Northern Ireland, as amateur and professional players, in (a) youth teams; (b) men's teams; and (c) women's teams.

(AQW 1368/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) does not retain information on the

number of people registered at rugby clubs in Northern Ireland, nor is such information available, except at disproportionate cost.

Ulster Cycling Federation

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what meetings he has had, or plans to have, with the Ulster Cycling Federation. (AQW 1398/07)

Mr Poots: I have had no meetings to date, nor have I currently any plans to meet with Cycling Ulster. However, Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, meets regularly with Cycling Ulster.

Financial Support for Cycling

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of financial support he has given to (a) the sport of cycling; and (b) individual cycling clubs and organisations, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1399/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI has provided financial support to (a) the sport of cycling and (b) individual cycling clubs and organisations, in each of the last five financial years as follows:

Financial Year	Sport of Cycling		Individual Clubs/ Organisations		Total (£)
	Exchequer (£)	Lottery (£)	Exchequer (£)	Lottery (£)	
2002/03	Nil	63,340	Nil	5,000	68,340
2003/04	70,892	35,880	Nil	Nil	106,772
2004/05	Nil	117,140	Nil	35,590	152,730
2005/06	40,666	31,500	Nil	Nil	72,166
2006/07	58,650	151,850	Nil	Nil	210,500

Northern Ireland Cycling Federation

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of grants awarded by his department to the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1400/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of grants to sports

organisations. SNI has made no awards to the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (NICF) in each of the last 5 years as it currently recognises Cycling Ulster as the governing body of cycling in Northern Ireland and as the NICF is now represented within Cycling Ulster.

Grants to the Ulster Cycling Federation

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of grants awarded to the Ulster Cycling Federation, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1401/07)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI has provided the following grants to Cycling Ulster, in each of the last five financial years:

Financial Year	Exchequer (£)	Lottery (£)	Total
2002/03	Nil	63,340	63,340
2003/04	70,892	20,880	91,772
2004/05	Nil	101,640	101,640
2005/06	40,666	17,100	57,766
2006/07	58,650	131,450	190,100

Northern Ireland Cycling Federation

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what meetings he has had, or plans to have, with the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation. (AQW 1402/07)

Mr Poots: I have had no meetings, nor do I plan to meet with, the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (NICF) as the Federation agreed in December 2006 to amalgamate with Cycling Ulster. The NICF is now represented within Cycling Ulster and Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, meets regularly with Cycling Ulster to monitor investment in cycling in Northern Ireland.

Funding to Féile an Phobail

Mr Gerry Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding that is outstanding, from the funding allocated last year by his department to Féile an Phobail. (AQW 1456/07)

Mr Poots: Last year the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure awarded up to £100k transitional

funding to Féile an Phobail. £25k of this funding is still outstanding.

EDUCATION

Post-Primary Integrated Education

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the current provision of integrated education in the secondary sector in Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle. (AQW 650/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): There is no post-primary integrated provision in Bangor, Donaghadee or Millisle. The nearest post-primary integrated provision for the towns in question is:

Priory College, Holywood; and Strangford Integrated College, Carrowdore.

The enrolment at St Columbanus the Catholic Maintained post primary school in Bangor includes over 30% Protestants.

Provision of School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the measures being taken to ensure the delivery of healthy menus in school canteens. (AQW 712/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked a number of related questions concerning the provision of healthy school meals, I shall reply to these together.

My Department has worked, in conjunction with the Education and Library Boards, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Health Promotion Agency and the Food Standards Agency, to develop compulsory new Nutritional Standards for school meals and to ensure that these standards are reviewed regularly in light of the latest information on nutrition and health. These were originally published in the document, "Catering for Healthy Lifestyles". This booklet is at present being updated to take account of the new standards.

Healthy menus were first introduced through a pilot scheme in almost one hundred schools. Thereafter, a roll-out programme encompassed all schools.

The standards are now being extended to other sources of food in schools such as tuck shops and vending machines.

School canteen staff are presently being trained in the delivery of healthy menus. Also, nutritional co-ordinators have been appointed to advise canteen

staff and schools on menu-planning and nutrition-related matters.

The implementation of healthy menus is being monitored by the Education and Library Boards and other school authorities. Schools are also being checked for compliance with the standards by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Provision of School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the methodology used to monitor the implementation of government policy regarding the delivery of healthy school meals. (AQW 713/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked a number of related questions concerning the provision of healthy school meals, I shall reply to these together.

My Department has worked, in conjunction with the Education and Library Boards, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Health Promotion Agency and the Food Standards Agency, to develop compulsory new Nutritional Standards for school meals and to ensure that these standards are reviewed regularly in light of the latest information on nutrition and health. These were originally published in the document, "Catering for Healthy Lifestyles". This booklet is at present being updated to take account of the new standards.

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The implementation of healthy menus is being monitored by the Education and Library Boards and other school authorities. Schools are also being checked for compliance with the standards by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Provision of School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the methodology used to introduce healthy options on to school menus in the past; and how this is to be expanded in the future. (AQW 714/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked a number of related questions concerning the provision of healthy school meals, I shall reply to these together.

My Department has worked, in conjunction with the Education and Library Boards, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Health Promotion Agency and the Food Standards Agency, to develop compulsory new Nutritional Standards for school meals and to ensure that these standards are reviewed regularly in light of the latest information on nutrition and health. These were originally published in the document, "Catering for Healthy Lifestyles". This booklet is at present being updated to take account of the new standards.

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The implementation of healthy menus is being monitored by the Education and Library Boards and other school authorities. Schools are also being checked for compliance with the standards by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Referral of Children for Statutory Assessment

Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children referred to the North Eastern Education and Library Board to be assessed for a statement of special educational needs, in each of the last three years. (AQW 723/07)

Ms Ruane: The North Eastern Education and Library Board report that the number of children referred for statutory assessment in each of the last three financial years is as follows:

2004/05	360
2005/06	327
2006/07	338

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education if she will ensure that the Craigavon-based

Dickson Plan is preserved in any proposed replacement of the existing transfer test system. (AQW 734/07)

Ms Ruane: The arrangements for post-primary transfer that will succeed those currently in operation have not yet been decided. I have made clear that I am not in favour of academic selection.

Budget Performance of South Eastern ELB

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister of Education to confirm the reported savings of £4.5 million in the South Eastern Education and Library Board's 2006/07 budget; and to outline where the savings were made. (AQW 765/07)

Ms Ruane: The unaudited Annual Accounts of the South Eastern Education and Library Board for 2006/2007, submitted to the Department of Education on 1 June 2007, report that the Board lived within the budget allocated to it for this period whilst also meeting the agreed 2006-07 repayment target of £4.5m.

The Board tells me that this was achieved in part through the application of stringent budget management disciplines and also by giving effect, following a comprehensive review of services, to proposals designed to secure greater efficiencies in service provision.

South Eastern Education and Library Board Maintenance Budget

Mr Jimmy Spratt asked the Minister of Education to give details of the deficit, to date, in the maintenance budget allocated to the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 766/07)

Ms Ruane: Education and Library Boards receive allocations to cover the delivery of the full range of services that they provide. It is a matter for each Board to determine how much of its centre allocation is spent on maintenance. In 2006/07, the Board has advised that it spent £3,935k on maintenance; an increase of 123% on the previous year.

School Vending Machines

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to name the schools that provide tuck shops or vending machines in the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 777/07)

Ms Ruane: The following schools in the South-Eastern Education and Library Board area provide vending machines in their canteen/dining areas:

- Down Academy, Downpatrick
- Dundonald High School

- Knockbreda High School
- Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn
- Regent House School, Newtownards
- Shimna Integrated College, Newcastle
- St Malachy's High School, Castlewellsan

Information relating to the schools which provide tuck shops or vending machines outside the school canteen is not available.

From September 2007 my Department's nutritional standards initiative will be extended to all sources of food in schools. This means that only healthy options will be available in vending machines and tuck shops etc.

Pupil Behaviour Maintenance

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and type of schemes currently in existence to prevent school exclusions; and what is the level of funding allocated to these schemes.

(AQW 794/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education allocates earmarked funding to the Education and Library Boards, which they can augment from their block grant, for a range of interventions to maintain pupils with challenging behaviour in school. Funding for this financial year is as follows:

Area	Allocation (£k)
Behaviour Support Teams	1,002
Pupil Referral Units	1,212
Education Otherwise Than at School	3,229
School Behaviour Schemes	250
Total	5,693

Each Education and Library Board decides how to allocate this funding to best meet the needs of the young people in their area.

Suspension and Expulsion of Pupils

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education to advise of current departmental policy in relation to 'rolling exclusions'; and how this policy is enforced.

(AQW 795/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education does not have such a policy.

All schools are required to have a scheme for the suspension and expulsion of pupils, in which the procedures to be followed are set out.

A pupil can be suspended only by the School Principal for up to five school days and this can only be extended with the prior approval of the Chair of the Board of Governors. A pupil can only be suspended for a maximum of 45 school days in a school year. The Principal must immediately give notice of a suspension to the parent of the pupil, the Chair of the Board of Governors, the relevant Education and Library Board and, as appropriate, to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Education and Library Boards are responsible for monitoring pupil suspensions.

Suspension and Expulsion of Pupils

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the advice currently given to schools in relation to suspension and exclusion tariffs; and what guidance is provided to ensure that they operate on an equivalent basis in all schools. (AQW 796/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department's current advice to schools, on sanctions for breaches of discipline and the use of suspension and expulsion, is set out in "Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour" published in June 2001.

The Education Order (NI) 2006 sets out new arrangements for the suspension and expulsion of pupils, including the introduction of a common scheme for all grant-aided schools. The scheme will be the subject of wide consultation later this year. Following this, the Department will issue the agreed common scheme and associated guidance to all schools. This will ensure consistent practice across all schools and to allow equity of treatment for all pupils irrespective of the school they attend.

Funding of School Meals Service

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for the provision of school meals at primary schools that is used for other purposes in (a) the controlled sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 801/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked a number of related questions concerning the funding of the school meals service, I shall reply to these together.

Education and Library Boards receive allocations to cover the delivery of the full range of services that they provide, including school meals. It is a matter for each Board to determine how much of its centre allocation is spent on school meals. However, the Initial Resource Allocation Plans submitted to my

Department by the Boards indicate that they have allocated the following expenditure in relation to the school meals service for 2007/08 in respect of maintained and controlled schools:

Belfast	£5.906 million
North-Eastern	£6.574 million
South-Eastern	£4.427 million
Southern	£6.581 million
Western	£7.087 million
Total	£30.575 million

(A breakdown of this expenditure between school types and sectors is not available.)

My Department is also providing funding of £1.5 million to grant-maintained integrated schools and £2.5 million to voluntary grammar schools for the provision of their school meals service.

Additionally, my Department is providing a further £3 million to Boards in the current financial year which is ring-fenced and must be used to improve the quality of food in schools. This additional funding is mostly to ensure that expenditure on the food and nutritional content value of school meals amounts to at least 50p in nursery, primary and special schools and 60p in post-primary schools. The remaining funding supports the implementation of the standards, including the recruitment of five Nutritional Co-ordinators to advise schools, training arrangements for the many hundreds of canteen staff and assistance with additional staff costs and preparation time.

Funding of School Meals Service

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail how much funding is allocated to secondary schools for the provision of school meals in (a) the controlled sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 802/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked a number of related questions concerning the funding of the school meals service, I shall reply to these together.

Education and Library Boards receive allocations to cover the delivery of the full range of services that they provide, including school meals. It is a matter for each Board to determine how much of its centre allocation is spent on school meals. However, the Initial Resource Allocation Plans submitted to my Department by the Boards indicate that they have allocated the following expenditure in relation to the

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Funding of School Meals Service

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail how much funding is allocated to primary schools for the provision of school meals in (a) the controlled sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 803/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked a number of related questions concerning the funding of the school meals service, I shall reply to these together.

Education and Library Boards receive allocations to cover the delivery of the full range of services that they provide, including school meals. It is a matter for each Board to determine how much of its centre allocation is spent on school meals. However, the Initial Resource Allocation Plans submitted to my Department by the Boards indicate that they have allocated the following expenditure in relation to the school meals service for 2007/08 in respect of maintained and controlled schools:

Belfast	£5.906 million
North-Eastern	£6.574 million
South-Eastern	£4.427 million
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Funding for Primary and Secondary Schools

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to narrow the gap between funding for primary and secondary schools. (AQW 807/07)

Ms Ruane: The rationale behind the differential in funding for primary and secondary schools reflects the greater cost demands which arise for secondary schools in the delivery of the curriculum. I am, however, committed to reducing the current funding differential and I will therefore be looking very carefully, within the resources I can secure for education under the Comprehensive Spending Review, at how we can improve the current balance to allow more investment in early years, without creating difficulties for the post-primary sector.

School Vending Machines

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how many schools provide tuck shops or vending machines, by school type and Board area. (AQW 873/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of schools providing vending machines in their canteen/dining areas is as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	TOTAL
Controlled	2	0	5	1	3	11
Maintained	2	0	1	0	9	12
Grant-Maintained Integrated	0	0	1	0	1	2
Voluntary Grammar	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	4	1	7	1	13	26

Information relating to the schools which provide tuck shops or vending machines outside the school canteen is not available.

From September 2007 my Department's nutritional standards initiative will be extended to all sources of food in schools. This means that only healthy options should be available in vending machines and tuck shops.

School Meals Service

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to name the schools that provide school dinners where food is prepared, in the South Eastern Education and Library Board Area. (AQW 874/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked two related questions concerning the school meals service in the South-Eastern Education and Library Board area, I shall reply to these together.

The schools that provide school dinners where food is prepared on site are as follows:

CONTROLLED SCHOOLS

Abbey PS	Killinchy PS	Killard House
Academy PS	Killowen PS	Knockevin Special School
Anahilt PS	Kilmaine PS	Longstone Special School
Andrews Memorial PS	Knockmore PS	Parkview Special School Ballynahinch HS
Ballymacash PS	Largymore PS	Bangor Central Kitchen
Ballymagee PS	Lisburn PS	Bangor Academy (Castle)
Ballynahinch PS	Londonderry PS	Bangor Academy (Clanmorris)

Bangor Central IPS	Lower Ballinderry PS	Comber HS
Bloomfield Road PS	Meadowbridge PS	Donaghadee HS
Brooklands PS	Moirá PS	Down Academy
Cairnshill PS	Newcastle PS	Down HS
Carrowdore PS	Newtownards Model PS	Dundonald HS
Carryduff PS	Old Warren PS	Dunmurry HS
Castle Gardens PS	Pond Park PS	Fort Hill College
Clandeboyne PS	Rathmore PS	Glastry HS
Cumran PS	Riverdale PS	Glenlola Collegiate
Comber PS	Seymour Hill PS	Knockbreda HS
Donaghadee PS	Spa PS	Laurelhill HS
Downpatrick PS	St Brigid's PS	Lisnagarvey Boys HS
Downshire PS	Tonagh PS	Lisnasharragh HS
Dundonald PS	Towerview PS	Movilla HS
Fort Hill PS	Tullycarnet PS	Newtownbreda HS
Grange Park PS	Victoria PS	Priory College
Harmony Hill PS	Westwinds PS	Regent House
Kilcooley PS	Beechlawm Special School	Saintfield HS

MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Christ the Redeemer PS	St Mary's PS, Kircubbin
Convent of Mercy PS	St Mary's PS, Newcastle
Good Shepherd PS	St Mary's PS, Portaferry
Legamaddy PS	St Nicholas' PS
Sacred Heart PS	St Patrick's Boys' PS, Downpatrick
St Aloysius PS	St Patrick's PS, Ballyhinch
St Colmcille's PS	St Ita's PS
St Joseph's PS, Carnacaville	De La Salle Secondary School, Downpatrick
St Joseph's PS, Carryduff	St Colman's HS, Ballynahinch
St Joseph's PS, Killough	St Colmcille's HS, Crossgar
St Joseph's PS, Lisburn	St Colm's HS, Twinbrook
St Kieran's PS	St Columba's HS, Portaferry
St Luke's PS	St Columbanus' College, Bangor
St Malachy's PS, Bangor	St Malachy's HS, Castlewellsan
St Malachy's PS, Castlewellsan	St Mary's HS, Downpatrick
St Mark's PS	St Patrick's HS, Lisburn

GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

Loughview PS
Lagan College
Shimna College
Strangford College

VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

Assumption GS, Ballynahinch
Bangor Grammar School and Preparatory Department
Friends' School, Lisburn and Preparatory Department
Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock
St Patrick's GS, Downpatrick
Sullivan Upper School, Holywood and Preparatory Department
Wallace HS, Lisburn and Preparatory Department

The schools that serve school dinners but do not prepare them on site are as follows:

CONTROLLED SCHOOLS

Bangor NS	Braniel PS	Kircubbin IPS
Barbour NS	Brownlee PS	Kirkistown PS
Braniel NS	Carr PS	Knockbreda PS
Brooklands NS	Carrickmannon PS	Leadhill PS
Castlereagh NS	Castlewellsan PS	Lisnasharragh PS
Downpatrick NS	Conlig PS	Loughries PS
Glenbrook NS	Crawfordsburn PS	Maghaberry PS
Knockbreda NS	Cregagh PS	McKinney PS/NS
Kings Road NS	Crossgar PS	Millisle PS
Newtownards NS	Derriaghy PS	Moneyrea PS
Pond Park NS	Derryboy PS	Newtownbreda PS
Alexander Dickson PS	Dromara PS	Portaferry IPS
All Children's IPS	Dunmurry PS	Portavogie PS
Annsborough IPS	Gilnahirk PS	Redburn PS
Ballycarrickmaddy PS	Glencraig PS	Tyrella PS
Ballycloughan PS	Grange Park PS	Ardmore House Special
Ballyholme PS	Greyabbey PS	Brookfield Special School
Ballykeigle PS	Groomsport PS	Broomhedge Annex
Ballyvester PS	Hilden IPS	Clifton Special School

Ballywalter PS	Hollywood PS	Cottown Special School
Belvoir Park PS	Killyleagh PS	Tor Bank Special School

MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Convent of Mercy NS	St Comgall's PS
Good Shepherd NS	St Finian's PS
St Colmcille's NS	St Francis PS, Drumaroad
St Kieran's NS	St Joseph's PS, Ballycruttle
St Luke's NS	St Joseph's PS, Crossgar
St Mark's NS	St Joseph's PS, Strangford
St Therese's NS	St Joseph's PS, Tyrella
Trinity NS	St Macartan's PS
Aughlisnafin PS	St Malachy's PS, Kilclief
Ballymacricket PS	St Malachy's PS, Kilcoo
Ballymacward PS	St Mary's PS, Ardglass
Bunscoil Bhenna Biorche, Castlewellan	St Mary's PS, Ballygowan
Drumaghlin PS	St Mary's PS, Comber
Drumaness PS	St Mary's PS, Dunsford
Guinness PS	St Mary's PS, Killyleagh
Holy Family PS	St Mary's PS, Saintfield
Our Lady Queen of Peace PS	St Patrick's PS, Ballygalget
Scoil Na Faiseoige PS	St Patrick's PS, Burnreagh
St Bernard's PS	St Patrick's PS, Castlewellan
St Brigid's PS	St Patrick's PS, Hollywood
St Caolan's PS	St Patrick's PS, Portaferry
St Colman's PS, Lisburn	St Patrick's PS, Saul
St Colman's PS, Moira	

GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

Cedar IPS, Crossgar
Drumlins IPS, Ballynahinch
Millennium IPS, Saintfield
Oakwood IPS, Derriaghy

School Meals Service

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to name the schools that serve school dinners but which do not prepare them on site in the South Eastern Education and Library Boards area (AQW 875/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked two related questions concerning the school meals service in the South-Eastern Education and Library Board area, I shall reply to these together.

The schools that provide school dinners where food is prepared on site are as follows:

CONTROLLED SCHOOLS

Abbey PS	Killinchy PS	Killard House
Academy PS	Killowen PS	Knockevin Special School
Anahilt PS	Kilmaine PS	Longstone Special School
Andrews Memorial PS	Knockmore PS	Parkview Special School Ballynahinch HS
Ballymacash PS	Largymore PS	Bangor Central Kitchen
Ballymagee PS	Lisburn PS	Bangor Academy (Castle)
Ballynahinch PS	Londonderry PS	Bangor Academy (Clanmorris)
Bangor Central IPS	Lower Ballinderry PS	Comber HS
Bloomfield Road PS	Meadowbridge PS	Donaghadee HS
Brooklands PS	Moirá PS	Down Academy
Cairnshill PS	Newcastle PS	Down HS
Carrowdore PS	Newtownards Model PS	Dundonald HS
Carryduff PS	Old Warren PS	Dunmurry HS
Castle Gardens PS	Pond Park PS	Fort Hill College
Clandeboyne PS	Rathmore PS	Glastry HS
Cumran PS	Riverdale PS	Glenlola Collegiate
Comber PS	Seymour Hill PS	Knockbreda HS
Donaghadee PS	Spa PS	Laurelhill HS
Downpatrick PS	St Brigid's PS	Lisnagarvey Boys HS
Downshire PS	Tonagh PS	Lisnasharragh HS
Dundonald PS	Towerview PS	Movilla HS
Fort Hill PS	Tullycarnet PS	Newtownbreda HS
Grange Park PS	Victoria PS	Priory College
Harmony Hill PS	Westwinds PS	Regent House
Kilcooley PS	Beechlawn Special School	Saintfield HS

MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Christ the Redeemer PS	St Mary's PS, Kircubbin
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Convent of Mercy PS	St Mary's PS, Newcastle
Good Shepherd PS	St Mary's PS, Portaferry
Legamaddy PS	St Nicholas' PS
Sacred Heart PS	St Patrick's Boys' PS, Downpatrick
St Aloysius PS	St Patrick's PS, Ballyhinch
St Colmcille's PS	St Ita's PS
St Joseph's PS, Carnacaville	De La Salle Secondary School, Downpatrick
St Joseph's PS, Carryduff	St Colman's HS, Ballynahinch
St Joseph's PS, Killough	St Colmcille's HS, Crossgar
St Joseph's PS, Lisburn	St Colm's HS, Twinbrook
St Kieran's PS	St Columba's HS, Portaferry
St Luke's PS	St Columbanus' College, Bangor
St Malachy's PS, Bangor	St Malachy's HS, Castlewellan
St Malachy's PS, Castlewellan	St Mary's HS, Downpatrick
St Mark's PS	St Patrick's HS, Lisburn

GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

Loughview PS
Lagan College
Shimna College
Strangford College

VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

Assumption GS, Ballynahinch
Bangor Grammar School and Preparatory Department
Friends' School, Lisburn and Preparatory Department
Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock
St Patrick's GS, Downpatrick
Sullivan Upper School, Holywood and Preparatory Department
Wallace HS, Lisburn and Preparatory Department

The schools that serve school dinners but do not prepare them on site are as follows:

CONTROLLED SCHOOLS

Bangor NS	Braniel PS	Kircubbin IPS
Barbour NS	Brownlee PS	Kirkistown PS
Braniel NS	Carr PS	Knockbreda PS
Brooklands NS	Carrickmannon PS	Leadhill PS
Castlereagh NS	Castlewellan PS	Lisnasharragh PS
Downpatrick NS	Conlig PS	Loughries PS

Glenbrook NS	Crawfordsburn PS	Maghaberry PS
Knockbreda NS	Cregagh PS	McKinney PS/NS
Kings Road NS	Crossgar PS	Millisle PS
Newtownards NS	Derriaghy PS	Moneyrea PS
Pond Park NS	Derryboy PS	Newtownbreda PS
Alexander Dickson PS	Dromara PS	Portaferry IPS
All Children's IPS	Dunmurry PS	Portavogie PS
Annsborough IPS	Gilnahirk PS	Redburn PS
Ballycarrickmaddy PS	Glencraig PS	Tyrella PS
Ballycloughan PS	Grange Park PS	Ardmore House Special
Ballyholme PS	Greyabbey PS	Brookfield Special School
Ballykeigle PS	Groomsport PS	Broomhedge Annex
Ballyvester PS	Hilden IPS	Clifton Special School
Ballywalter PS	Hollywood PS	Cottown Special School
Belvoir Park PS	Killyleagh PS	Tor Bank Special School

MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Convent of Mercy NS	St Comgall's PS
Good Shepherd NS	St Finian's PS
St Colmcille's NS	St Francis PS, Drumaroad
St Kieran's NS	St Joseph's PS, Ballycruttle
St Luke's NS	St Joseph's PS, Crossgar
St Mark's NS	St Joseph's PS, Strangford
St Therese's NS	St Joseph's PS, Tyrella
Trinity NS	St Macartan's PS
Aughlisnafin PS	St Malachy's PS, Kilclief
Ballymacrickey PS	St Malachy's PS, Kilcoo
Ballymacward PS	St Mary's PS, Ardglass
Bunscoil Bhenna Biorche, Castlewellan	St Mary's PS, Ballygowan
Drumaghlis PS	St Mary's PS, Comber
Drumaness PS	St Mary's PS, Dunsford
Guinness PS	St Mary's PS, Killyleagh
Holy Family PS	St Mary's PS, Saintfield
Our Lady Queen of Peace PS	St Patrick's PS, Ballygalget

Scoil Na Fuisceige PS	St Patrick's PS, Burnreagh
St Bernard's PS	St Patrick's PS, Castlewellan
St Brigid's PS	St Patrick's PS, Holywood
St Caolan's PS	St Patrick's PS, Portaferry
St Colman's PS, Lisburn	St Patrick's PS, Saul
St Colman's PS, Moira	

GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

Cedar IPS, Crossgar
Drumlins IPS, Ballynahinch
Millennium IPS, Saintfield
Oakwood IPS, Derriaghy

Craigavon Based Dickson Plan

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the impact of the Craigavon-based Dickson Plan on (a) the delivery of education; and (b) academic performance in the Craigavon area. (AQW 903/07)

Ms Ruane: I have noted that the arrangements currently operating in the Craigavon-based Dickson Plan are well established. Research into the impact of the Dickson Plan published in 1998 produced inconclusive findings. I understand that a study of provision in the Dickson Plan area, commissioned by the Southern Education and Library Board, will be published soon. This will better enable an assessment of the area's provision to be made.

School Amalgamation

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to outline, in cases where two or more schools amalgamate, whether any overspend associated with these schools transfers to the school formed by the amalgamation. (AQW 917/07)

Ms Ruane: All schools are required, under the Local Management of Schools delegated funding arrangements, to ensure that levels of expenditure are contained within the total available resources. Schools should work with the relevant funding and employing authorities in the run up to an amalgamation.

Any overspend associated with these schools coming together on amalgamation will be met from centre funds, providing that in preparing the school for amalgamation, they have complied with any requirements, direction or advice issued by the Funding Authority.

Delegation of Funding

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to explain, in instances where a school closes, what happens to any overspend associated with that school. (AQW 918/07)

Ms Ruane: All schools are required, under the Local Management of Schools delegated funding arrangements, to ensure that levels of expenditure are contained within the total available resources. Schools should work with their Funding Authority in planning for a closure. Where a school closes with an associated overspend, the responsibility for meeting this falls to the relevant funding authority.

Teaching of Evolution in Schools

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education what provision currently exists for teachers to teach (a) creationism; (b) Intelligent Design; and (c) other theories of origins, as scientific explanations. (AQW 928/07)

Ms Ruane: The revised curriculum will have a greater emphasis on developing skills, such as critical thinking and analysis, and will also provide greater flexibility for schools to include teaching of alternative theories to evolution. GCSE Science specifications also include the exploration of theories other than evolution to explore the development of life on earth.

Child Obesity

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what role her department has in combatting childhood obesity. (AQW 976/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education contributes to the Public Service Agreement target to stop the rise in obesity in children by 2010 and is progressing recommendations in the report "Fit Futures: Focus on Food, Activity and Young People".

From September 2007, healthy eating and physical activity will be addressed in the school curriculum through the new strand of Personal Development, where pupils will explore healthy lifestyles, and the compulsory study of Home Economics at Key Stage 3 and Physical Education from age 4 to 16. In support of this, I am working with the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Football Association to introduce a sports programme in primary schools to help young people develop the physical literacy skills that will support them in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and to encourage them to take part in sports and to develop an enjoyment of 'getting out there' and being active.

In addition New Nutritional Standards, which are aimed at improving the quality of food served in schools, are being applied to all schools. Extended Schools are playing an important part in promoting healthy eating and physical activity.

Examination Timetables

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to minimise the potential for 'timetable fatigue', in relation to children sitting A-level and GCSE examinations. (AQW 982/07)

Ms Ruane: Schools are free to choose awarding bodies across GCE and GCSE subjects. The timetable for examinations is jointly agreed across the five awarding bodies following consultation with examination centres. There is a requirement within timetabling that daily examination times are limited to 6 hours for GCE and 5.5 hours for GCSE.

CCEA, as the main awarding body here, can arrange examinations during the half-term week in England and Wales in late May/early June to spread examinations over a slightly greater number of days with fewer days on which candidates are required to take examinations in more than one subject.

The number of assessment units in GCE courses beginning in 2008 will be reduced from six to four resulting in a reduction of one third in the number of AS examinations (from 2009) and A2 examinations (from 2010) taken by candidates.

Irish Language Schools

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to provide financial incentives in order to encourage teachers in Irish language schools who do not hold formal teaching qualifications to obtain such qualifications. (AQW 1038/07)

Ms Ruane: I am awaiting the review of Irish medium education before I consider whether it is appropriate to provide financial incentives to encourage teachers in Irish language schools who do not hold formal teaching qualifications to obtain such qualifications.

Pupil Expulsions

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Education to advise how many children per thousand have been expelled from schools, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board area; and (b) District Council area or postcode area, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 1058/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is set out in the following tables:

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	All Boards
2000/01	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.02
2001/02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.02
2002/03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.02
2003/04	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
2004/05	0.01	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.03

The numbers of pupil expulsions per thousand are not collected by District Council area. The expulsion statistics for the 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the Department of Education website when this has been completed.

Joint Declaration of Protection

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education if the Equal Opportunities and Sex Discrimination Joint Declaration of Protection, which was agreed by the Administrative, Executive, Clerical, Professional and Technical Staffs Council on 24 March 1995, has been adopted and signed by (a) each of the five Education and Library Boards; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, and, if so, to give the date that it was signed by each of these bodies. (AQW 1078/07)

Ms Ruane: The Southern Education and Library Board signed the declaration on 18th May 1995.

The Belfast Education and Library Board signed the declaration on the 29 October 1998.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board's declaration was signed by the then Chief Executive. Although there is no record of the date on which it was signed on behalf of the board it would have pre-dated 1 January 1997.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) signed the declaration in June 1995.

The Joint Declaration of Protection was adopted by the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the Western Education and Library Board on 27 September 1995.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools adopted this policy as the CCMS Joint Declaration of Protection on 13 May 1999.

Pupil Class Sizes

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the maximum allowable; and (b) the average

class sizes in schools in each year group at primary and secondary level, for the years (i) 1985; (ii) 1990; (iii) 1995; (iv) 2000; and (v) 2005. (AQW 1079/07)

Ms Ruane:

- (a) Prior to 1998 the Primary School Principal determined the number of pupils in all classes in a primary school, taking account of the accommodation available, the needs of pupils, and the deployment of teaching staff. In September 1998 this was modified slightly, with the introduction of the 'Class Sizes in Key Stage 1' policy whereby all classes in P1 to P4 are limited to a maximum of 30 pupils.

In post primary schools, the number of pupils under instruction together by one teacher does not normally exceed 20 for a class in a practical subject; there are exceptions in some practical subjects. These exceptions are as follows:

- Science - up to 26 pupils in Years 8-10
- up to 24 pupils in Years 11-12
- 20 pupils in Years 13-14
- Art & Design - up to 26 in Years 8-10
- 20 pupils in Years 11-14
- PE - up to 25 in Years 8-10 if held in a Gym or Assembly Hall
- 20 pupils in Years 11-12
- up to 30 in all years if held in a sports hall or playing-pitch
- Home Economics, Technology & Design and Music are all restricted to a maximum of 20 pupils.
- Music became recognised as a practical subject in 2004 but all the others have been recognised as practical subjects since 1985.

- (b) Information on the average class size in post primary schools is not collected by the Department of Education. Average class size information has only been available for primary schools from 1999 onwards. The average class size in primary schools by year group for 2000 and 2005 is as follows:

	2000	2005
Year 1	21.9	22.1
Year 2	24.2	23.8
Year 3	24.9	24.4
Year 4	25.5	24.5
Year 5	25.9	25.3
Year 6	25.7	25.0
Year 7	25.0	24.1

Note: The average class size is calculated using only those classes that comprise single year groups.

Impact of Review of Public Administration on Education

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of information sessions held by Education and Library Boards, explaining to staff the impact upon them of the closure of the Boards. (AQW 1083/07)

Ms Ruane: The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards have informed me that the number of information sessions held by Education and Library Boards to explain to staff the impact upon them of the implementation of the Review of Public Administration in education is as follows:

Education and Library Board	Number of Information Sessions
BELB	3
NEELB	19
SEELB	28
SELB	7
WELB	10

Staff are also kept informed through Board Intranet /Internet sites, in-house staff magazines, minutes of Board meetings and internal monthly core briefs.

Classroom Assistants

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's expenditure on classroom assistants working with children with learning difficulties. (AQW 1084/07)

Ms Ruane: I am advised by the Chief Executive Officers of the Education and Library Boards that in 2005/06, the last year for which full outturn figures are available, £48,075,000 was spent on the costs of assistance, to children with special educational needs. For three Boards the cost includes expenditure on both classroom assistance and general assistance as it is not possible to identify these separately.

Education and Library Board Expenditure

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount spent by each Education and Library Board on (a) refurbishing offices; (b) travel expenses of administrative staff; and (c) travel expenses of advisory staff, in each of the last two years. (AQW 1085/07)

Ms Ruane: I have been advised that the amount spent by each Education and Library Board in the 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years is:

2005-06	BELB £	NEELB £	SEELB £	SELB £	WELB £
Refurbishment of Offices	10,000	71,031	-	5,000	387,218
Travel expenses of Administrative staff	22,000	91,845	12,116	130,000	100,443
Travel expenses of Advisory staff	93,000	113,075	54,484	319,000	237,680

2006-07	BELB £	NEELB £	SEELB £	SELB £	WELB £
Refurbishment of Offices	33,000	-	-	28,000	148,334
Travel expenses of Administrative staff	32,000	108,027	14,670	108,000	103,166
Travel expenses of Advisory staff	86,000	94,888	52,343	303,000	222,845

Review of Public Administration

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Chief Executives or Chief Officers in (a) Education and Library Boards; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, who are involved in the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 1086/07)

Ms Ruane: Six Chief Executives in total from the areas described are involved in the Review of Public Administration:

- (a) 5 Chief Executives in the Education and Library Boards
 - (1 in each of the 5 Education and Library Boards – Belfast, North-Eastern, Southern, South-Eastern and Western) and
- (b) 1 Chief Executive in the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

Home to School Transport

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to explain why a Lithuanian child travelling from her home in Randalstown to Tannaghmore School, Co. Antrim, a distance exceeding four miles, has been refused a bus pass. (AQW 1088/07)

Ms Ruane: The North-Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that it has no record of receiving an application for home to school transport assistance for a Lithuanian child travelling from Randalstown to Tannaghmore School, Co Antrim.

Replacement School at St MacNisius'

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the proposed refurbishment, extension or new build at St MacNisius' School, Tannaghmore, Co. Antrim. (AQW 1092/07)

Ms Ruane: A scheme for a replacement school at St MacNisius' was stopped in March this year following a review of all previously announced schemes then in planning. It was announced at that time that there were concerns over enrolments, raising the issue of longer term viability. The school has 73 pupils.

Additional Funding for Primary Schools

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of additional funding that will be made available to primary schools, to finance the resources and training required to deliver the new Primary 1 curriculum. (AQW 1098/07)

Ms Ruane: An additional £3m will be allocated to primary schools in 2007/8 to support the introduction of the Foundation Stage in Year 1. Schools will be notified of the amount they will be allocated as soon as possible in new school term.

In addition, across all schools, over 25,000 new laptops will be provided during the 2007/08 school year to support the introduction of the revised curriculum and assessment arrangements.

Teacher Training

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to ensure that the supply of newly trained teachers is consistent with demand. (AQW 1109/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department determines the number of students to be admitted each year to initial teacher education (ITE) courses. This is achieved by means of the Teacher Demand Model: a statistical exercise which takes account of projected pupil enrolments in the various school sectors, teachers' leaving the profession, pupil teacher ratios, and those not completing ITE courses. The end result provides a projection of teacher vacancies arising in future years

and the consequent requirements for intakes into ITE courses needed to satisfy this demand.

In recognition of the impact which demography is having and to ensure that supply is consistent with demand, the number of students admitted to ITE courses has been systematically reduced over the last three years. My Department will continue to monitor the situation closely, giving careful consideration to numbers and subject specialism required in future years.

Primary School Funding

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the amount of funding received directly by primary schools. (AQW 1114/07)

Ms Ruane: I am convinced of the benefits of investment in our primary schools which play such an important role in building the foundations for learning and where early intervention has a vital role in preventing or reducing future difficulties. In 2007/08 £416.3m was provided directly to primary school Principals and Boards of Governors under Local Management of Schools arrangements. This included additional direct-to-schools allocations from the Children & Young People Funding Package. In addition to this primary schools also receive funding for classroom assistance under the Making a Good Start initiative.

In the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review, I will be looking very carefully, at how we might ensure that the importance of primary education is properly reflected in our funding arrangements.

Implementation of the Revised Curriculum

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Education if she is considering postponing the implementation of the revised curriculum in primary schools for one year, to enable it to be more appropriately funded and resourced. (AQW 1115/07)

Ms Ruane: The implementation of the revised curriculum will begin as planned from September 2007, to enable pupils to benefit from it.

The Department has provided an additional £9million over 2 years to support the implementation of the curriculum, with the bulk of this money going towards a full programme of training for principals and teachers. It has also provided significant extra resources to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to enable it to provide curriculum guidance materials. Some of these materials have already been provided to schools, with more to follow in the next school year. I am also providing an additional £3million in 2007/08 for

resources to support the introduction of the Foundation Stage in Year 1.

Pupils Resident in Each Education and Library Board

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils resident in (a) the North Eastern Education and Library Board area; and (b) the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, that have attended schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board area, in each year since 2001.

(AQW 1116/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

ELB of residence	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
North Eastern	2,803	2,881	3,024	3,063	3,071	3,134
South Eastern	8,083	8,202	8,480	8,389	8,493	8,550
Total	10,886	11,083	11,504	11,452	11,564	11,684

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

ELB of residence	2006/07
North Eastern	951
South Eastern	2,315
Total	3,266

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

ELB of residence	2006/07
North Eastern	33
South Eastern	53
Total	3,266

Note:

- Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.
- Information relating to area of residence of individual pupils in primary and special schools was not collected prior to 2006/07.

Underspend of Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Education to account for the 26.4% (£11.6m) underspend of resource departmental expenditure limits, and the 71.3% (£400,000) underspend of capital departmental

expenditure limits, for the 2006/07 children and young people's priority funding package. (AQW 1117/07)

Ms Ruane: Over £100m has been provided for 2006/07 and 2007/08 to reduce social, health and educational differentials and give children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds the best possible start in life. Around £41m is to be spent in 2006/07 with the remaining funding being spent in 2007/08.

The financial outcome on the package will not be known with certainty until the position regarding end of year flexibility has been determined (which is likely to be in August/September). However the latest monitoring round undertaken by the Department estimates an underspend for the 2006/07 financial year of just over £1.5m (5.6% of the overall resources available for 2006/07). This figure is subject to revision.

The package did not contain any capital element, although late in the financial year (February 2007) approval was given to re-classify £400k from Theme 2 Early Years Provision to address the issues of rural access to services in those areas of the North of Ireland where it would be difficult to progress expansion plans in the absence of capital spend. Delays associated with the capital process (e.g. planning permission etc.) lead to difficulties in this allocation being spent in the 2006/07 financial year. Progress on expenditure is now being made in the 2007/08 financial year.

Ulster-Scots Curriculum Development

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education what actions were taken by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in response to a letter, dated 7 November 2005, from her department's Curriculum and Post-Primary Division, requesting that 'Ulster-Scots cultural heritage is reflected as appropriate when CCEA is preparing exemplars or guidance materials for schools'.

(AQW 1119/07)

Ms Ruane: Since November 2005 CCEA has been working with the Ulster-Scots Agency and Stranmillis College's Ulster-Scots curriculum development unit to develop online resources for primary schools, mapped to the revised curriculum, which aim to promote the language, culture and history of Ulster-Scots. These materials will be published once they have been reviewed and approved by the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group.

CCEA is working to provide further guidance materials to support the introduction of the revised curriculum and in that context will continue to take appropriate opportunity for references to Ulster-Scots heritage.

Classroom Assistants

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to confirm that her departmental guidance states that schools will have one classroom assistant per classroom, even if more than one child in the class has a statement of special needs. (AQW 1132/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has no recommended pupil or classroom ratios that relate to classroom assistants.

The Department's Making a Good Start Initiative provides funding directly to schools to provide a minimum of 10 hrs classroom support for all P1 classes and for P2 classes in schools with the lowest proportion of their pupils achieving the expected level for their age at Key Stage 2 Assessment.

The provision of classroom assistants to pupils with special educational needs is a matter for the Education and Library Boards and I am assured by the Chief Executive Officers of the Boards that they do not have a specific policy relating to one classroom assistant per class.

Any decision on the provision of classroom assistance is based on an informed assessment of the child's special educational needs, taking account of the circumstances both of the individual child and the environment in which the child is to be found.

Pupils Attendance

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils resident in the Belfast Education and Library Board area who have attended schools in (a) the North Eastern Education and Library Board area; and (b) the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each year since 2001. (AQW 1134/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

ELB of residence	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
North Eastern	858	805	786	724	687	659
South Eastern	2,258	2,261	2,260	2,277	2,245	2,201
Total	3,116	3,066	3,046	3,001	2,932	2,860

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

ELB of residence	2006/07
North Eastern	71

ELB of residence	2006/07
South Eastern	706
Total	777

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

ELB of residence	2006/07
North Eastern	44
South Eastern	161
Total	205

Note:

- Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.
- Information relating to area of residence of individual pupils in primary and special schools was not collected prior to 2006/07.

Statutory Assessment of Children

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the average number of months taken for an Education and Library Board to complete the assessment process for a child with autism or special needs. (AQW 1140/07)

Ms Ruane: The Chief Executive Officers of the Education and Library Boards inform me that separate

figures for the various categories of special education needs are not maintained. However, the average time taken to complete a statutory assessment of a child with special education needs and issue a Statement, in the last year for which figures are available, that is 2005/06, is as follows.

Belfast Education and Library Board	6 months
North Eastern Education and Library Board	5.75 months
Western Education and Library Board	7.60 months
Southern Education and Library Board	10.04 months
South Eastern Education and Library Board	7.20 months

Expenditure

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the annual expenditure of each Education and Library Board; and to provide information on how this expenditure is broken down. (AQW 1141/07)

Ms Ruane: I have been advised that expenditure in relation to the budgets provided by each funding department is as detailed in the table below. Expenditure has been reported against each of the main budgets classifications.

EXPENDITURE 2006-07
£000S

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Department of Education (DE)					
Recurrent Expenditure:					
Delegated Schools Budgets	120,321	167,213	145,866	179,459	140,340
Centre - schools related non-earmarked	61,945	77,209	69,706	82,029	69,837
Centre - school related Earmarked	21,098	15,572	17,146	14,870	64,381
Youth non- earmarked	3,206	3,752	3,428	3,732	3,077
Youth earmarked	1,335	698	692	752	500
Total Recurrent Expenditure DE	207,905	264,444	236,838	280,842	278,135
Capital Expenditure:					
Schools Capital (Gross)	8,407	13,312	11,485	20,129	18,069
Youth/Community Relations Capital (Gross)	668	1,062	823	805	544
Total Capital Expenditure	9,075	14,374	12,308	20,934	18,613
Total Expenditure DE 2006-07	216,980	278,818	249,146	301,776	296,748

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Department of Culture Arts and Leisure					
Recurrent	5,763	9,185	5,356	4,985	4,533
Capital	0.784	1,147	0.417	0.547	0.183
Total Expenditure DCAL	6,547	10,332	5,773	5,532	4,716
Department of Employment and Learning					
Recurrent Expenditure	1,950	3,536	2,982	4,290	5,299

Promoting Inclusiveness

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to promote inclusiveness, with specific reference to her department's use of terminology in relation to place names. (AQW 1144/07)

Ms Ruane: I have indicated my own preference in relation to language in my speeches and correspondence.

Integrated Education

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Education what assessment her department is making with regard to increased demand for integrated education across Northern Ireland in (a) primary schools; and (b) secondary schools. (AQW 1148/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education and also a duty to ensure that parental choice is balanced against the provision of efficient instruction and training, and avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure. Proposals to expand integrated school provision are the subject of a formal development proposal consultation process. All proposals are considered on their individual merits.

Over the past five years four new grant maintained integrated primary schools have opened and two more are planned to open in September 2007. Four primary schools transformed to integrated status and a further two are due to transform in September. Approval was also given for one integrated primary school to increase its enrolment. Over the same period in the secondary sector, two new grant-maintained integrated schools have opened; one school will transform to integrated status in September; and approval was given for two schools to increase their enrolments.

Special Education

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to outline the information given to parents of children with special needs regarding the options available to

them when considering the most appropriate type of school for their child; and, specifically, to state whether the information issued relates only to grant-maintained schools, and those funded by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. (AQW 1150/07)

Ms Ruane: The responsibility for providing information to the parents of children with special educational needs lies with the Education and Library Boards. The range of options discussed will vary according to the individual needs of the child.

Education and Library Boards have a statutory responsibility to make special educational needs provision in schools within the grant-aided sector. Where a Board is of the opinion that they cannot meet a child's special educational needs within the grant-aided sector then the special education legislation provides a route to enable them to make the provision other than in the grant-aided sector.

A Board cannot make arrangements for special educational provision other than in a grant-aided school in the north of Ireland unless it is satisfied that the interests of the child require such arrangements to be made and those arrangements are compatible with the efficient use of resources. Where a Board proposes to make provision in this way it will issue relevant information to the parents.

DE Spend on Consultancy Service

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's projected spend on consultancy services, in the 2007/2008 financial year. (AQW 1175/07)

Ms Ruane: It is anticipated that the department's projected spend on consultancy services in the 2007/08 financial year will amount to £2.053m, of which:

- £1.607m relates to management consultancy;
- £135k relates to construction related consultancy;
- £14k relates to PPP related consultancy;

- £222k relates to Information Technology related consultancy;
- £35k relates to legal consultancy; and
- £40k relates to Training related consultancy.

Independent Conductive Education School

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps taken by Education and Library Boards to make parents of autistic children aware that there is an Independent Conductive Education School in Dungannon. (AQW 1195/07)

Ms Ruane: The Buddy Bear School, which is an independent conductive education school, opened in Dungannon in 1993 to provide for children with cerebral palsy.

The Buddy Bear School has not been established to meet the needs of children with Autism, therefore the Education and Library Boards do not routinely advise parents of children with Autism about the school.

Special Educational Needs

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to outline the action taken by Education and Library Boards regarding the provision of information to parents on methods, schools or units specialising in teaching children with autism, cerebral palsy, and behaviour-related problems. (AQW 1196/07)

CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2005/06

Summary	Damages	Plaintiffs	Board Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims	Reference
BELB	99,250	46,601	40,169	186,020	9	Annex A
NEELB	52,624	25,911	19,840	98,375	14	Annex B
SEELB	158,703	75,263	37,199	271,165	23	Annex C
SELB	182,304	95,524	46,387	324,215	25	Annex D
WELB	75,059	45,621	51,998	172,678	13	Annex E

CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2006/07

Summary	Damages	Plaintiffs	Board Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims	Reference
BELB	174,418	123,624	83,383	381,425	30	Annex F
NEELB	312,049	100,292	48,206	460,547	31	Annex G
SEELB	123,506	95,163	54,345	273,014	32	Annex H
SELB	226,325	66,926	41,217	334,468	19	Annex I
WELB	205,781	62,321	46,656	314,758	15	Annex J

Ms Ruane: Education and Library Boards use a number of means to provide parents with information on specialist provision that could be appropriate to meet the needs of their particular child, such as lists of schools in their areas which are available in booklet form or on websites. In addition when a Board issues a proposed Statement of Special Educational Needs it will provide parents with details of educational provision within the area to enable parents to make a choice. Parents are also encouraged to visit schools or obtain a school prospectus to obtain more detail.

In addition each of the Education and Library Boards has established an Advice and Information Service, which provides parents with advice in relation to Boards services and special education provision.

Since 2005, the five Boards have worked collaboratively to develop a Special Educational Needs website that provides information relating to special education and since June 2007 this can be accessed in a range of languages.

Out-of-Court Settlements

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of out-of-court settlements for each Education and Library Board over the past two years; and the costs incurred in relation to legal fees and compensation, on a case-by-case basis. (AQW 1198/07)

Ms Ruane: The information detailed in the table below has been provided by each Education and Library Board:

EMPLOYMENT 1 APRIL 2005 TO 31 MARCH 2007

	Total Amount of Compensation	Total Legal Costs Paid	Number of Cases
BELB	50,500	12,994	17
NEELB	14,500	33,768	15
SEELB	43,391	29,403	16
SELB	54,500	30,580	11
WELB	13,557	13,801	12

ANNEX A**BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2005/2006 FINANCIAL YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
4,000.00	2,260.75	2,720.64	8,981.39	1
10,000.00	3,353.63	2,378.48	15,732.11	1
17,500.00	5,573.57	4,035.51	27,109.08	1
10,000.00	3,533.92	2,743.63	16,277.55	1
10,000.00	7,970.71	5,867.44	23,838.15	1
20,000.00	12,617.35	16,830.61	49,447.96	1
8,750.00	4,226.00	2,083.63	15,059.63	1
17,500.00	6,171.01	3,209.93	26,880.94	1
1,500.00	893.77	299.63	2,693.40	1
99,250.00	46,600.71	40,169.50	186,020.21	9

ANNEX B**NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2005/2006 FINANCIAL YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
8,750.00	6,498.86	9,061.72	24,310.58	1
2,000.00	1,786.62	1,374.75	5,161.37	1
4,500.00	1,423.50		5,923.50	1
4,250.00	2,391.53	1,517.56	8,159.09	1
5,000.00	1,920.49	1,014.00	7,934.49	1
8,500.00	2,479.10	1,410.00	12,389.10	1
3,000.00	1,295.35	2,019.82	6,315.17	1
4,125.00	1,838.25		5,963.25	1
2,500.00	1,588.25		4,088.25	1
8,750.00	4,688.85	3,442.16	16,881.01	1
696.42			696.42	1

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
150.00			150.00	1
278.95			278.95	1
123.37			123.37	1
52,623.74	25,910.80	19,840.01	98,374.55	14

ANNEX C**SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2005/2006 FINANCIAL YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
10,000.00	10,954.37		20,954.37	1
15,000.00	11,333.44	6,474.36	32,807.80	1
5,000.00	3,520.18	6,536.00	15,056.18	1
3,500.00	3,396.21	1,223.66	8,119.87	1
375.00	2,114.00	1,012.50	3,501.50	1
2,250.00	1,583.44	1,412.50	5,245.94	1
4,000.00	2,021.65	1,057.50	7,079.15	1
2,000.00	1,524.00	607.00	4,131.00	1
4,739.50	3,072.09	1,280.00	9,091.59	1
2,000.00	1,785.51	712.50	4,498.01	1
2,500.00	1,020.64		3,520.64	1
5,000.00	2,033.37	810.00	7,843.37	1
8,333.33	3,121.64	6,598.92	18,053.89	1
10,000.00	9,962.44		19,962.44	1
47,500.00	11,354.68	6,501.70	65,356.38	1
27,500.00	2,010.00		29,510.00	1
3,500.00	2,052.00	1,210.00	6,762.00	1
4,500.00	2,403.18	1,762.50	8,665.68	1
120.00			120.00	1
26.25			26.25	1
75.00			75.00	1
661.33			661.33	1
122.55			122.55	1
158,702.96	75,262.84	37,199.14	271,164.94	23

ANNEX D

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2005/2006 FINANCIAL
YEAR

Damages	Plaintiffs Costs	Boards Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
520.00	1299.68	2813.12	4632.80	1
1500.00	3757.15	3259.69	8516.84	1
610.00	940.38	1064.82	2615.20	1
3000.00	3329.25	2111.86	8441.11	1
250.00	360.76	809.20	1419.96	1
12500.00	6098.78	4860.03	23458.81	1
1000.00	1427.07	698.34	3125.41	1
7500.00	5263.55	932.00	13695.55	1
12500.00	10042.44	1280.55	23822.99	1
2500.00	3574.44	3784.31	9858.75	1
57957.27	16860.00	2840.40	77657.67	1
33952.91	14892.80	6130.98	54976.69	1
5000.00	2749.25	1572.50	9321.75	1
2012.27	1817.88	1140.88	4971.03	1
10000.00	5739.13	3497.28	19236.41	1
3500.00	2552.38	1362.25	7414.63	1
9000.00	4775.69	2735.89	16511.58	1
2500.00	1977.88	712.50	5190.38	1
9981.10	4001.63	2032.50	16015.23	1
3500.00	3227.17	1515.00	8242.17	1
2500.00	837.18	1232.61	4569.79	1
140.92			140.92	1
145.00			145.00	1
64.63			64.63	1
170.38			170.38	1
182,304.48	95,524.49	46,386.71	324,215.68	25

ANNEX E

WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2005/2006 FINANCIAL
YEAR

Damages	Plaintiffs Costs	Boards Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
5,000.00	1,695.25	1,410.00	8,105.25	1
3,000.00	1,237.50	0.00	4,237.50	1
15,000.00	8,741.52	4,634.20	28,375.72	1
8,000.00	3,670.47	4,529.24	16,199.71	1

Damages	Plaintiffs Costs	Boards Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
750.00	1,028.13	396.56	2,174.69	1
3,000.00	2,876.48	1,551.00	7,427.48	1
12,309.09	14,119.65	23,707.02	50,135.76	1
1,000.00	1,316.48	3,692.66	6,009.14	1
7,500.00	6,035.83	8,487.38	22,023.21	1
6,000.00	2,416.10	1,241.25	9,657.35	1
1,000.00	935.12	586.56	2,521.68	1
7,500.00	0.00	0.00	7,500.00	1
5,000.00	1,547.99	1,762.50	8,310.49	1
75,059.09	45,620.52	51,998.37	172,677.98	13

ANNEX F

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2006/2007 FINANCIAL
YEAR

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
17500.00	10512.73	7987.31	36000.04	1
7000.00	3622.40	4417.10	15039.50	1
1000.00	1058.12	538.73	2596.85	1
4000.00	2710.59	1014.00	7724.59	1
5000.00	2576.88	1189.68	8766.56	1
3500.00	4150.89	2011.61	9662.50	1
3000.00	2646.77	6905.40	12552.17	1
4000.00	3166.81	2616.72	9783.53	1
20000.00	18033.77	8631.55	46665.32	1
8168.00	3692.63	5238.82	17099.45	1
15000.00	8441.88	3458.29	26900.17	1
4000.00	2801.75	1825.36	8627.11	1
3500.00	16264.97	8880.10	28645.07	1
3750.00	1668.39	299.63	5718.02	1
4000.00	3291.76	2431.60	9723.36	1
10000.00	6011.96	3905.61	19917.57	1
1500.00	1129.16	349.56	2978.72	1
3000.00	2548.82	299.63	5848.45	1
3000.00	2454.75	1443.78	6898.53	1
20000.00	6960.99	6059.43	33020.42	1
17500.00	6058.17	4387.45	27945.62	1
1500.00	1249.76	1953.81	4703.57	1
1500.00	1894.16	1528.68	4922.84	1

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
3500.00	1278.00	298.16	5076.16	1
2500.00	2864.54	298.16	5662.70	1
750.00	1753.69	1249.91	3753.60	1
1000.00	482.50	306.68	1789.18	1
750.00	1767.79	3164.87	5682.66	1
2500.00	939.95	315.19	3755.14	1
2000.00	1590.00	376.00	3966.00	1
174,418.00	123,624.58	83,382.82	381,425.40	30

ANNEX G

**NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2006/2007 FINANCIAL
YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
6,500.00	2,952.85	1,314.82	10,767.67	1
1,000.00	2,014.85	907.05	3,921.90	1
10,000.00	8,763.37	4,806.93	23,570.30	1
2,500.00	1,766.88	725.56	4,992.44	1
3,000.00	1,231.60	367.34	4,598.94	1
5,000.00	1,582.69	892.27	7,474.96	1
22,500.00	7,157.37	4,528.46	34,185.83	1
5,500.00	3,118.40	1,541.60	10,160.00	1
1,000.00	462.50		1,462.50	1
3,000.00	2,976.03	1,071.32	7,047.35	1
5,880.00	1,555.85		7,435.85	1
10,000.00	4,042.35	3,135.23	17,177.58	1
4,000.00	2,166.25		6,166.25	1
17,500.00	8,616.86	5,887.23	32,004.06	1
15,000.00	8,895.58	1,356.30	25,251.88	1
25,000.00	9,662.22	5,976.04	40,638.26	1
125,000.00	4,009.12	2,256.00	131,265.12	1
10,000.00	3,800.86		13,800.86	1
4,000.00	2,297.13	1,110.37	7,407.50	1
10,000.00	6,489.84	4,207.70	20,697.54	1
1,300.00			1,300.00	1
60.00			60.00	1
386.35			386.35	1
728.53			728.53	1
139.00			139.00	1

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of Claims
55.00			55.00	1
6,500.00	2,952.85	1,314.82	10,767.67	1
1,000.00	2,014.85	907.05	3,921.90	1
10,000.00	8,763.37	4,806.93	23,570.30	1
2,500.00	1,766.88	725.56	4,992.44	1
3,000.00	1,231.60	367.34	4,598.94	1
312,048.88	100,292.15	48,205.92	460,546.95	31

ANNEX H

**SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2006/2007 FINANCIAL
YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
7,500.00	8,095.00	4,233.00	19,828.00	1
6,250.00	2,950.16	1,890.00	11,090.16	1
4,614.00	1,473.88	5,730.58	11,818.46	1
8,000.00	4,972.27	1,800.00	14,772.27	1
5,000.00	3,186.16	1,012.50	9,198.66	1
2,500.00	2,547.15	1,090.14	6,137.29	1
1,000.00	5,330.66	3,393.00	9,723.66	1
1,000.00	1,177.15	1,706.50	3,883.65	1
7,500.00	6,288.68	2,035.56	15,824.24	1
1,500.00	1,996.25	970.00	4,466.25	1
3,000.00	2,093.00		5,093.00	1
7,500.00	7,326.94	5,648.60	20,475.54	1
5,000.00	8,616.64	5,152.29	18,768.93	1
8,750.00	4,388.53	2,825.50	15,964.03	1
17,500.00	9,743.82	5,592.00	32,835.82	1
4,000.00	2,805.79		6,805.79	1
235.00			235.00	1
1,500.00	1,725.63	1,071.40	4,297.03	1
1,250.00	1,540.00		2,790.00	1
7,500.00	8,555.45	3,975.50	20,030.95	1
2,500.00	1,070.81	570.00	4,140.81	1
873.40			873.40	1
7,500.00	2,896.50	1,886.00	12,282.50	1
3,000.00	2,374.88	1,327.26	6,702.14	1
25.00			25.00	1
4,000.00	2,079.00	1,217.50	7,296.50	1
55.21			55.21	1

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
1,500.00	1,536.50	1,217.50	4,254.00	1
1,167.00			1,167.00	1
750.00	392.00		1,142.00	1
950.11			950.11	1
86.62			86.62	1
123,506.34	95,162.85	54,344.83	273,014.02	32

ANNEX I

**SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2006/2007 FINANCIAL
YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
15000.00	6828.63	1107.00	22935.63	1
28486.76	9670.99	8074.82	46232.57	1
2800.00	2326.06	1811.43	6937.49	1
20000.00	9458.15	5921.33	35379.48	1
1500.00	4610.54	3557.90	9668.44	1
17500.00	9722.26	4200.71	31422.97	1
22500.00	7574.26	4142.53	34216.79	1
4750.00	2842.88	2936.20	10529.08	1
750.00	865.53	292.50	1908.03	1
12500.00	3748.00	2400.00	18648.00	1
10000.00	2700.11	1890.00	14590.11	1
7500.00	3468.23	3529.50	14497.73	1
110.00			110.00	1
12.65			12.65	1
74.99			74.99	1
182.13			182.13	1
7500.00	3110.63	1353.10	11963.73	1
158.63	0.00	0.00	158.63	1
75000.00	Fees out-standing	Fees out-standing	75000.00	1
226325.16	66926.27	41217.02	334468.45	19

ANNEX J

**WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD
CLAIMS SETTLED OUT OF COURT 2006/2007 FINANCIAL
YEAR**

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
2,500.00	0.00	15,212.32	17,712.32	1

Damages	Plaintiff's Costs	Board's Costs	Total Outlay	Number of claims
800.00	1,368.93	1,898.34	4,067.27	1
15,000.00	7,949.55	1,368.88	24,318.43	1
7,500.00	2,865.45	1,542.17	11,907.62	1
5,000.00	9,302.85	6,925.74	21,228.59	1
4,000.00	2,279.25	1,586.25	7,865.50	1
4,000.00	2,390.25	0.00	6,390.25	1
250.00	665.87	1,927.00	2,842.87	1
8,750.00	3,171.35	964.00	12,885.35	1
30,000.00	8,599.21	4,604.62	43,203.83	1
3,000.00	1,217.50	0.00	4,217.50	1
5,000.00	1,562.50	0.00	6,562.50	1
55,481.31	18,125.09	5,141.03	78,747.43	1
2,000.00	2,823.32	3,364.64	8,187.96	1
62,500.00	0.00	2,121.32	64,621.32	1
205,781.31	62,321.12	46,656.31	314,758.74	15

Pupil Suspensions

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have been suspended from (a) primary schools; (b) post primary schools; and (c) special needs schools, broken down by Education and Library Board area, for each of the last five years.
(AQW 1199/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is shown in the following tables:

(a) The number of pupils suspended from primary schools in each Education and Library Board.

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2000/01	70	29	88	29	12	228
2001/02	177	48	99	22	13	359
2002/03	99	31	68	#	#	264
2003/04	104	52	#	#	25	288
2004/05	105	44	#	47	#	288

(b) The number of pupils suspended from post-primary schools in each Education and Library Board.

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2000/01	713	890	1101	774	751	4229
2001/02	1100	834	1008	894	901	4737
2002/03	806	837	1105	926	1137	4901
2003/04	1033	854	1168	904	1059	5018
2004/05	954	898	1237	871	1016	4976

(c) The number of pupils suspended from special schools in each Education and Library Board.

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2000/01	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2001/02	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2002/03	19	38	28	#	*	117
2003/04	54	30	29	53	0	166
2004/05	41	33	26	42	0	142

Key: # denotes figure has been suppressed to prevent possible identification of individual pupils

* denotes less than five pupils

Note: While the information from the 2002/03 school year onwards is regarded as accurate, the information for the school years prior to that is regarded only as an indicator of the position.

Suspension statistics broken down by school were first collected in the 2002/03 school year. Separate figures for suspensions from special schools are, therefore, not available for previous years.

Statistics for 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Support for Suspended Pupils

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last five years, expenditure on support services for the education of suspended pupils, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1216/07)

Ms Ruane: Grant-aided schools are responsible for the education of all pupils on their registers, including those who have been suspended.

Each Education and Library Board provides support services to schools in their area, including support for suspended pupils. There are, however, no systems for tracking separately any costs associated with support provided specifically for pupils on suspension.

Pupil Expulsions

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail, broken down by Education and Library Board, the number of (a) primary school; (b) post-primary school; and (c) special needs school pupils that have been expelled, in each year for the last five years. (AQW 1217/07)

Ms Ruane: The following tables show:

(a) The total number of pupils expelled from primary schools:

School Year	Total*
2000/01	2
2001/02	0
2002/03	3
2003/04	2
2004/05	2

* due to the small number of pupils expelled, a breakdown by Education and Library Board is not published.

(b) The number of pupils expelled from post-primary schools in each Education and Library Board.

School Year	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	Total
2000/01	5	19	29	11	14	78
2001/02	7	16	18	12	23	76
2002/03	18	10	16	16	7	67
2003/04	6	10	15	12	26	69
2004/05	6	11	26	9	9	61

The Department does not collect information in the format requested to provide details of expulsions from special schools separately.

Expulsion statistics for the 2005/06 school year are currently being analysed and will be placed on the DE website when this has been completed.

Disruptive Pupils

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the consideration given by the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to the family group conferencing and restorative justice approaches, in order to assist in dealing with disruptive pupils. (AQW 1218/07)

Ms Ruane: The Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools support the appropriate use of family group conferencing and

restorative justice approaches to assist in the resolution of educational issues. Relevant Boards' staff have been trained in the family group conferencing process and use this with pupils, parents and school personnel to tackle persistent non-attendance, bullying and anti-social behaviour.

Controlled Primary Schools

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of funding per pupil, for controlled primary schools in each Education and Library Board area, in (a) 2004/2005; (b) 2005/2006; and (c) 2006/2007. (AQW 1261/07)

Ms Ruane: Figures shown in the table below refer to the average funding per pupil, within the delegated school budgets made available under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding arrangements, for controlled primary schools in each of the Education & Library Board (ELB) areas for the years in question. Figures exclude capital funding, other initiative funding made available outside of delegated funding arrangements, and services and support provided by Education & Library Boards on behalf of all schools in their area.

CONTROLLED PRIMARY SCHOOLS: LMS DELEGATED FUNDING PER PUPIL ^(1,2)

	2004/05 ⁽³⁾ £	2005/06 £	2006/07 ⁽⁴⁾ £
Belfast	2,108	2,353	2,529
North Eastern	1,962	2,210	2,372
South Eastern	1,993	2,174	2,315
Southern	2,049	2,270	2,426
Western	2,083	2,320	2,477

Notes:

- 1 Includes nursery class pupils in primary schools
- 2 Includes controlled integrated primary schools
- 3 In 2004/05 funding was distributed under the separate LMS Schemes operated by each ELB and includes the funding allocated directly to schools under the "Chancellor's Budget Addition". From April 2005 all schools have been funded under Common Funding arrangements, with all schools funded according to their relative need, and in a way that aims to mitigate the effects of social disadvantage. Funding distributed in 2005/06 and 2006/07 included the transitional funding arrangements, designed to support schools and smooth budgetary changes in moving all schools to the single funding formula.
- 4 Funding distributed in 2006/07 includes the funding allocated directly to schools from the Children & Young People Funding Package.

Controlled Secondary Schools

Mr Gregory Campbell asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of funding per pupil, for controlled secondary schools in each Education and Library Board area, in (a) 2004/2005; (b) 2005/2006; and (c) 2006/2007. (AQW 1263/07)

Ms Ruane: Figures shown in the table below refer to the average funding per pupil, within the delegated school budgets made available under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding arrangements, for controlled post-primary schools in each of the Education & Library Board (ELB) areas for the years in question. Figures exclude capital funding, other initiative funding made available outside of delegated funding arrangements, and services and support provided by Education & Library Boards on behalf of all schools in their area.

CONTROLLED POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS: LMS DELEGATED FUNDING PER PUPIL ^(1,2)

	2004/05 ⁽³⁾ £	2005/06 £	2006/07 ⁽⁴⁾ £
Belfast	3,327	3,651	3,871
North Eastern	3,092	3,417	3,649
South Eastern	3,098	3,392	3,605
Southern	3,135	3,446	3,672
Western	3,163	3,481	3,700

Notes:

- 1 Includes secondary, controlled grammar and controlled integrated schools
- 2 Includes preparatory pupils in controlled grammar schools
- 3 In 2004/05 funding was distributed under the separate LMS Schemes operated by each ELB and includes the funding allocated directly to schools under the "Chancellor's Budget Addition". From April 2005 all schools have been funded under Common Funding arrangements, with all schools funded according to their relative need, and in a way that aims to mitigate the effects of social disadvantage. Funding distributed in 2005/06 and 2006/07 included the transitional funding arrangements, designed to support schools and smooth budgetary changes in moving all schools to the single funding formula.
- 4 Funding distributed in 2006/07 includes the funding allocated directly to schools from the Children & Young People Funding Package.

St Joseph's Primary School, Co Tyrone

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Education at what stage are the plans for a new build for St. Joseph's Primary School at 7 Lurgylea Road, Galbally, Co. Tyrone. (AQW 1272/07)

Ms Ruane: A capital scheme for St Joseph's Primary School is in the very early stages of planning. Officials from the Department and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) visited the school

in March 2006 to assess the school's accommodation needs. While it was recognised that the school suffered from sub-standard accommodation, the Department advised that a capital scheme for the school's future provision would have to be considered within the context of area-based planning. Further consideration of this scheme will be taken forward with the CCMS in the coming months.

Teaching of Music

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated specifically to the teaching of music, broken down by Education and Library Board; and to explain the reasons for the disparities in such funding. (AQW 1294/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education does not allocate funding specifically to the teaching of music. Schools are allocated funding under a Common Funding Formula which has been developed to cover, among other key areas, support for schools in delivering the curriculum, including the teaching of music. Under Local Management of Schools arrangements, each school receives a delegated budget, calculated in accordance with the Formula, and it is then for the Principal and the Board of Governors to manage these funds appropriately in accordance with their priorities and the needs of all pupils enrolled at the school.

All Education and Library Boards provide a Music Service from within their overall funding allocations and it is a matter for each Board to determine the allocation of funds to each service which they provide.

Music Lessons in Schools

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to explain the reasons why children taking music lessons in schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area are required to pay for their musical instruments, and also to pay towards additional lessons needed for grading. (AQW 1295/07)

Ms Ruane: Schools are required to teach music as part of the curriculum but they also have access to their Board's music service, which provides additional tuition to help nurture the talent of those young people with a gift or passion for a particular instrument. If a young person does not have an instrument of their own, their parents may hire one from the SEELB's Music Service and this is common practice across all Boards. The SEELB has to levy a charge for instrument hire as the income this generates is an important part of the overall funding arrangements that enables the Board to provide this service. The SEELB's hire charge has remained at £35 since 2005/06.

The SEELB charges schools for the lessons it provides in that school, but it is for schools to determine how much of the charge to pass on to parents. The lessons provided by the Music Service include preparation for graded examinations as an integral part of the lesson, i.e. there is no additional charge.

East West Co-operation

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education, further to her response to AQW 1121/07, to detail what action she plans to take to develop and expand education as an area of east-west co-operation. (AQW 1326/07)

Ms Ruane: I attended the British Irish Council on 16 July 2007 and this was a very useful meeting. I met my counterparts from England, Scotland, Wales, Guernsey, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands.

I have also met with Alex Salmond during his visit to the North of Ireland and discussed with him a future meeting with the Minister of Education in the Scottish Executive and with officials in the British Council to take this forward.

Dean Maguire College, Carrickmore

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail the current status of the new build development proposal for the Dean Maguire College, Carrickmore; and to outline the history of this proposal, including her department's interest in potential sites for the new build. (AQW 1338/07)

Ms Ruane: Following a review of previously announced capital schemes in planning conducted earlier this year, the project for Dean Maguire College, Carrickmore was put on hold pending further examination of the proposed scheme with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The key issues for consideration are the potential impact of enrolment trends for the scheme and the provision needed in the area. The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.

The planning of a major capital scheme for Dean Maguire College was approved by the Department in November 2002. An economic appraisal was completed in 2004 which identified site options and recommended the provision of a new purpose built school on a new site. The scheme for the school was included in the capital programme announced in March 2006. The economic appraisal had identified the former PSNI site in Carrickmore as a possible site for the proposed new school.

I understand that this site is no longer available and if it is considered that the capital scheme should

proceed, then consideration will be given to the options for a suitable site.

Managing Grant-Aided Schools

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education, further to her answer to AQW 340/07, to detail what (a) daily input to the school; (b) influence over the appointment of school governors; and (c) routine inspection of the delivery of the curriculum in the classroom, her department has in relation to an independent school that has made a successful application for grant-aided status. (AQW 1352/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department has a general strategic aim to promote the value of education and create a desire for learning. However, the day to day running of a school is an operational matter for a school Board of Governors in liaison with the School Principal and teaching staff. Among their responsibilities are the admission of pupils, the delivery of the curriculum, staffing matters and the management of school budgets.

My Department is responsible for the appointment of Departmental governors to Boards of Governors. Other appointments to Boards are made by a number of other bodies including Education & Library Boards, school trustees and representatives of transferors.

With regard to inspections all grant-aided schools are subject to inspection in the normal way, which would include an evaluation of the curriculum on offer.

Schools Selection System

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education, further to her answer to AQW 338/07, if, as part of her proposals, it is her intention to give (a) greater; (b) equal; or (c) less weight to public opinion, than her predecessor under devolution. (AQW 1353/07)

Ms Ruane: I do not think it is helpful or possible for me to compare the level of consideration I will give to public opinion to that of previous Ministers. As I have made clear, I am listening to the full range of views on the issue of the new arrangements for transfer from primary to post-primary education, and will be mindful of the strength of arguments put forward and any equality considerations. I will ensure that the needs of the child will be at the heart of any decision taken. We are committed to a consultation on draft regulations for future school admissions criteria.

Critical Areas of Education

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that critical areas of education, such as special needs, are not denied

funding due to expenditure on other areas, with reference to the £11,721,530 spent on the Irish language and Irish-medium teaching in 2006/07. (AQW 1354/07)

Ms Ruane: In 2006-07 current expenditure on education services amounted to £1,584.3 million, and capital investment totalled £128.0 million. This included some £1 billion in relation to school delegated budgets, as well as significant provision for education initiatives, education reforms and other important areas of provision such as early years and special educational needs and inclusion.

The 1998 Education Order places a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education. The Department of Education funds Irish-medium schools that meet the specified criteria. The intake and enrolment criteria for Irish-medium schools are the same as for all schools.

Budgets for Irish-medium and other schools are determined under a single Common Funding Formula according to their relative need and in a way that helps mitigate the effects of social disadvantage. The implementation of Common Funding in 2005 ensures that schools in all areas receive similar levels of delegated funding and greater consistency in their access to centre services provided by Education and Library Boards.

In the 2007 Priorities and Budget process, which is currently under way, I am committed to ensuring that the funding available to the education service takes account of future needs.

Breakfast and Homework Clubs

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money available to primary and secondary schools to promote (a) breakfast clubs; and (b) homework clubs, in the last 3 years. (AQW 1356/07)

Ms Ruane: My Department does not hold the information requested.

Almost 500 (40%) of our schools are being funded as Extended Schools under The Children and Young People Funding Package to support wide ranging activities, including breakfast clubs and homework clubs, based on each schools' particular circumstances. £10m has been made available in each of the 2006/07 and 2007/08 financial years aimed at those schools operating in the most disadvantaged areas. Over 300 primary and almost 70 post primary schools have been allocated approximately £7m and £2m respectively. Many other schools also offer these services on a voluntary basis.

Extended Schools will provide to the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) a short report including statistics on participation and activities undertaken during the first year of the programme and, in turn, ELBs will provide a summary report to DE later this year. However, in order to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic burden on school principals, individual costings for each activity has not been requested in the end-of-year report.

Standardising School Holidays

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to standardise school holidays.
(AQW 1364/07)

Ms Ruane: There are no plans to make any changes to the current arrangements for school holidays. Harmonisation of school holidays does take place as far as is possible with dates for each academic year agreed to take account of school transport arrangements. Schools are informed in writing of the non-operational transport dates from their respective Education and Library Board. However, schools have discretion to close at varying times during the year for 5 optional days, 5 staff training and development days (known as Baker Days) and 5 School Improvement Days. This inevitably means that there will be some variation between schools on holiday periods.

Teacher Employment

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers employed in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 1366/07)

Ms Ruane: The number of teachers employed in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years is detailed in the attached table. The figures do not include Voluntary Grammar Schools or FE Colleges.

Sector	April 2005	April 2006	April 2007
Controlled	1978	1897	1834
Maintained	895	878	838
Grant Maintained Integrated	173	179	182
Special	207	195	187
Total	3253	3149	3041

School Cleaners' Salaries

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm that the South Eastern

Education and Library Board has not updated school cleaners' salaries, in line with the other Education and Library Boards; and what steps she will take to address this issue.
(AQW 1375/07)

Ms Ruane: School cleaners are employed by the local Education and Library Boards and as such their terms and conditions of employment are primarily a matter for the relevant Board. I am advised that the results of the five Boards' job evaluation exercise for cleaners is currently subject to appeal. However Boards decided to move the cleaners on to the new pay rates determined by the evaluation, pending the outcome of the appeal. The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has advised me that its school cleaners will transfer to the new pay rates in August 2007.

School Closures

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools that are scheduled to close in the current financial year.
(AQW 1384/07)

Ms Ruane: Nine primary schools and two post-primary schools are due to close at 31 August 2007. In addition, a total of eight primary schools and three special schools are due to amalgamate to form four new primary schools and one new special school respectively at 1 September 2007. One primary school is to close at 31 August 2007 as the first phase of an amalgamation involving two other primary schools and one nursery school will close at 31 August 2007 and be re-established as a nursery unit at a primary school.

The Bain Report

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the savings that have been made as a result of the implementation of Professor Sir George Bain's Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education.
(AQW 1385/07)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Report sets out 61 recommendations covering funding of education, strategic planning of the schools estate, and sharing and collaboration. Some of the recommendations would require further detailed work and consultation and others should be progressed as part of the Department's and education authorities' existing responsibilities. I am currently considering the details of the Bain report and the implications of each of the recommendations before decisions on implementation and it is too early at this stage to estimate costs and savings from implementation.

School Closures

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools that have been closed to date, as a result of the implementation of Professor Sir George Bain's Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education. (AQW 1386/07)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Report was published on 4 December 2006. Since then development proposals have been approved to close eight primary schools and two post-primary schools, however the respective school authorities had commenced work on each of these proposals well in advance of the publication of the report.

The Bain Report

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the expenditure of (a) each Education and Library Board; and (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, in relation to the implementation of Professor Sir George Bain's Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education. (AQW 1387/07)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Report sets out 61 recommendations covering funding of education, strategic planning of the schools estate, and sharing and collaboration. Some of the recommendations would require further detailed work and consultation and others should be progressed as part of the Department's and education authorities' existing responsibilities. I am currently considering the details of the Bain report and the implications of each of the recommendations before decisions on implementation and it is too early at this stage to estimate costs and savings from implementation.

Development of Educational Village at Lisanelly, Omagh

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) her department's involvement in plans to develop an educational village concept at the Lisanelly site in Omagh; (b) what discussions her department has had with the Ministry of Defence regarding the disposal of the Lisanelly site; and (c) the timetable for taking this project forward. (AQW 1388/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has been in contact with relevant managing authorities of a number of schools in the Omagh area to seek their views on the possible development of part of the Lisanelly site for educational use. The Department is also liaising with the Department for Social Development which, with its responsibilities for regeneration, has been in discussion with the Ministry of Defence on the possible acquisition of the site on the behalf of the

administration. The Ministry of Defence wishes to dispose of the site by spring of next year and requires confirmation shortly from the administration as to whether it wishes to purchase this site. Subject to a decision to purchase the site, the planning for its development, including an educational campus, would commence shortly thereafter.

Educational Psychology Services

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail whether pupils attending grant-aided primary schools and post-primary schools in Co. Tyrone are given equal access to the full range of educational psychology services, including those pupils who are resident in Co. Donegal. (AQW 1389/07)

Ms Ruane: The five Education and Library Boards have a reciprocal arrangement as regards educational psychology services for pupils who live in one Board area but are educated in another Board area. Children, even if they reside in another Board area, who are at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs can be assessed for the purposes of Stage 3 in the school in which they are enrolled by the educational psychology service of the Board in which the school is situated. However, those who are referred for assessment at Stage 4 of the Code of Practice must be assessed by an educational psychologist from the Board in which they reside, as it is that Board which is responsible for issuing and maintaining any statement of special educational needs.

This service is not available to pupils who live in Co Donegal, but attend schools in Co Tyrone. Currently it is advised that these children should access assessments through the National Educational Psychological Service.

Integrated Primary Schools

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of integrated primary schools in each constituency in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1390/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

Constituency	Number of integrated Schools in 2006/07
Belfast East	1
Belfast North	1
Belfast South	2
Belfast West	0

Constituency	Number of integrated Schools in 2006/07
East Antrim	3
East Derry	3
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2
Foyle	2
Lagan Valley	2
Mid Ulster	2
Newry and Armagh	1
North Antrim	1
North Down	2
South Antrim	4
South Down	5
Strangford	3
Upper Bann	2
West Tyrone	1

Integrated Primary Schools

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applicants for each integrated primary school, in each constituency in Northern Ireland, for the year 2007/2008. (AQW 1391/07)

Ms Ruane: For each constituency in the North of Ireland, the number of applicants for each integrated primary school and the number of applicants not admitted are as follows:

Constituency	Integrated Primary School	Total Applications	Those Not Admitted
Belfast North	Hazelwood	47	All admitted
Belfast South	Cranmore	24	All admitted
	Forge	43	All admitted
Belfast East	Loughview	50	All admitted
Foyle	Oakgrove	50	All admitted
	Groarty	5	All admitted
West Tyrone	Omagh	46	2
East Derry	Carhill	8	All admitted
	Roe Valley	25	All admitted
	Millstrand	24	All admitted
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Enniskillen	31	1
	Windmill	29	All admitted

Constituency	Integrated Primary School	Total Applications	Those Not Admitted
North Antrim	Ballycastle	17	All admitted
	Braidside	52	1
South Antrim	Glengormley	14	All admitted
	Rathenraw	7	All admitted
	Round Tower	27	2
	Maine	10	All admitted
East Antrim	Carnlough	11	All admitted
	Acorn	52	23
	Corran	22	All admitted
North Down	Bangor Central	83	1
	Glencraig	41	1
South Down	All Children	39	10
	Annsborough	10	All admitted
	Cedar	27	All admitted
	Drumlins	19	All admitted
South Down	Kilbroney	14	All admitted
Strangford	Kircubbin	15	All Admitted
	Portaferry	17	All admitted
	Millennium	24	All admitted
Lagan Valley	Oakwood	36	6
	Hilden	0	0
	*Rowandale	11	11
Upper Bann	Bridge	72	14
	Portadown	27	All admitted
Mid Ulster	Phoenix	25	All admitted
	Spires	35	6
Newry and Armagh	Saints & Scholars	37	All admitted

* subject to proving viability

Integrated Primary Schools

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applicants that failed to gain a place in an integrated primary school, in each of the constituencies in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1392/07)

Ms Ruane: For each constituency in the North of Ireland, the number of applicants for each integrated primary school and the number of applicants not admitted are as follows:

Constituency	Integrated Primary School	Total Applications	Those Not Admitted
Belfast North	Hazelwood	47	All admitted
Belfast South	Cranmore	24	All admitted
	Forge	43	All admitted
Belfast East	Loughview	50	All admitted
Foyle	Oakgrove	50	All admitted
	Groarty	5	All admitted
West Tyrone	Omagh	46	2
East Derry	Carhill	8	All admitted
	Roe Valley	25	All admitted
	Millstrand	24	All admitted
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Enniskillen	31	1
	Windmill	29	All admitted
North Antrim	Ballycastle	17	All admitted
	Braidside	52	1
South Antrim	Glengormley	14	All admitted
	Rathenraw	7	All admitted
	Round Tower	27	2
	Maine	10	All admitted
East Antrim	Carnlough	11	All admitted
	Acorn	52	23
	Corran	22	All admitted
North Down	Bangor Central	83	1
	Glencraig	41	1
South Down	All Children	39	10
	Annsborough	10	All admitted
	Cedar	27	All admitted
	Drumlins	19	All admitted
South Down	Kilbroney	14	All admitted
Strangford	Kircubbin	15	All Admitted
	Portaferry	17	All admitted
	Millennium	24	All admitted
Lagan Valley	Oakwood	36	6
	Hilden	0	0
	*Rowandale	11	11

Constituency	Integrated Primary School	Total Applications	Those Not Admitted
Upper Bann	Bridge	72	14
	Portadown	27	All admitted
Mid Ulster	Phoenix	25	All admitted
	Spires	35	6
Newry and Armagh	Saints & Scholars	37	All admitted

* subject to proving viability

Integrated School Closures and Mergers

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the integrated primary schools in Northern Ireland currently facing closure or merger. (AQW 1393/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department is not currently aware of any integrated primary schools that are due to close or merge. Groomsport Primary School, which had been given approval to acquire controlled integrated status from September 2004, will close at 31 August 2007. During that period the school did not achieve the necessary community balance in intakes for integrated status.

Number of Classroom Assistants

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of classroom assistants employed in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1395/07)

Ms Ruane: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has provided the following information on the number of classroom assistants employed by the Board during the last three school years.

School Year	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Number of Classroom Assistants	1604	1584	1460

St Patrick's Secondary School and St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to outline the capital investment planned for St Patrick's Secondary School and St Mary's Primary School in Banbridge; and to give a timescale for the commencement of these works. (AQW 1412/07)

Ms Ruane: Capital schemes for the construction of replacement school buildings for St Patrick's College and for St Mary's PS in Banbridge were announced in

March 2006. Planning of both projects is underway and it is estimated that the dates for construction work to start on site for St Patrick's and St Mary's are autumn 2008 and early 2009 respectively.

Non-Domiciled Pupils

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children resident in Northern Ireland, currently attending schools in the Republic of Ireland, in the (a) primary; and (b) post-primary sectors, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1418/07)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is not available, as the school census only collects information from schools in the North of Ireland.

Non-Domiciled Pupils

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children resident in the Republic of Ireland who are currently attending schools in Northern Ireland, in the (a) primary; and (b) post-primary sectors, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1419/07)

Ms Ruane: Information on the number of children resident in the South of Ireland but attending schools in the North of Ireland is not collected. However, the number of children attending schools in the North of Ireland who are not domiciled here is as follows:

NON-DOMICILED PUPILS ATTENDING SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND 2006/07

Education and Library Board	Primary	Post Primary
Belfast	3	134
Western	116	102
North Eastern	0	0
South Eastern	7	1
Southern	9	83
Total	135	320

Note:

- Figures include children normally resident in the South of Ireland and Borders from outside the North of Ireland.

Cross - Border Teacher Mobility

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in addressing the issues associated with cross-border teacher mobility, in relation

to the transfer of pensions and other associated issues.
(AQW 1420/07)

Ms Ruane: A study on Obstacles to Mobility commissioned by the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) identified the transfer of pensions in both the public and private sectors as an important mobility issue. Since transferability has implications for all public service pension schemes, it was decided to consider the transfer of teachers' pensions along with the wider pensions issues arising from the Study. Work on this is ongoing.

A Joint Working Group established by the NSMC in the Education Area for Cooperation has also been examining obstacles to teacher mobility in relation to teacher qualifications. Issues in relation to proficiency in the Irish language for teachers wishing to move south have been largely addressed. The requirement for teachers who move south to study for and undertake a written examination on the History and Structure of the Irish Education System has been reviewed by the Registration Council in the South of Ireland and the way forward will be determined at the next meeting of the Group.

The General Teaching Councils for Scotland, England, Wales, North of Ireland, and the South of Ireland subscribe to the general principle that teaching qualifications throughout these islands should be mutually recognised. They are actively considering the issue in the context of freedom of movement throughout Europe.

Non-Domiciled Pupils

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers resident in Northern Ireland, who are currently employed in schools in the Republic of Ireland, in the (a) primary; and (b) post-primary sectors, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1421/07)

Ms Ruane: The information is not collected by the Department and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Northern Ireland Teachers Resident in the South of Ireland

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers resident in the Republic of Ireland, currently teaching in schools in Northern Ireland, in the (a) primary; and (b) post-primary sectors, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1422/07)

Ms Ruane: Details of the number of teachers (permanent/temporary) with an address in the South

of Ireland currently teaching in schools in the North of Ireland are shown in the tables below:

PERMANENT TEACHERS

	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
Primary	1	37	0	0	11
Post Primary	0	57	2	0	11
Special	0	7	0	0	1

TEMPORARY TEACHERS

	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
Primary	0	11	1	0	0
Post Primary	0	9	0	0	5
Special	0	1	0	0	0

Canteen Facilities at Bunscoil an Traonaigh

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made regarding the provision of canteen facilities at Bunscoil an Traonaigh, for the new school term in September 2007. (AQW 1430/07)

Ms Ruane: The provision of school meals accommodation is the responsibility of the Western Education and Library Board. A site meeting involving the Board and representatives of the Board of Governors of the school will take place on the 24th July to discuss the location of the meals accommodation. An application for planning permission will then be required to be submitted to the Planning Service. It is hoped that the schools meals accommodation will be provided as quickly as possible.

'Area-Based Planning Approach' for Schools

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria that have been developed by her department, on an 'area-based planning approach' for future building projects. (AQW 1440/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education is working on the area-based planning approach and will liaise with the education sector in developing the work. Central to this approach will be a consideration of the anticipated educational needs of an area, and the longer term viability of schools. A draft sustainable schools policy proposing criteria and indicators was the subject of consultation earlier this year and is now being analysed. Until such time as area plans are in place, the Department would expect to see such issues

addressed by the education authorities in project appraisals.

School Building Projects

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) all outstanding future new build school projects; and (b) which of these projects have experienced delays in implementation, due to the development of an 'area-based planning approach'. (AQW 1441/07)

Ms Ruane: There are 86 approved school building projects which are proceeding, together with another 6 projects originally approved but which have been put on hold pending further examination of, among other things, their consistency with an area-based planning approach. A list of all these projects is attached.

In addition, a number of feasibility studies and draft economic appraisals for potential capital schemes which have not yet been approved and are in the early stages of development, are being reviewed by relevant school authorities in the context of area based planning.

Education and Skills Authority

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money that will be saved at senior management level, through the creation of the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 1449/07)

Ms Ruane: A key aim in creating the new Education and Skills Authority is to release resources from back office functions for redeployment to the front line, through slimmer management structures throughout the organisation and more efficient service delivery arrangements.

Work is continuing on the design of the new ESA taking account of comments received from the legacy education organisations and trade unions. It is therefore not possible, at this stage, to detail the amount of money that will be saved at senior and other management levels.

Education and Skills Authority

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the salaries that will be received by the respective directors of the new Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 1450/07)

Ms Ruane: Work on the organisational design of the Education and Skills Authority is ongoing and the number of Director posts and their associated salaries has not yet been determined.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Teacher Training

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to address the duplication of resources in relation to teacher training. (AQW 1111/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department is responsible for the funding and administration of initial teacher education.

The Department of Education determines intakes to initial teacher education courses in the four locally based higher education institutions, and the Open University in Ireland, based on their Teacher Demand Model. My Department allocates funding to the initial teacher education (ITE) providers, based on this model which takes account of projected pupil enrolments in the various Northern Ireland school sectors, teacher wastage rates, pupil teacher ratios and wastage rates from the ITE courses.

The issue of duplication is one of several I shall be examining jointly with my colleague, the Minister of Education, in the ongoing Review of Teacher Education.

Lip-Reading Classes

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of lip reading classes in Further and Higher Education Colleges that have been closed in the last two years; and to give the reasons for such closures. (AQW 1171/07)

Sir Reg Empey: North West Institute of Further and Higher Education is the only FE College that provides a course in lip reading. No lip reading classes in FE Colleges have been closed in the last two years.

South Eastern Regional Council

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the procedure through which the present Director Designate of the South Eastern Regional College was appointed; and to detail (a) the date of the advertisement; (b) the date of interview; (c) and the number of candidates who applied for this post. (AQW 1192/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Under the requirements of the 1997 FE Order, in the circumstance of college mergers, the recruitment process for the new college Director posts must, in the first instance, be internal and be restricted to the existing Directors of the colleges that are merging. Only in cases where there are no internal

applicants, or if such applicants are found to be unsuitable, can an external process be conducted.

The appointment of a college Director is the responsibility of the college's Governing Body. As the appointment of the Directors designate for the new FE colleges was in advance of the appointment of the new colleges' governing bodies, Temporary Executive Committees (TECs), comprised of existing governors from the colleges that are merging, were formed to oversee a range of merger related activities. The TECs also undertook the task of identifying Directors designate for the new colleges. The Director designate appointments will be ratified formally by the new in-coming governing bodies in August 2007.

- The Temporary Executive Committee of the South Eastern Regional College invited, through correspondence on 18 September 2006, the Directors of the three merging colleges to express an interest in, and make application for, the Director designate post in the new college.
- The interviews took place on 24 October 2006.
- Two candidates applied for the post.

Employment-Led Apprenticeships

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how the experience and uptake patterns of the Electrical Training Trust have informed his department's recent approach to contracting for other employment-led apprenticeships. (AQW 1208/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Electrical Training Trust (ETT) has an annual intake in excess of 300 apprentices and achieves success rates in excess of 80% for completion of the MA framework. A key element of this model training approach is the strong employer support given throughout the industry to ETT.

From this experience it was decided that where a Level 3 Apprenticeship training provider demonstrated in their tender for Traing for Success that an all NI approach could deliver high quality training and levels of performance the Department would award a single contract as a best option.

Modern Apprenticeships in the North West

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give a timescale for publication of the consultants' report on the impact of the uptake of electrical installation modern apprenticeships in the north west, since the contract was awarded to the Electrical Training Trust. (AQW 1209/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department has received the first draft of the consultants report and will make its findings known at the end of August 2007.

Employment-Led Apprenticeships

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures are planned to ensure that the concentration on employment-led apprenticeships does not compound the skills shortage in districts with a weaker employment base.

(AQW 1210/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's approach to skills training, while wishing to encourage training in priority skill areas, does not favour any geographical area. Under the recent contracting process for the delivery of Training for Success, the Department sought tenders for all professional and technical frameworks across all 26 contract management areas.

A range of options is open to participants under Training for Success that offers options that meets the needs of the individual and the local economy, either for those employed or not in employment.

Sign Language Courses

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students that have enrolled on sign language courses, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1214/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Number of enrolments on sign language courses in the Northern Ireland Higher and Further Education sectors from 2003/04 to 2005/06.

Academic Year	Number of Enrolments
2003/04	975
2004/05	1,161
2005/06	1,023

Source: Further Education Statistical Record; Higher Education Statistical Agency.

Note: The data above relates to enrolments as opposed to a student headcount and all levels of provision are included.

Sign Language Courses

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of sign language courses that are currently available in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1215/07)

Sir Reg Empey: There are currently 36 sign language courses being offered in Northern Ireland for

the 2007/08 academic year. Details of the courses are listed below:

College	Course	No of Courses
Northern Regional College	Intro to BSL Level 1	1
	BSL Level 1	3
	BSL Level 2	2
South West College	BSL Level 1	2
North West Regional College	BSL Level 1	5
	ISL Level 1	1
	BSL Level 2	1
	ISL Level 2	1
Southern Regional College	Introduction to BSL Level 1 Unit 101	1
	BSL Level 1	5
	BSL Level 2	2
	Bridging Course to BSL Level 3	1
South Eastern Regional College	BSL Level 1	2
	BSL Level 2	2
Belfast Metropolitan College	BSL Level 1	2
	BSL Level 2	2
	BSL Level 2 Year 2	1
	BSL Level 2 (Fast Track)	1
	BSL Level 3	1
Total		36

Sign Language Courses

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of further education colleges that currently offer interpretive courses for sign language; and what is the cost of these courses.

(AQW 1234/07)

Sir Reg Empey: There are currently no further education colleges in Northern Ireland that offer Level 4 interpretive courses for sign language. However, Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) is currently working on costed proposals for Level 4 training provision which will shortly be submitted to my Department for consideration.

Sign Language Courses

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of (a) universities; and (b) further education colleges that currently offer sign language courses; what is the cost of enrolling on each of these courses; and what is the cost of running each of these courses. (AQW 1235/07)

Sir Reg Empey: There are no universities in Northern Ireland that currently offer sign language courses. Details of sign language courses currently on offer in FE Colleges for the 2007/08 academic year are listed below. Each of these colleges will comprise a merger of a number of individual colleges. Hence the enrolment and running costs shown are average figures.

College	Course	No of Courses	*Enrolment Cost (per year)	**Running Cost (per year)
Northern Regional College	Intro to BSL Level 1	1	£50	£360
	BSL Level 1	3	£100	£2,100
	BSL Level 2	2	£150	£3,200
South West College	BSL Level 1	2	£90	£1,900

DEL Special Bonus Scheme

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of non-pensionable bonuses that were paid to staff in his department in each of the last three years; and what steps he has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 1249/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) introduced a Special Bonus Scheme in February 2006.

The scheme is designed to reward exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks or difficult situations, which fall outside normal duties, and are unable to be recognised and rewarded within the performance appraisal system.

A total of 17 nominations were approved for payment, during the period 1/4/06 to 31/3/07, resulting in awards to 25 staff totalling £10,025.

The awards ranged from £50 to £900.

A further 5 nominations have been approved for payment since 1/4/07, resulting in awards to 21 staff totalling £4400.

DEL Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by his department in each of the last two years; and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys. (AQW 1258/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department has not carried out any staff surveys in the last two years.

Religious Breakdown of Undergraduates at University of Ulster

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of undergraduate students at the University of Ulster that are (a) members of the Protestant community; and (b) members of the Roman Catholic community.

(AQW 1312/07)

Sir Reg Empey:

- In 2005/06, of those who provided religion information, 38.6% of undergraduate enrolments at the University of Ulster were from the Protestant community; and
- in the same year, of those who provided religion information, 59.6% of undergraduate enrolments at the University of Ulster were from the Roman Catholic community.

Please note that religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate. Information on religion was not available for 19.3% of undergraduate enrolments at the University of Ulster in 2005/06.

Religious Breakdown of Undergraduates at Queen's University Belfast

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of undergraduate students at Queen's University Belfast that are (a) members of the Protestant community; and (b) members of the Roman Catholic community.

(AQW 1313/07)

Sir Reg Empey:

- In 2005/06, of those who provided religion information, 43.3% of undergraduate enrolments at Queen's University Belfast were from the Protestant community; and
- in the same year, of those who provided religion information, 51.8% of undergraduate enrolments at Queen's University Belfast were from the Roman Catholic community.

Please note that religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate. Information on religion was not available for 25.7% of undergraduate enrolments at Queen's University Belfast in 2005/06.

Working Beyond Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what facility currently exists for members of staff in his department to work in their current post, beyond the default retirement age. (AQW 1340/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Since 1 October 2006 staff who wish to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

Teaching Grants

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Employment and Learning what is the recurrent teaching grant for (a) Stranmillis University College; and (b) St. Mary's University College. (AQW 1371/07)

Sir Reg Empey: The recurrent teaching grant for the 2007/08 Academic Year for Stranmillis University College is £5,446,199 and for St Mary's University College £5,077,493.

Religious Breakdown of Staff at St Mary's University College

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the religious composition of (a) teaching staff; (b) administrative staff; and (c) ancillary staff at St Mary's University College. (AQW 1372/07)

Sir Reg Empey: St Mary's University College, like all other higher education institutions, is an independent autonomous institution, responsible for its own policies and practices. The College must comply with all fair employment legislation in all matters relating to the recruitment and employment of staff at the College.

Given this autonomous status, my Department does not collect statistics relating to the composition of the workforce at St Mary's University College.

Religious Breakdown of Staff at Stranmillis University College

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the religious composition of (a) teaching staff; (b) administrative staff; and (c) ancillary staff at Stranmillis University College. (AQW 1373/07)

Sir Reg Empey: Stranmillis University College, like all other higher education institutions, is an independent autonomous institution, responsible for its own policies and practices. The College must comply with all fair employment legislation in all matters relating to the recruitment and employment of staff at the College.

Given this autonomous status, my Department does not collect statistics relating to the composition of the workforce at Stranmillis University College.

Research and Development Opportunities

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his department's efforts to create more research and development opportunities for local university graduates; and to detail whether his department is actively seeking expertise from overseas. (AQW 1423/07)

Sir Reg Empey: In order to increase the number of research and development opportunities for university graduates my Department has bid for funding for additional PhD places. In addition, my Department is taking forward a review of the wider policy and funding of postgraduate places. It also operates a range of funding initiatives/mechanisms that enable the universities to attract experienced graduates from overseas.

University of Ulster Travel Expenditure

Mr Alex Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the University of Ulster's total expenditure on (a) international flights taken by university staff; and (b) domestic flights taken by university staff, for the 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years; and to detail the sources of this expenditure. (AQW 1438/07)

Sir Reg Empey: As autonomous bodies, the universities are responsible for the travel arrangements of their staff on official business; therefore, the Department does not hold this information.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Asbestos Complaints

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail for each of the last three years, (a) the number of complaints relating to asbestos on construction sites received by the Health

and Safety Executive; (b) the resultant number that were verified as being valid; (c) the resultant number of written cautions issued; and (d) the resultant number of prosecutions taken. (AQW 1076/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The numbers requested are given in the following table.

Year	(a) Asbestos related complaints	(b) Those verified as valid
05/06	56	24
06/07	58	28
07-date	20	7

(c) HSENI does not issue written cautions as Inspections generally result in a satisfactory outcome. Since 2005 there have been 109 resultant Inspections.

(d) There were no prosecutions completed in the period in question. However 4 cases arising from complaints within the period are awaiting a decision on prosecution.

Prohibition Notices are used in cases where there is a risk of serious personal injury. There have been 6 resultant prohibition notices since 2005.

Energy Issues

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the current position with regard to the establishment of an all-island single energy market. (AQW 1091/07)

Mr Dodds: Co-operation with the Government of the Irish Republic on energy matters is set in the context of the development of EU internal energy markets and is based on the delivery of mutual long term benefits to consumers in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

A key priority is the establishment of a single competitive wholesale electricity market (“the SEM”) which will be underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding between the two Governments and parallel legislation which has been passed in each jurisdiction. A significant milestone in the development of the new market was achieved with the triggering, on 3 July, of the ‘go active’ phase. This involved a legal obligation being placed on market participants, via licence modifications, to continue their preparations, including trialling of new systems and procedures, in advance of the market going ‘live’ on 1 November. A programme of structural change within the two existing electricity markets is also being implemented, with the aim of addressing dominance and market power in

order to assist the creation of a fully competitive single market which will attract new investment in generation.

Other ongoing work includes: the planning by the two transmission system operators of a second North/South electricity interconnector which is expected to be operational by 2012; a joint study of how the all-island electricity grid can accommodate an increased contribution from renewable generation, which is due to be completed in the Autumn.

Tourism Ireland

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the members of the expert group recruited by Tourism Ireland to advise on a review of the branding of the island of Ireland; and (b) the criteria that were used in selecting the members of the group. (AQW 1123/07)

Mr Dodds: The Expert Group appointed by Tourism Ireland consists of local and international business people as well as marketing and brand professionals who are not directly involved in the tourism industry.

The members are David Nichols, Chairman; Professor David Carson; Trevor Ringland; Mark Thompson; John Fanning; Dr. Maureen Gaffney; Ciarán Ó Gaora and Regine Reinhardt.

Members of the expert group were selected on their ability to fulfill the following criteria and also to ensure a balance of interests from outside the tourism industry both within and outside Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic:

- To bring recognised perspective on international brands to the review
- To bring forward recognized perspective on the island of Ireland brand, as viewed from outside the tourism industry in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.
- To bring forward views on how the diverse culture and heritage on the island of Ireland is reflected in marketing overseas.

Investment in Ards Borough Council

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of potential investor visits to the Ards Borough Council area organised by Invest Northern Ireland, that have resulted in investment. (AQW 1128/07)

Mr Dodds: There have been six potential investor visits to Ards Borough Council area, organised by

Invest Northern Ireland since 2002. However none of these visits has resulted in investment.

Investment in Castlereagh District Council

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail which of the six potential investor visits to the Castlereagh District Council area, that were organised by Invest Northern Ireland, resulted in investment.

(AQW 1129/07)

Mr Dodds: There have been six potential investor visits to the Castlereagh District Council area organised by Invest Northern Ireland since 2002. None of these visits resulted in an investment project within this district council area. However, a significant investment project was located by one of these visiting companies in Belfast, within travel to work distance of Castlereagh District Council area.

Down District Council

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail which of the four potential investor visits to the Down District Council area, organised by Invest Northern Ireland, resulted in investment.

(AQW 1130/07)

Mr Dodds: There have been four potential investor visits to Down District Council area, organised by Invest Northern Ireland, since 2002. One of these visits resulted in an investment project within the Down District Council area, promoting 70 jobs and leveraging £2.84m in planned investment.

Another of these visits resulted in investment within the Greater Belfast area

Ballycastle to Campbeltown Ferry

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions he has had with the Scottish and Irish Parliaments regarding funding for, and the future of, the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry; and to detail any developments on this issue.

(AQW 1169/07)

Mr Dodds: I have not as yet held discussions relating to funding or the future of a Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service. The matter has been raised in recent discussions between the Scottish and Northern Ireland Executive and more recently at the British Irish Council where agreement was reached to examine the case for restoring the ferry service.

Officials have arranged to meet to consider the issue further, following which, the facts will be presented to me for consideration.

Private Sector Employment in East Derry/Londonderry

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to attract private sector employment to East Derry/Londonderry.

(AQW 1223/07)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI promotes Northern Ireland as a single entity in its drive to attract new inward investment, and its regional office network works closely with local stakeholders to encourage them to develop regional propositions which can help ensure that the offering for their area is maximised to attract visits by potential investors. In addition, Invest NI works to stimulate further investment by existing companies and it encourages and supports the formation of new businesses.

Since it was set up, Invest NI has secured three inward investment projects within the East Londonderry constituency, leveraging total investment of around £19 million, safeguarding almost 790 jobs and promoting a further 24. It has also offered over £24 million assistance towards further investment projects by existing businesses totalling £75 million, in addition to supporting over 860 new business starts. Constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets and a project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries.

Invest NI's Londonderry regional office is also actively working with the five North West councils involved in the North West Action Plan to encourage private sector development in key areas of business growth, innovation and trade. Combined with a rolling programme of activities and initiatives to stimulate business starts and growth, this work by Invest NI is facilitating the private sector to provide ongoing employment opportunities within the constituency.

Investment Projects in North Antrim

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide details of work undertaken by Invest Northern Ireland in relation to attracting new investment and employment to the North Antrim constituency; and to outline the work currently being done to promote inward investment within the constituency.

(AQW 1224/07)

Mr Dodds: Since it was set up, Invest NI has secured two inward investment projects within the North Antrim constituency, leveraging total investment of around £21 million, safeguarding almost 650 jobs and promoting a further 23. It has also offered almost £21 million assistance towards further investment projects by existing businesses totalling £105 million, in addition to supporting around 830 new business starts.

Constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets and a project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries.

Invest NI promotes Northern Ireland as a single entity in its drive to attract new inward investment, and its regional office network works closely with local stakeholders to encourage them to develop locally-focused propositions which can help ensure that the offering for their area is maximised to attract visits by potential investors. Invest NI's scope to 'direct' investment to specific geographic areas is limited, and ultimately the final location decision rests with the business itself. However, Invest NI works proactively to stimulate further investment by existing companies and it encourages and supports the formation of new businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

Attracting Tourists to Northern Ireland

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to attract more visitors to Northern Ireland from (a) the Republic of Ireland; (b) the rest of the United Kingdom; (c) the European Union; (d) the USA and Canada; and (e) the rest of the world. (AQW 1238/07)

Mr Dodds:

(a) Irish Republic

Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has identified the Irish Republic market as a key market for Northern Ireland Tourism.

NITB will deliver several key marketing initiatives within the Irish Republic in 2007/08 in line with the Winning Themes and Signature Projects outlined in the Strategic Framework for Action. These include a

- 'Great Days' Campaign - aimed at promoting things to see and do in Northern Ireland for families, friends and couples, it will include partnership activity with the Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs) and;

- An Awareness Campaign which will seek to improve perceptions of Northern Ireland and raise awareness of the many things that Northern Ireland offers as a holiday / short break destination.

NITB are also carrying out a major review of the 'Island of Ireland' market to inform future decision making on domestic marketing activities in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

Tourism Ireland promotes Northern Ireland overseas by ensuring that Northern Ireland features prominently in the full range of island of Ireland marketing activities in over 30 countries, and through a programme of additional tactical marketing activities specifically designed to promote tourism to Northern Ireland.

(b) Great Britain

Tourism Ireland focuses on promoting Northern Ireland throughout the GB market, but particularly in Scotland/Northern England. Tourism Ireland will seek to develop tactical campaigns, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which will be implemented in autumn 2007.

Northern Ireland will be highlighted in a range of ways including campaigns, newspaper, magazine and radio advertising.

(c) Mainland Europe

Activity in Europe includes promoting Northern Ireland in markets with direct access to Northern Ireland including Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, creating specific Northern Ireland eNewsletters for Tourism Ireland's European consumer databases and using other events such as international football matches to showcase Northern Ireland

(d) United States and Canada

Northern Ireland will continue to be promoted actively both in the United States and Canada; in addition to being well represented in the main destination marketing campaign, Tourism Ireland continues to promote Northern Ireland specifically to Ulster Scots ethnic groups in North America. Activities include specific advertising in selected newspapers and magazines, direct and eMarketing to respondents to previous initiatives such as the Northern Ireland Family Names campaign. Production of Northern Ireland tour programmes and flyers and liaison with specialist tour operators, and specific promotions on aspects of Northern Ireland culture and heritage

Tourism Ireland is also working closely with the NITB and other agencies to maximize the tourism benefits from Northern Ireland's exposure at the

Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC this summer.

(e) **New & Developing Markets**

Publicity will continue to be key to raising awareness of Northern Ireland in our new and developing markets. The focus will be on attracting key travel and lifestyle journalists to experience at first-hand what Northern Ireland has to offer.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to develop Northern Ireland as a distinct tourist designation; and which unique features he plans to emphasise in relation to this. (AQW 1239/07)

Mr Dodds: NITB plans to develop Northern Ireland through delivery of the programme areas identified in the Strategic Framework for Action (2004-2008). The Strategic Framework for Action forms the basis of Northern Ireland's tourism strategy for 2004-2008. The key objective of the strategy is to position Northern Ireland as a unique tourist destination through the delivery of ten programme areas.

The unique features that the Strategic Framework for Action identified to give Northern Ireland international standout include: Giant's Causeway and Antrim & Causeway Coast Area; Saint Patrick and Christian Heritage; The Mourne National Park; The Walled City; and Titanic Made in Belfast

Interpretative Centre at Giant's Causeway

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will give an update on plans for an Interpretative Centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 1240/07)

Mr Dodds: The detailed design for the replacement visitor facilities has reached an advanced stage of development. In committing public funds to the project my Department must take account of all material considerations which may impact on the development of the new facilities including a value for money assessment. Key issues which have delayed the project have been the resolution of car parking requirements and planning considerations.

Consideration must be given to a planning application submitted to Planning Service for an alternative, private sector led visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to increase the number of people resident in Northern Ireland who holiday within the country. (AQW 1241/07)

Mr Dodds: Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has identified the domestic Northern Ireland market as key to the success of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland.

NITB will deliver several key marketing initiatives within Northern Ireland this year. The direction for Northern Ireland Tourism is set by the Strategic Framework for Action (2004-2008), which outlines our strategies for development of Northern Ireland as a competitive, must see destination for visitors from home as well as from overseas. In line with this our marketing activity within Northern Ireland will be driven by the Winning Themes and Signature Projects outlined within our Strategic Framework for Action

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps his department (a) has taken in the last three years; and (b) plans to take in the next three years, to give Northern Ireland a competitive advantage over the Republic of Ireland as a tourist destination. (AQW 1250/07)

Mr Dodds: Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) seeks to give Northern Ireland competitive advantage over the Irish Republic by positioning Northern Ireland as a distinct tourist destination.

As strategic leader for Northern Ireland tourism, NITB developed and launched the Strategic Framework for Action (2004-2008) for Northern Ireland Tourism. The Strategic Framework for Action has identified 5 Signature Projects to give Northern Ireland competitive advantage.

A brand for Northern Ireland tourism is currently being developed to support the distinctive positioning of Northern Ireland.

In addition we are carrying out a major review of the island of Ireland market which will inform future decision making within our domestic marketing activities to ensure our messages and campaigns are best placed to ensure more Northern Ireland residents holiday within the country.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assurances he will give that additional resources will be made

available to the Regional Tourism Partnership.
(AQW 1268/07)

Mr Dodds: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is fully committed to regional development as outlined in the Strategic Framework for Action (2005 – 2008). In the current financial year, £500,000 has been allocated from the agency's core budget to Regional Tourism Partnership's (RTPs) to assist in the delivery of aspects of regional development.

NITB is looking at the possibility of further funding for regional development with my department. Any further bid for funding will be considered with other requests as part of the Government's 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of comments, made in the recent Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report on 'Tourism in Northern Ireland and its Economic Impact and Benefits', regarding the lack of clarity of roles between Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Regional Tourism Partnerships. (AQW 1276/07)

Mr Dodds: My Department accepts the view expressed by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) that there needs to be greater clarity of roles and responsibilities between Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Regional Tourism Partnerships.

This will be addressed in the coming months as part of a wider review of roles and responsibilities of tourism support organisations within my Department. That review will take cognisance of the NIAC report and other data which has recently become available.

Tourism Industry

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of comments, made in the recent Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report 'Tourism in Northern Ireland and its Economic Impact and Benefits', indicating that properly funded Regional Tourism Partnerships, identifying and pursuing local regional tourism priorities, were essential to the development of the tourism industry. (AQW 1283/07)

Mr Dodds: Local delivery and development of visitor services and servicing is a key element of raising the profile of the tourism industry across Northern Ireland and perhaps more importantly

providing visitors with the quality of services and facilities they want and need.

Under current proposals responsibility for a number of local tourism functions, including local visitor servicing and local product development, is to be transferred to the new councils under the Review of Public Administration (RPA). However the key thing is that there is still a need for engagement with the private sector. Pending the outcome of the RPA there remains a strong case for the retention of Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs) as the vehicles for the delivery of sub- regional strategies.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) currently allocates £500,000 of its core budget to fund RTP activities. In addition NITB are currently bidding for an additional £1m per annum for regional development from the EU Competitiveness and Employment Programme 2007-13.

Northern Ireland Tourism

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what steps his department is taking to ensure that the roles of Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and the Regional Tourism Partnerships are clearly defined. (AQW 1284/07)

Mr Dodds: My Department accepts the view expressed by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) that there needs to be greater clarity of roles and responsibilities between Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Regional Tourism Partnerships.

This will be addressed in the coming months as part of a wider review of roles and responsibilities of tourism support organisations within my Department. That review will take cognisance of the NIAC report and other data which has recently become available.

Deaths at the Workplace

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of people killed at their workplace as a result of work-related accidents; (b) the number of employers that were found guilty of health and safety breaches as a result of Health and Safety Executive investigations into such deaths; and (c) the financial fines that were imposed in each case, for the last ten years. (AQW 1288/07)

Mr Dodds: The numbers requested are given in the following table:

Year	Total number of people killed in their workplace	Total number of employers found guilty	Fines imposed in each case
2006/07	17	2	£2,000
			£2,000
2005/06	20	5	£50,000
			£10,000
			£10,000
			£ 2,500
			£40,000
2004/05	12	5	£100,000
			£ 20,000
			£ 25,000
			£ 10,000
			£ 2,500
2003/04	18	3	£25,000
			£18,000
			£75,000
2002/03	14	2	£15,000
			£ 3,000
2001/02	7	2	£15,000
			£ 5,000
2000/01	10	4	£7,500
			£1,500
			£1,000
			£2,500
1999/00	14	1	£10,000
1998/99	22	2	£2,500
			£ 250
1997/98	23	5	£10,000
			£12,000
			£ 500
			£16,000
			£16,000

Tourism Ireland

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail whether Tourism Ireland has a cultural diversity policy which would require it to reflect appropriately and proportionately, in its publications and programmes, the cultural diversity of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1289/07)

Mr Dodds: Tourism Ireland does not have an official cultural diversity policy. The Company's two Key Objectives are to: (1) Increase tourism to the island of Ireland and (2) Support Northern Ireland to realise its tourism potential

Foreign Investment

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the incentives that are being made available to attract foreign investors to Northern Ireland (a) in order to make it a more attractive proposition than the Republic of Ireland; and (b) over and above the incentives offered in the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 1327/07)

Mr Dodds: One of the incentives available to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Northern Ireland is Invest NI's ability to offer Regional Aid in the form of Selective Financial Assistance (SFA) to secure either capital investment and/or job creation projects. Such assistance generally takes the form of capital and/or employment-related grant, and this can sometimes be supplemented by offering training grants through the Business Improvement Training Programme, R&D financial assistance, and help to identify suitable property.

The level of SFA that Invest NI may make towards the eligible costs of any FDI project is governed by the European Commission's Guidelines on Regional Aid and this is true of all regions within the UK, the Irish Republic and the rest of the European Union's Member States.

Whether and how much aid can be offered in particular geographical areas within Member States is determined principally by the overall population of the Member State to which Regional Aid may be applied and relative wealth of each region.

(a) Irish Republic

- The inward investment product offering in the Irish Republic has a different focus to that of Northern Ireland and is based on its 12.5% corporate tax rate.
- Northern Ireland's product offering focuses more on skilled labour availability and cost competitiveness for near-shore markets. As a result of the tax situation Northern Ireland tends to win projects where the Irish Republic tax advantage can be neutralised e.g. in cost centre projects as opposed to profit centres.

(b) Rest of UK

- Whereas very few areas in England are eligible for Regional Aid, and its availability in Wales and Scotland is partial, Invest NI may offer

Selective Financial Assistance to FDI projects locating anywhere in Northern Ireland.

- The UK's inward promotional effort combines both UKTI and the Devolved Administrations in one co-ordinated network organised under the Committee on Overseas Promotion (COP). The network's objective is to attract inward investment into the UK, and to retain and expand that investment. Invest NI is a member of COP and attends regular meetings to ensure the Northern Ireland offering is fully represented.

Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what facility currently exists for members of staff in his department to work in their current post, beyond the default retirement age.

(AQW 1341/07)

Mr Dodds: Since 1 October 2006 staff wanting to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by his department in each of the last two years; and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys.

(AQW 1348/07)

Mr Dodds:

	Number of Surveys	Cost of Surveys
2005/06	8	£850
2006/07	12	Nil

Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report on discussions he has had regarding the future of Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly, as a centre for industry and/or a business park.

(AQW 1374/07)

Mr Dodds: I have not been involved in any discussions concerning the future of Shackleton Barracks either as a centre for industry or as a business park.

Funding for Tourism Ireland

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, for each of the last three years, (a) the level of funding provided to Tourism Ireland; (b) the percentage of total budget of Tourism Ireland made up by this funding; and (c) the targets agreed with Tourism Ireland, against which the effectiveness of this departmental funding can be measured.

(AQW 1413/07)

Mr Dodds:

- (a) The level of funding provided to Tourism Ireland from Northern Ireland over the last three years is:

2005	£12.7m
2006	£12.6m
2007	£13.128m

- (b) The NI contribution represents a percentage of the total funding as follows:

2005	29.5%
2006	28.7%
2007	27.85%

- (c) The targets agreed with Tourism Ireland against which the effectiveness of this departmental funding can be measured are:

INCREASE IN TOURISM REVENUE

2005	
All Island	6.8%
Irish Republic	6.5%
NI	9%
2006	
All Island	6.9%
Irish Republic	6.7%
NI	9%
2007	
All Island	8.4%
Irish Republic	8%
NI	9%

Enterprise Action Zone / Enterprise Arc

Mr Gerry Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the

recommendation of the West Belfast and Shankill Economic Task Force report, for the development of an Enterprise Action Zone/ Enterprise Arc in that area. (AQW 1455/07)

Mr Dodds: The West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces' recommendation for the development of an Enterprise Action Zone/Enterprise Arc in the area is currently under consideration. The West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise Council, which was established to bring greater coherence to the promotion of and support for local businesses and to foster local enterprise, is working on the production of an interim report on the establishment of an Enterprise Zone based on existing models of best practice. This report is due to be completed by September/October this year and, upon receipt, will be jointly considered by Invest NI and DETI with other relevant Departments as necessary.

Open Air Internet Access

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to develop open-air internet access for towns and cities in Northern Ireland, similar to the wi-fi project that is currently being pioneered in Carlow in the Republic of Ireland, which offers wireless 24-hour, seven days a week access to the internet on its main streets, to upwards of 10,000 households. (AQW 1458/07)

Mr Dodds: There are a number of initiatives in this area of telecommunications, either underway or recently completed, which DETI has pushed forward. In particular, as part of the Northern Ireland Broadband Flagship Initiative, DETI has pioneered an open-access wi-fi project in Londonderry. This enables citizens, businesses, the council and tourists to access a range of services, including free access to the internet for a limited period. This £1.38 million project was undertaken by DETI with support from the EU Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme and on foot of this successful investment, I understand that Derry City Council have plans to develop the service further in due course.

In addition, in conjunction with Belfast City Council and DRD, DETI has been considering the feasibility of delivering wireless broadband services in Belfast. Two companies (BT and eircom) have expressed an interest in taking this forward. I am also aware that DFP plan to undertake small scale pilots of free public wireless access points starting in August.

From a wider commercial perspective, there are already a number of private sector companies offering wi-fi services in various cities and towns in Northern Ireland. Wireless internet services are also available

through mobile phones and from specialist wireless operators.

ENVIRONMENT

Non-Pensionable Bonuses for DOE Staff

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline how many non-pensionable bonuses were paid to staff in her department in each of the last three years; and what steps she has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 912/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): Non-pensionable bonuses can be paid to staff at all grades to reward performance in two ways: as part of the annual pay round, or under the NICS special bonus scheme. The number of payments made under each scheme in the last three financial years is as follows:

Year	Performance-related	Special Bonus Scheme
2004/2005	1199	505
2005/2006	1364	151
2006/2007	1802	174

Performance-related bonuses are an important and integral element of the NICS reward strategy and are used as part of the annual pay round to acknowledge and reward higher performing staff.

The special bonus scheme is designed to reward members of staff for exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks.

The award of bonuses is therefore regarded as being complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the award of consolidated pay increases.

Please note that information can be provided only in relation to staff currently employed by the Department.

Planning Permissions

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of the Environment whether there is any intended change in procedure or policy, in relation to the renewal of existing planning permissions. (AQW 1004/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no plans to change procedure or policy in relation to the renewal of existing planning permissions at this time.

Setting Planning Policy in Northern Ireland

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the difference between the roles of DOE and DRD in setting planning policy in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1093/07)

Mrs Foster: DOE prepares planning policy under the statutory provisions of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 while DRD prepares planning policy under the statutory provisions of the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

Replacement Dwellings

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to specify exactly what criteria is applied by the Planning Service when assessing applications for replacement single dwellings in rural areas; and to state how many (a) refusals; and (b) approvals have been granted in the (i) Moyle; (ii) Ballymena; and (iii) Ballymoney areas, since 16 March 2006.

(AQW 1095/07)

Mrs Foster: Current planning policy in relation to replacement dwellings is set out in Policy CTY5 of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14. This states that planning permission will generally be granted for a replacement dwelling where the proposed replacement would not have a visual impact significantly greater than the existing dwelling.

In addition, a proposal for a replacement dwelling will only be permitted where all the following criteria are met:

- the proposed replacement dwelling is sited within the established curtilage of the existing dwelling, unless either (a) the curtilage is so restricted that it could not reasonably accommodate a modest sized dwelling or (b) it can be demonstrated that an alternative position nearby would result in clear landscape, heritage, access or amenity benefits;
- the overall size of the new dwelling allows it to integrate into the surrounding landscape and its design is appropriate to its rural setting having regard to local distinctiveness and vernacular styles;
- where it is proposed to replace a vacant or unoccupied building, it is demonstrated by the applicant that the property is or was last lawfully used as a dwelling house and that residential use has not been abandoned.

The number of rural replacement applications granted and refused in each of the Council areas referred to since 16 March 2006 is shown in the table below.

Council Area	Replacement rural applications from 16 March 2006 to 31 May 2007	
	Approvals	Refusals
Ballymena	83	14
Ballymoney	39	5
Moyle	30	4

Replacement Dwellings

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the criteria for abandonment, as defined in planning policy in relation to replacement dwellings, specifying which policy covers this issue; and to confirm that no criteria, other than those defined in policy, will be used. (AQW 1096/07)

Mrs Foster: To ask the Minister of Environment to detail the criteria for abandonment, as defined in planning policy in relation to replacement dwellings, specifying which policy covers this issue; and to confirm that no criteria, other than those defined in policy, will be used.

Current planning policy in relation to replacement dwellings is set out in Policy CTY 5 "Replacement Dwellings" of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14.

Abandonment is not a concept embodied in planning law, but has arisen out of court judgements. Where a dwelling to be replaced is unoccupied or where it is unclear when the dwelling was last occupied, the onus will be on the applicant to demonstrate that residential use has not been abandoned. This will be assessed having regard to the following matters:

- the physical condition of the building
- the period the dwelling has not been in use;
- whether there has been any intervening use; and
- evidence of the owner's intentions.

Judgements on the issues of abandonment and the intentions of the owner remain a matter of fact and degree. Various appeal cases have shown that after a dwelling has ceased to be used, the time which has to elapse for it to be regarded as abandoned is very variable and to a large extent relies on how much it has deteriorated.

I can confirm that no criteria other than those which I have outlined are used to assess abandonment of residential use.

Marine Conservation Bill

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to present a Marine

Conservation Bill before the Assembly.
(AQW 1104/07)

Mrs Foster: I am broadly in support of the UK Government's proposals for a Marine Bill. However, I am reserving my position on how they might best be delivered in Northern Ireland until I have given the matter further consideration and agreed with Ministerial colleagues the best approach for Northern Ireland.

Waste-to-Energy Plant

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her policy regarding the provision of a waste-to-energy plant in Northern Ireland, to help meet EU landfill targets.
(AQW 1133/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department's policy is set out in the Northern Ireland Waste Strategy, 'Towards Resource Management' that was launched in March 2006.

Government believes that energy from waste will be a necessary component of the preferred infrastructure to ensure that Northern Ireland meets its landfill diversion targets. Energy from waste facilities will also provide diversity of energy supply.

Bonfire Management

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the road safety implications of bonfires that are situated on, or near, roads.
(AQW 1153/07)

Mrs Foster: As the Minister with responsibility for roads, your question has been passed to me to answer.

I can advise that my Department's Roads Service does not approve of, or support, the unauthorised use of departmental property either for the siting of bonfires or for the storage of materials and that it is Roads Service policy to remove such material where there is a danger to road users. However, bonfire management is an interagency issue and it is not always easy to find quick fix solutions when problems arise. The support, co-operation and involvement of local communities is an important factor and this was recognised in the report of the interagency group which produced guidelines on bonfire management. A copy of the report can be found on the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service website: www.ehsni.gov.uk. A copy of this report has been placed in the library.

Roads Service's experience has been that many of the complaints received from the public are related to the stockpiling of materials on sites adjacent to public roads, which are not owned by Roads Service. On occasions where the overspill from bonfire stockpiles

obstructs the public road or footway Roads Service will remove it or arrange for it to be pushed back off the road onto the bonfire site, consulting with the police and local communities as necessary. However, Roads Service has a duty of care to its staff and the immediate and ongoing safety of personnel tasked with removal work is always taken into account in consultation with the police and other parties.

There are relatively few instances where bonfires are actually brought onto the public road for lighting. However where bonfires are lit on or near the public road, Roads Service will arrange for burnt out debris to be removed and carry out any repairs to carriageways, footways and street lights that may be needed.

Landfill Allowance Scheme

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she is taking to ensure that District Councils meet Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme targets over the next five years.
(AQW 1159/07)

Mrs Foster: My officials are finalising a strategic business case to identify the best solutions for waste management and this will consider the case for central government support in Northern Ireland. The strategic business case draws on a comparative analysis of central government support in Great Britain and will estimate the cost of providing equivalent levels of support in Northern Ireland.

My Department has provided Guidance to District Councils on their responsibilities under NILAS. Guidance and advice are also provided to the District Councils on an ongoing basis through the NILAS Implementation Steering Group, chaired by the Department.

The Department also provides funding to the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) which advises, supports and provides guidance on a number of environmental issues, including landfill diversion, to District Councils.

Landfill Allowance Scheme

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the funding she will provide to District Councils, in order to help them meet Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme targets.
(AQW 1160/07)

Mrs Foster: My officials are finalising a strategic business case to identify the best solutions for waste management in Northern Ireland. Among the various

scenarios being considered is the possibility of providing an element of central government support.

The business case will be considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel and following that it will be for the Executive, as part of the Priorities and Budgets exercise, to consider whether central government support will be provided.

Landfill Allowance Scheme

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the impact of the fines that District Councils will face if they fail to meet Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme targets over the next five years. (AQW 1162/07)

Mrs Foster: The allocation of allowances as set out under the Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme Regulations is an essential element of my Department's strategy to meet our obligations under the EU Landfill Directive to reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste going to landfill.

The Regulations make provision for the imposition of fines should individual District Councils exceed their agreed allowances in any given year. Councils may be fined £150 per tonne of waste over their allowances.

My Department has, however, indicated that only in exceptional circumstances would a penalty be imposed on a Council before 2009.

DoE Spend on Consultancy Services

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her department's projected spend on consultancy services, in the 2007/2008 financial year. (AQW 1174/07)

Mrs Foster:

Business Area	Projected 2007/2008 spend £'000
DVA – Testing	238
DVA – Licensing	0
Planning Service	534
Environment and Heritage Service	196
Road Safety	195
Local Government Division	7
Local Government Reform Division	27
Planning and Environmental Policy Group	803
Total	2,000

Erection of Flags

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of the Environment what are the requirements with respect to planning permission for the erection of flags, bunting or other symbols on lamp posts.

(AQW 1181/07)

Mrs Foster: Under the Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992, the national flag of any country can be displayed on a single flagstaff without the need to apply to the Department for consent to display. The term "flagstaff" is not specifically defined in legislation but it is unlikely that a lamp post could be considered as such for the purposes of the above legislation.

Other types of flags and emblems of a political nature are not included in the exemption noted above. The erection of bunting is considered to be outside the scope of planning control as it is very minor in nature.

In practice, it is almost invariably impossible to enforce these requirements.

Fox Numbers in Northern Ireland

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of foxes in Northern Ireland; whether there has been an increase in these numbers over the past three years; and whether this correlates with a decrease in songbirds and other wildlife. (AQW 1193/07)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not monitor foxes in Northern Ireland and therefore cannot give details of their population.

Research reports from Queen's University along with anecdotal information suggests that the range and abundance of foxes has increased since the 1930s and probably continues to increase.

There is no scientific information to suggest that foxes predate song birds in significant numbers. A project is currently underway to assess the impact of a number of predators, including foxes, on the breeding success of the Curlew in Co Antrim.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) designations for the last twelve months; and to detail (a) their location; (b) the size of land of each designation; (c) the number of replies to consultations on each of the designations; and (d) whether each designation was accepted by affected parties. (AQW 1200/07)

Mrs Foster: Details relating to Areas of Special Scientific Interest designated during the period 1 July 2006 to 30 June 2007 are given in the table below.

ASSI Name	ASSI Location	Area (ha)	Replies (excluding objections) to Declaration	Objections to Declaration
Smulgedon	Smulgedon, Limavady, Co Londonderry	12.76	1	0
Castle River Valley	Smuldegon, Limavady, Co Londonderry	5.50	1	0
Ballymacallion	Ballymacallion, Limavady, Co Londonderry	22.54	0	0
Cruninish Island	Near Boa Island, Lower Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh	14.47	1	0
Hare Island	Hare Island, Lower Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh	28.19	1	0
Coolnasillagh	Coolnasillagh, Coleraine, Co Londonderry	16.96	0	0
Lough McCall	Ballyscally, Dungannon, Co Tyrone	2.29	0	1
Rathsherry	Rathsherry, Ballymena, Co Antrim	10.19	0	0
Lough na blaney bane	Cavan, Dungannon, Co Tyrone	12.91	0	0
Devenish Island	Devenish, Lower Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh	64.24	0*	0*
Ballyrisk More	Carrydoo, Limavady, Co Londonderry	12.97	0*	0*
Errigal Glen	Farrantemple Glebe, Coleraine, Co Londonderry	15.90	1*	0*
Round Lough & Lough Fadda	Fivemiletown, Dungannon, Co Tyrone	15.42	0*	0*
Ballymacaldrack	Ballymacaldrack, Ballymoney, Co Antrim	2.50	0*	0*
Tanderagee	Tanderagee, Cookstown, Co Tyrone	44.25	1*	2*
Sheepland Coast	Sheepland More, Lecale, Co Down	81.42	0*	0*

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what consultation has taken place between departmental officials and landowners and families affected by an Area of Special Scientific Interest designation, to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by such a designation. (AQW 1201/07)

Mrs Foster: Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is required under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to give notice to every owner and occupier of land that is included in an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI).

The notice and accompanying papers advise of the purpose and implication of the ASSI designation, provide full details of the implications of the designation and invite comments from these consultees, including any matters perceived to disadvantage them.

EHS is required to consider any representations or objections that are received as a consequence of this notice before confirming the designation, with or without modification.

EHS officials also endeavour to visit, in accordance with established procedures, every landowner and occupier that they are able to identify prior to the

designation to advise about the proposal to include their lands within the ASSI and to address any questions that may arise.

These procedures were followed with respect to the designation of ASSIs at sites around Strangford.

Staff Departures at the Planning Service

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Planning Service staff that have left the service for (a) employment in planning offices of councils in the Republic of Ireland; (b) employment in private planning consultancy firms; (c) retirement; or (d) unknown, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1211/07)

Mrs Foster: The following tables detail the number of staff who have left the Planning Service in each of the last 5 years. The Department does hold complete records of why staff leave the Planning Service and staff are under no obligation to provide this information. Where this information is available it has been provided. For the purposes of this question the response relates only to permanent staff and excludes casual staff.

There are also a number of additional administrative staff who have left the Planning Service on promotion or transfer to take up posts in both the wider Department and the NICS but these have not been included in the following tables.

1 April 2002 – 31 March 2003	
Grade	No. of Resignations
TPA	
PTO	5
HPTO	5
SPTO	
PPTO	
AO	1
AA	1
Total	12

1 April 2003 – 31 March 2004	
Grade	No. of Resignations
TPA	2
PTO	2
HPTO	
SPTO	
PPTO	
AA	5
Total	9

1 April 2004 – 31 March 2005	
Grade	No. of Resignations
TPA	1
PTO	5
HPTO	2
SPTO	1
PPTO	1
Grade 6	1
AO	2
AA	3
Total	16

1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006	
Grade	No. of Resignations
TPA	1
PTO	8

1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006	
Grade	No. of Resignations
HPTO	8
SPTO	2
PPTO	
Systems Analyst	1
AO	1
AA	3
Total	24

1 April 2006 – 31 March 2007					
Grade	Private Sector	Public Sector	ROI Councils	Other	Not Known
TPA	1	1			1
PTO	3	1	3	2	8
HPTO	5			3	7
SPTO	3	4			5
PPTO					
AO				7	
AA				5	
Total	12	6	3	17	21

GRAND TOTAL = 59

1 April 2007 – 31 July 2007					
Grade	Private Sector	Public Sector	ROI Councils	Other	Not Known
TPA					
PTO	1		4		
HPTO	3	1	2		
SPTO					
PPTO					
AA				3	
Total	4	1	6	3	-

GRAND TOTAL = 14

Planning Service Staffing

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what efforts have been made to retain staff in the Planning Service, given the high proportion of staff leaving for similar jobs in the Republic of Ireland or the private sector. (AQW 1212/07)

Mrs Foster: The Planning Service is conscious of the problems created by the loss of valuable

experience though resignations. Management in the Agency has previously raised the issue at Ministerial level and with the Department of Finance & Personnel's Central Personnel Group (CPG) which is responsible for such matters as pay and terms and conditions of employment. Efforts have been made in the recent pay negotiations to address the pay concerns of staff but remuneration packages to compete with those offered by employers outside the NICS are neither viable nor affordable.

The Planning Service does however make use of the NICS bonus scheme to reward staff who are performing exceptionally well. In addition, I have recently endorsed a proposal by the Agency to pay the professional fees of specialist planning staff from 1 January 2008, in recognition of their professionalism and their particular contribution to the work of the Agency.

The situation will be regularly monitored and reported to CPG as appropriate.

Backlog of Planning Applications

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what steps have been taken to address the current backlog of planning applications. (AQW 1219/07)

Mrs Foster: In an effort to ease the current pressures on the development control system a Divisional Support Team has been established and is currently in operation in the Craigavon Divisional Planning Office. Alongside the work of the team, the Planning Service's Operations Directorate will be critically examining existing practices within Divisions with a view to changes that will further assist. Areas of specific focus include, but will not be limited to, arrangements for handling planning appeals; the approach to processing reserved matters applications; and arrangements for handling telephone contact with offices.

Training for Planning Service Staff

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Minister of the Environment what training is given by the Planning Service to staff transferring from one section of the service to another. (AQW 1220/07)

Mrs Foster: In the majority of cases staff transferring, moving on promotion or for location reasons the Planning Service tries to ensure that, as far as possible, the skill set and experience of staff match the requirements of the post they are moving to but Planning Service endeavours to ensure that staff are properly inducted to their new posts or grade. This is mainly the responsibility of the immediate line

manager who is responsible for setting out and clarifying the requirements of the post. If the member of staff has been moved to a post, with new roles and responsibilities, the line manager should agree a personal performance agreement (PPA) and identify any training and development needs on the personal development plan (PDP).

The Agency also has a checklist for line managers to use for the induction of new staff. This is primarily used for new staff entering the Agency but is also appropriate for use with staff moving location - to help them integrate locally.

Water Framework Directive

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the ways in which her department is working with the government in the Republic of Ireland, in order to implement the Water Framework Directive in the north-western and Neagh-Bann river basin districts. (AQW 1226/07)

Mrs Foster: Co-ordinated implementation of the Water Framework Directive within the international river basin districts is supported by the North South WFD Co-ordination Group, the North South Technical Advisory Group and the NS SHARE project, all of which involve participation of officials from both jurisdictions.

Considerable co-ordination has taken place in successfully completing the initial stages of the Water Framework Directive's implementation. Most recently for example, reports on the significant water management issues (SWMI) within each river basin district were published on a joint North-South basis.

Ards and Down Area Plan 2015

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm the implementation date for the new Ards and Down Area Plan 2015. (AQW 1244/07)

Mrs Foster: It is anticipated that the Planning Appeals Commission's (PAC's) report on the Public Inquiry into the draft Ards and Down Plan will be with my Department by the end of 2007. My officials will then consider the report and will put recommendations to me on the draft Plan's adoption and publication in whole or in part, with or without modification, as the final document.

It is not possible at this stage to provide a definitive date for implementation of the Plan because this will depend on what the PAC report says and on the work that will be needed to consider its findings. However,

the aim will be to publish the adopted Plan as early as possible in 2008.

High Hedges Legislation

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the legislative priorities which are preventing her from introducing high hedges legislation. (AQW 1253/07)

Mrs Foster: The main priorities requiring resources to develop policy and take legislation forward are (i) responding to a number of EU imperatives arising from new and amended EC Directives and European Court judgements, (ii) work to determine the way ahead on the Review of Public Administration and (iii) proposals that will be brought forward to simplify, streamline and further reform the planning system.

Practical and Theory Driving Tests

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to upgrade the requirements of the practical and theory driving tests, in order to address the high levels of road traffic accidents involving inexperienced drivers. (AQW 1278/07)

Mrs Foster: The syllabus for the theory test is specified in the Second European Directive on Driver Licensing 91/439/EU but the Northern Ireland theory test, like that in GB, specifies in addition a hazard perception test (HPT). From 3 September 2007 when the number of questions asked in the theory test will increase to 50 with candidates being required to answer at least 43 questions correctly. This increase in the number of questions will create a more robust test with better content validity and make a positive contribution to driving standards and road safety through a more thorough assessment of the learner's knowledge and understanding.

The Driving Standards Agency (DSA) has commissioned the Central Office of Information (COI) to develop new hazard perception clips to ensure that the current bank of clips covers a wider range of scenarios. To assist with this process staff from the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) are in the lead providing technical support. The increase to the bank of clips will impact on training in relation to scanning the road, recognising at the first opportunity from the clues that a potentially dangerous situation might arise and adopting a driving plan to reduce the risk.

The practical Driving Test in Northern Ireland is based on European legislation and is similar in design and content to the rest of the UK.

It is recognised throughout Europe that the practical driving test in its current format achieves the designed objectives, that is to establish whether or not a driver has reached an acceptable level of competence to drive safely on the road.

DVA officials have also been working with UK and European partners on a number of projects to consider ways to integrate measurement of driver behaviour and attitude, previously not assessed, into the driving test. DVA are fully committed to working with other European partners to achieve a common goal of reducing the number of road deaths. To this end DVA have not only committed staff resources but also partly funded one of the projects.

In addition to this we intend to monitor closely recently commissioned research in GB which includes taking a radical look at how drivers are currently trained and tested. DVA will consider recommendations coming from this research and implement if appropriate.

Deferral of Planning Applications

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the circumstances in which a second deferral of a planning application is permissible, where such a course of action can lead to a resolution of outstanding issues. (AQW 1285/07)

Mrs Foster: One of the key elements of the revised consultation procedures with councils, which were introduced in October 2005, is that Planning Service would accept only one deferral on an application. Where an initial deferral on a planning application is acceptable, an office meeting or exceptionally a site meeting will be arranged to further discuss the issues.

Subject to the outcome of the meeting, and where it is considered that amendments to the scheme may lead to a resolution of outstanding issues, applicants may be offered the opportunity to submit additional or revised information. If this information is not submitted within the stipulated timeframe, the proposal may be presented back to council with an unchanged opinion or the decision notice may be issued accordingly.

Where an application is presented to the council for the second time and the council is strongly of the opinion that a decision contrary to that proposed by the Divisional Planning Office should be made, the council may request that the application be referred to the Management Board.

However, applications referred to the Management Board must relate to significant developments as defined in the revised guidance issued to councils in May 2007.

Deferral of Planning Applications

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the consultation process between Planning Service and District Councils in respect to planning applications; and to detail the guidelines, as implemented by planning officials, in regard to permitting a deferral on a planning application. (AQW 1287/07)

Mrs Foster: In line with the revised procedures on Council consultation on planning applications, Councils must provide planning reasons when seeking a deferral on an individual application. If a deferral is granted then all the outstanding issues will be dealt with before the application is brought back to Council with Planning Service's opinion. A key element of the revised procedures, brought in to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of consultation with Councils, is that Planning Service would only accept one deferral on an application.

These procedures are currently the subject of an independent review.

Planning Service Customer Standards

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the requirements on planning officials in relation to communication with agents and elected representatives, with specific reference to any timescales within which responses to letters, emails and telephone calls should issue. (AQW 1290/07)

Mrs Foster: Planning Service is committed to providing an open and professional service with clear lines of communications for all stakeholders, and has targets in place for replying to letters, faxes, emails and telephone calls. These targets apply to correspondence from agents and elected representatives as well as members of the public.

Acknowledgments to letters, faxes and emails are required to issue within 3 working days of receipt, with a substantive response to issue within 15 working days. Where a response requires more detailed investigation, a holding reply should issue within 15 days to advise a substantive reply will issue as soon as possible (recognised as replying within a further 15 working days). Responses to Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulation requests are required to issue within 20 working days of receipt.

In relation to telephone enquiries, the Agency's Customer Standards Statement outlines the aim of answering 85% of telephone calls within 20 seconds. The Agency aims to respond to telephone enquiries immediately or, if this is not possible, to respond

within 1 working day or indicate who is better placed to deal with the enquiry.

Refusal of Planning Applications

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that it is now current practice within Planning Service to issue a refusal in respect of an application with an outstanding request for a deferral, without notifying the elected representative, agent or applicant that the request has been declined. (AQW 1291/07)

Mrs Foster: A key element of the revised procedures brought in to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of consultation with Councils is that Planning Service accepts only one deferral on an application. Requests for a deferral must be based on defensible planning grounds.

The practice is that a request for a deferral will be considered at the Council meeting and the Planning Service official attending the meeting will advise the elected representative whether a deferral will be accepted or declined. If the request is accepted, the Council will be consulted again before a decision is issued. If the request is declined, the decision notice will be issued.

On occasions, additional information is presented at the Council meeting or promised within a few days. In such cases, the issue of the decision notice may be held for up to 5 days to allow this new information to be considered. This would not be classed as a 'deferral' of the application.

If the new material leads to a change of opinion by the Planning Service, the application is returned to the Council with a reconsidered opinion to approve. If, however, the information does not alter the Planning Service's opinion, the decision notice refusing planning permission is issued. The Councillor(s) who sent the new information is not routinely notified in these circumstances.

A review of the Council consultation procedures is currently ongoing.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of the Environment if she will make a statement on progress in dealing with the issues associated with Houses in Multiple Occupation, particularly in the East Belfast constituency and Coleraine Borough Council area. (AQW 1300/07)

Mrs Foster: The Department published the Draft Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Subject Plan for Belfast City Council Area in June 2006. The Plan's

Strategy seeks to protect area amenity, accommodate multiple occupation, focus development in areas where it can contribute to regeneration and promotes development of purpose built student accommodation.

The Plan's policies will limit development of HMOs throughout most of East Belfast to 10%. The exception to this limit is at HMO Nodes. Such nodes are designated along certain parts of arterial routes, where development would contribute to regeneration.

Planning Appeals Commission will consider objections to the Subject Plan at an Independent Examination commencing on 1st October 2007.

My officials are currently reviewing the Coleraine Borough HMO Plan 2016 and I will make a decision on the best way forward for this plan in the coming months.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest Designated at Strangford

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the consultation that has taken place between her department and the landowners and farmers, regarding Area of Special Scientific Interest designation at sites in Strangford. (AQW 1307/07)

Mrs Foster: Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is required under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to give notice to every owner and occupier of land that is included in an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI).

The notice and accompanying papers advise of the purpose and implication of the ASSI designation, provide full details of the implications of the designation and invite comments from these consultees, including any matters perceived to disadvantage them.

EHS is required to consider any representations or objections that are received as a consequence of this notice before confirming the designation, with or without modification.

EHS officials also endeavour to visit, in accordance with established procedures, every landowner and occupier that they are able to identify prior to the designation to advise about the proposal to include their lands within the ASSI and to address any questions that may arise.

These procedures were followed with respect to the designation of ASSIs at sites around Strangford.

Bloomfield Shopping Centre

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that the recently approved extension to Bloomfield Shopping Centre was in

accordance with previous conditions laid down by the Planning Appeals Commission, in its original approval of the centre. (AQW 1314/07)

Mrs Foster: Full planning permission was granted in May 2007 for an extension to Bloomfield Shopping Centre, Bangor. The approval relates to stores and ancillary areas and includes a new lift and stairs. This approval accords with the conditions previously imposed, following a public inquiry. The decision therefore does not increase the net retail floor space of the shopping centre.

Demolition of Property on Bryansburn Road

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what action her department intends to take against the person who demolished numbers 38 and 40 Bryansburn Road, which is part of an Area of Townscape Character in the new Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQW 1315/07)

Mrs Foster: An enforcement case W/2006/0050CA was opened on 2 June 2006 relating to the demolition of the dwellings at 38 & 40 Bryansburn Road, Bangor, which is within an Area of Townscape Character (ATC). Whilst the demolition of buildings in an ATC is a breach of planning control it is not an offence.

Despite exhaustive searches and investigations, the Department has been unable to identify the relevant landowners and was therefore not in a position to serve an enforcement notice on this matter. That said these efforts still are continuing and the Department has been in contact with the applicants of a recent application submitted to the Department for a new-build residential development of 12 sheltered category one elderly apartments on these lands (Planning Ref W/2007/0495/F refers) to try identify the owners. We await the information requested.

Default Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment what facility currently exists for members of staff in her department to work in their current post, beyond the default retirement age. (AQW 1342/07)

Mrs Foster: Since 1 October 2006 staff wanting to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised, all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

DOE Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by her department in each of the last two years; and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys. (AQW 1345/07)

Mrs Foster: Two staff surveys have been carried out within my Department in the last two years, at a total cost of £15148.35

Planning Application Fees

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of money received by Planning Service from planning application fees in the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office for (a) the Ards Borough Council area; and (b) the Strangford constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1365/07)

Mrs Foster: I regret that figures are not available in the format requested. However, net receipts for the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office for each of the last 3 years are shown in the attached table.

Net receipts per year/Year	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Downpatrick DPO	£2,471,000	£2,632,000	£3,001,000

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the Planning Service policy and criteria that exist in relation to floor space restrictions for single houses in the countryside. (AQW 1381/07)

Mrs Foster: There are no specific references or criteria in current planning policy in relation to floor space restrictions for single houses in the countryside. However, in granting planning permission the Department has the power to impose what ever conditions it sees fit and can restrict the maximum floor space of a new dwelling if the particular circumstances of the case warrant this approach. Such conditions are imposed to ensure the development being permitted properly integrates into the rural landscape and does not harm the character of the rural area. Any condition restricting floor space will also take account of the need to allow sufficient area to meet modern space standards.

Clea Lakes, Killyleagh

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the designations currently given to the Clea Lakes, Killyleagh; and to detail any designations that are imminent. (AQW 1396/07)

Mrs Foster: The Clea Lakes are designated as:

- (1) 'Salmonid' under the EC Freshwater Fish Directive (2006/44/EC) and
- (2) a 'Protected Area' under the EC Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC).

The Lakes were formerly designated as an 'Area of Scientific Interest' under the now repealed Amenity Lands Act (Northern Ireland) 1965. In recognition of their value for nature conservation, they have been proposed for designation as a site of Local Nature Conservation Importance in the draft Ards and Down Area Plan.

Planning Service Management Board

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications that have been referred to the Planning Service Management Board, in (a) the Ards Borough Council area; and (b) the Down District Council area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1405/07)

Mrs Foster: I can confirm that in the Ards Borough Council area there were 7 Management Board Referrals in 2004, 3 in 2005, none in 2006 and 1 to date in 2007. In the Down District Council area there were no Management Board Referrals in 2004, 1 in 2005, 3 in 2006 and 3 to date in 2007.

Planning Policy Statement 6

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what account the Environment and Heritage Service has taken of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Living Over the Shop scheme in Cookstown, in its response to the consultations on planning applications I/2007/0124 and I/2007/0138. (AQW 1407/07)

Mrs Foster: Environment and Heritage Service was consulted on the application for Listed Building Consent I/2007/0124 and Planning Application I/2007/0138. In these cases the proposed changes were considered to impact negatively on the character of buildings of special architectural or historic interest and thus were contrary to current policy contained in Planning Policy Statement 6.

However, it is the opinion of Environment and Heritage Service that it should be possible to achieve a

'Living Over The Shop' scheme in these buildings, without compromising the character to an unacceptable degree.

Advertising Planning Applications

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what action she is taking to ensure that the Planning Service promotes equality of opportunity when advertising planning applications in newspapers; and to outline the criteria that is used in deciding how and where advertising occurs.

(AQW 1408/07)

Mrs Foster: The Planning Service is required, under Article 21 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, to advertise planning applications received in at least one newspaper circulating in the locality in which the land to which the application relates is situated.

However, it has been the custom and practice of the Planning Service to advertise in a range of newspapers circulating in each district council area to try to ensure that all sections of the community have access to this information. The Department also operates a neighbour notification scheme and all applications are displayed on the Agency's website www.planningni.gov.uk. These arrangements are set out in the Department's Equality Scheme.

Government advertising generally was the subject of a review in 2005 and as a result changes were proposed to the advertising of planning applications in the Belfast area. Following a judicial review, these changes were largely put on hold pending a further review which is about to commence. This further review will initially consider the issue of advertising of planning applications in the Belfast area but will also consider advertising in all other district council areas. The aim is to devise a procurement and advertising strategy, taking account of new developments in advertising, technology and communication, that will communicate effectively to the public information about planning applications received, deliver value for money and minimise the cost to applicants.

The Tannery at Shrigley

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if she will make available the agreement relating to the use of water by the owner of the tannery at Shrigley, which formed part of the original planning permission for the tannery.

(AQW 1409/07)

Mrs Foster: I understand the original planning permission for the tannery was granted prior to 1973, the date my Department became responsible for

planning, and regret that Planning Service has no record of an agreement relating to the use of water by the tannery within any of its files.

However, there are references in two previous planning approvals to the factory water supply being an 'existing gravity feed via Clea Lakes' to which, according to an application form in 1986, the tannery had water rights.

Promotion of Recycling Initiatives

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she has taken to promote recycling initiatives in North Belfast.

(AQW 1410/07)

Mrs Foster: The Department of the Environment's role in promoting recycling initiatives is Northern Ireland wide, rather than focused on any specific area. The Environment and Heritage Service has provided waste management grant funding to Belfast City Council, enabling it to purchase household recycling bins. In addition, it provides support to organisations such as Bryson House and Sustainable NI, who work with young people and communities to promote the reduce, reuse, recycling message developed in the Wake Up to Waste campaign. The Environment and Heritage Service's education officers, based in its Country Parks and Countryside Centres, reinforce the work of Belfast City Council's waste education team, who offer visits and activities to all schools and community groups in Belfast.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Regional Economic Strategy

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to finalise a Regional Economic Strategy, in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

(AQW 1143/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): The redrafting of the Regional Economic Strategy will now await the outcome of the ongoing Varney Review. The recommendations of this Review will be critical to the future economic development of Northern Ireland. Sir David Varney is scheduled to report in September, which will align with the Executive releasing its draft Budget to public consultation.

Disabled Person's Allowance

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of applications for Disabled Person's Allowance, under the new capital values systems, that (a) have been processed and awarded; and (b) are awaiting processing.
(AQW 1269/07)

Mr Robinson: All ratepayers already in receipt of Disabled Person's Allowance under the old Net Annual Value (NAV) system have been automatically awarded the Allowance using the new basis under the capital values system. In respect of new applications received under the capital values system, (a) 400 have been processed but none have yet been awarded; and (b) 872 are awaiting processing following initial sifting.

Disabled Person's Allowance

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action his department is taking to reduce the backlog of applications for Disabled Person's Allowance, currently being processed by the Land and Property Services.
(AQW 1277/07)

Mr Robinson: A backlog of 1,179 cases from the period September 2006 to 31 March 2007 built up as Land & Property Service awaited the completion in June 2007 of the module within its new IT system to allow the processing of new applications for Disabled Person's Allowance. The staff resource available to process applications has also been increased and some 868 cases from this period have been completed. I expect that all backlogs will be substantially cleared by the end of September 2007.

Recruitment to and Promotion within NICS for over 55s

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel further to his answer to question AQW 635/07, what percentage of (a) those people recruited; and (b) those people promoted, in Northern Ireland Civil Service departments, were aged 55 or over at the time.
(AQW 1282/07)

Mr Robinson: Figures are based on all those who were aged 55 or over at the time of their recruitment into, or promotion in, the 11 NI Departments of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, expressed as a percentage of the total number of staff promoted or recruited in each year.

RECRUITED INTO THE 11 NI DEPARTMENTS 2004, 2005 & 2006. FIGURES ARE FOR ALL STAFF (PERMANENT, CASUAL AND INDUSTRIAL)

	Promotion		Recruitment	
	No.	%	No.	%
2004	25	2.2%	37	1.3%
2005	10	3.4%	55	2.5%
2006	12	1.2%	23	1.2%

Water Charges

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of funding, for the years 2008/09 and 2009/10, that his department has secured for the Department of Regional Development, so that it is adequately resourced to offset water charges.
(AQW 1296/07)

Mr Robinson: On 10 May, the Executive agreed to the deferral of water and sewerage charges in this financial year (2007-08). The Executive also decided to conduct a comprehensive review to address the longer term approach that should be adopted in relation to financing water and sewerage services. The position for 2008-09 and beyond, and the associated financial implications, will be considered following the conclusion of this review.

Default Retirement Age

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what facility currently exists for members of staff in his department to work in their current post, beyond the default retirement age.
(AQW 1339/07)

Mr Robinson: Since 1 October 2006 staff wanting to continue working beyond the default retirement age of 65 can apply to do so. Until the NICS policy has been finalised all such applications are automatically approved for periods of up to 6 months, and extended at up to 6 monthly intervals (subject to the normal performance and attendance requirements).

Departmental Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by his department in each of the last two years; and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys.
(AQW 1344/07)

Mr Robinson: The table below details the number of staff surveys carried out in the last two years and the total cost.

	05/06	06/07	
Staff Surveys	2	1	
		Total Cost	£5,024.11

Rates Review

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will consider, as part of the rates review, granting rates relief to residents living beside, or near, late night entertainment centres.

(AQW 1411/07)

Mr Robinson: Proximity to a late night entertainment centre should already be reflected in the local sales evidence used to determine the capital value rating assessment upon which rates bills are now based.

If a resident, however, feels that it has not been adequately reflected in his/her capital value, or the late night entertainment centre has only recently been opened, he/she can ask for it to be reviewed by Land and Property Services.

Departmental Funding

Mr Alex Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the financial pressures identified by each Northern Ireland Government Department; and (b) a breakdown of the quarterly returns each department provided to his department at the end of the first quarter of 2007/08. (AQW 1435/07)

Mr Robinson: As a consequence of the opening position inherited by the Executive for 2007-08, and in particular the level of planned overcommitment, departments were not asked to identify pressures in their June Monitoring returns as it was anticipated that there would be no resources available for reallocation.

Details of reduced requirements, internal reallocations and reclassifications, identified by departments and approved by the Executive as part of the June Monitoring round are set out in the attached tables.

Dept	Description	Admin	Other Resource	Total Resource	Capital
DE	ELBs Specialist Schools				-0.6
	Slippage on PPP Projects		-1.0	-1.0	

Dept	Description	Admin	Other Resource	Total Resource	Capital
Total DE			-1.0	-1.0	-0.6
DEL	Consultancy Costs	0.0		0.0	
	Essential Skills - Receipts BSP EU		-1.7	-1.7	
	Receipts - Investors in People		-0.1	-0.1	
	Recoup of RPS Admin Costs		-0.1	-0.1	
Total DEL			-1.9	-2.0	
DHSSPS	GMS Pay 3% to 2.5%		-0.5	-0.5	
	Reduced EPF Revenue Consequences		-1.5	-1.5	
	Reduced HPSS Pay Costs		-1.8	-1.8	
Total DHSSPS			-3.7	-3.7	
DOE	Add Fees - Disp of Radioactive Mats		-1.0	-1.0	
	Add Pollution Control Recs		0.0	0.0	
Total DOE			-1.0	-1.0	
DSD	Housing Assoc grant repayments				-3.4
	Housing Exec loan repayments (principal)				-11.2
Total DSD					-14.6
NIA	Delay in restoration of NI Assembly		-3.0	-3.0	
Total		0.0	-10.7	-10.7	-15.2

INTERNAL REALLOCATIONS (£ MILLION) ALLOCATIONS

Dept	Description	Admin	Other Resource	Total Resource	Capital
DARD	Farm Nutrient Management Scheme				1.0
	Food Strategy Delivery		0.8	0.8	
Total DARD			0.8	0.8	1.0
DCAL	OSNI - NIMA		0.5	0.5	
	Smithsonian Folklife from Arts to Sports		0.2	0.2	
Total DCAL			0.7	0.7	

Dept	Description	Admin	Other Resource	Total Resource	Capital
DEL	Business Education Initiative		0.7	0.7	
	Labour Relations Agency		0.5	0.5	
	Workforce Training				0.3
Total DEL			1.2	1.2	0.3
DFP	From CPD - PSMD Costs	0.7		0.7	
	From CSG - SSC Costs	1.2		1.2	0.5
Total DFP		1.9		1.9	0.5
DHSSPS	Central Training Budget to NIMDTA		4.8	4.8	
	GALA - From Hospital & Comm Health to Personal Social Services		0.3	0.3	
	GMS Contract to Primary Dental Services		1.9	1.9	
	GMS Contract to Primary Medical Services		1.5	1.5	
	GP Appraisals for Boards to NIMDTA		0.8	0.8	
	HR Function from Boards to Dept		3.2	3.2	
Total DHSSPS			12.4	12.4	
DOE	Emergency Planning & LG Boundaries Com		0.7	0.7	
	Environmental Policy Division Pressures		1.6	1.6	
	Road Safety Publicity		0.5	0.5	
Total DOE			2.7	2.7	
DSD	Modernisation Programme	6.7		6.7	
Total		8.5	17.7	26.3	1.8

REDUCTIONS

Dept	Description	Admin	Other Resource	Total Resource	Capital
DARD	Farm Nutrient Management Scheme				-1.0
	Food Strategy Delivery		-0.8	-0.8	
Total DARD			-0.8	-0.8	-1.0
DCAL	OSNI NIMA		-0.5	-0.5	
	Smithsonian Folklife Arts to Sports		-0.2	-0.2	
Total DCAL			-0.7	-0.7	
DEL	Institutions of FE				-0.3
	Management Development Programme		-0.7	-0.7	
	PFI Contract Costs		-0.5	-0.5	
Total DEL			-1.2	-1.2	-0.3
DFP	DID - SSC Costs	-1.2		-1.2	-0.5
	PD - PSMD Costs	-0.7		-0.7	
Total DFP		-1.9		-1.9	-0.5
DHSSPS	Central Training Budget to NIMDTA		-4.8	-4.8	
	GALA - From Hospital & Comm Health to Personal Social Services		-0.3	-0.3	
	GMS Contract to Primary Medical/ Dental		-3.4	-3.4	
	GP Appraisals from Boards to NIMDTA		-0.8	-0.8	
	HR Function from Boards to Dept		-3.2	-3.2	
Total DHSSPS			-12.4	-12.4	
DOE	Environmental Protection & Heritage		-2.7	-2.7	
DSD	Modernisation Programme	-6.7		-6.7	
Total		-8.5	-17.7	-26.3	-1.8

RECLASSIFICATIONS (£ MILLION)

Dept	Description	Admin	Other Resource	Total Resource	Capital Grant	Capital	Total Capital
DARD	AFBI Hard Charging	-1.0	1.0	0.0			
	QAB Milk Hygiene-Egg Pkg SLA with FSA	-0.8	0.8	0.0			
	Modulation Match Funding		-0.1	-0.1	0.1		0.1
Total DARD		-1.8	1.7	-0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
DCAL	Libraries RPA	-0.4	0.4	0.0			
	NI Mapping Agreement Transfers	-0.7	0.7	0.0			
	Sports Development		-0.4	-0.4	0.4		0.4
Total DCAL		-1.0	0.7	-0.4	0.4	0.0	0.4
DE	Account NI	0.1	-0.1	0.0			
DETI	Econ Development, Policy & Research	0.0		0.0			
DFP	Centre for Applied Learning	0.5	-0.5	0.0			
	Accommodation Services	0.0		0.0			
	e-HR	0.0		0.0			
	ASP	-3.1	3.1	0.0			
Total DFP		-2.6	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
DOE	Admin NC pressure in DVA Licensing	0.0		0.0			
	District Council's pressure in EHS				-0.3	0.3	0.0
Total DOE		0.0	0.0	0.0	-0.3	0.3	0.0
FSA	Non Cash to Other Resource		0.0	0.0			
NIAO	Cost Of Capital Pressure		0.0	0.0			
OFMDFM	Community Relations Unit				0.1	-0.1	0.0
Total		-5.2	4.8	-0.4	0.2	0.2	0.4

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

costs to Northern Ireland, including alcohol related crime, were estimated at £777 million in the same report.

Strategy for Reducing Alcohol Related Harm

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount that alcohol related illness is costing the National Health Service in Northern Ireland, on an annual basis.

(AQW 1027/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Strategy for Reducing Alcohol Related Harm was published by DHSSPS in September 2000 and estimated that the social costs to the HPSS were £25.1million, including £3.5million in occupied psychiatric bed days; £8.8 million in occupied acute bed days; and £12.8 million in general practice costs. Total direct and indirect

Lip-Reading Classes

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the value of lip reading classes as a method of rehabilitation for those who have lost their hearing, or whose hearing is declining. (AQW 1172/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Anecdotal evidence and feedback received suggests that those who attend lip-reading classes provided in Health and Social Service Board areas find them valuable, not only in terms of what they learn to help facilitate communication, but also in terms of friendship, support, and the confidence it gives them to cope with hearing loss, or hearing that is declining. It supports the view that the classes contribute to rehabilitation and in helping to reduce isolation.

Acute Hospitals

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are his plans to provide vital acute or emergency life saving hospital services for the people of Co. Tyrone. (AQW 1189/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In February 2003 Des Browne announced a new configuration of acute hospitals for Northern Ireland. His announcement on *Developing Better Services* (DBS) included the decision to develop a new acute hospital for the South West to be located to the north of Enniskillen. He also announced that the Tyrone County Hospital (TCH) would evolve into a local hospital.

These two new hospitals, together with enhanced primary and community care services, will provide the people of the south west, including those in Co. Tyrone, with high quality health services designed to meet their needs.

During the transition towards the implementation of DBS, people in Co Tyrone will normally access acute or emergency life saving hospital services from Altnagelvin or the Erne Hospitals. Some acute services, including inpatient medicine and cardiology, and an Urgent Care and Treatment Centre, continue to be provided at Tyrone County Hospital.

Patients who require highly specialised or regional services will continue to be referred to a hospital which can provide the expertise to effectively manage their condition

Provision of Lip-Reading Classes

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will produce a strategy for the provision of lip-reading classes, on a region-wide basis, through local Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 1194/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no plans to produce such a strategy. However, services for the deaf and hearing impaired are being considered as part of a Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy, which is currently being developed by my Department.

Acute Hospitals

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he will take to provide acute hospital services for children in County Tyrone. (AQW 1204/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Acute hospitals services for children in Co Tyrone are currently, and will continue to be provided in the Erne and Altnagelvin Hospitals. These acute services are supported by a range of

services provided for children in Tyrone County Hospital including ambulatory paediatrics, day surgery and outpatients.

Children who require highly specialised or regional services will continue to be referred to a hospital which can provide the expertise to effectively manage their condition. In the majority of cases this will be the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children.

Altnagelvin Area Hospital Cancer Unit

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement regarding the future of the cancer treatment unit at Altnagelvin hospital. (AQW 1225/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The cancer unit in Altnagelvin Area Hospital is one of five cancer units in Northern Ireland which were established following the Campbell Report, *Cancer Services – Investing in the Future*, published in 1996.

The cancer units deal with the more common cancers arising in their local population, and the cancer unit in Altnagelvin will continue to provide a range of high quality, comprehensive care and treatment services.

Waiting Lists for Home Lifts

Mrs Claire McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will investigate the delay in the release of funding for the installation of stair lifts in 16 homes in the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust area; and if he will ensure that the necessary funding is released, as a matter of urgency, to allow these adaptations to proceed. (AQW 1227/07)

Mr McGimpsey: At present there are 18 clients awaiting home lifts to be installed within the Southern Sector of the Western Trust. Feasibility inspection reports have been completed and costs identified. The Trust's Corporate Management Team and Western Health & Social Services Board commissioners are being asked to consider if any additional in-year funding can be made available to address this outstanding waiting list.

The Trust continues to target those in greatest need but difficult decisions must be taken to ensure that resources are allocated in the most effective and efficient means to meet the requirements of those most in need.

Public Transport Access to Antrim Area Hospital

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is aware of the difficulties and expense incurred by patients and relatives accessing Antrim Area Hospital by public transport from Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus. (AQW 1255/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A range of public transport services are available from Antrim Area Hospital to Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. A direct service operates on weekdays from Carrickfergus and supplements a range of scheduled daily services to the Hospital via either Larne or Belfast.

My Department has made financial help available through the Hospital Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) which provides assistance with the cost of travel to hospital for patients who are in receipt of benefits or on a low income. The assessment of entitlement is carried out by the individual's local Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office.

The Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme, which provides discounted fares, will also be of assistance to those travelling on public transport.

People who are eligible under this scheme include the over 65's, those registered blind or partially sighted, children and those receiving a war disablement pension.

DHSSPS Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by his department in each of the last two years, and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys. (AQW 1259/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The last staff attitude survey undertaken by the Department was in April/May 2005. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) were commissioned to undertake the survey. The survey was an on-line survey and cost £8k.

The Occupational Health Service carried out a Workforce Health and Well-Being survey in May/June 2005 across the NICS with the assistance of NISRA. This was a paper survey and the cost to this Department for the survey amounted to £3,850.

Private Finance Initiatives

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of Private Finance Initiatives for funding health projects in England; and to make a statement on the

lessons that can be learned in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1266/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The number and total capital value of PFI projects has increased in recent years.

In July 2003 the HM Treasury laid out its approach to continued use of PFI in its policy document *PFI: Meeting the Investment Challenge* outlining PFIs contribution to improving public services through increased investment and reform. The Treasury presented evidence of the use of PFI's delivering the construction of vital new facilities on time and at the cost contracted for.

The independent report by the National Audit Office *PFI: Construction Performance* (February 2003) also concluded that PFI in most cases delivered price certainty for departments and timely delivery of good quality assets.

In March 2006, the Treasury commissioned research on the performance of 100 operational PFI projects across all sectors, including health. It demonstrated that they are in the main working well, although there are some areas for improvement and some projects have not been as successful as expected.

Clearly some PFI projects have not been successes. Well-publicised problems have arisen with a small number of PFI projects, with problems ranging from over-ambitious plans and affordability problems, poorly negotiated contracts, ill thought out financial or business models, and poor public sector service planning. In some cases PFI has been used where experience has clearly proven it is not best suited, such as with ICT projects.

It is a matter of good practice that we continually learn lessons from previous PFI projects in the UK and elsewhere, as indeed we should always seek to improve our public sector procurement processes generally. This is no less important with PFI.

Among the lessons learned that we can apply in Northern Ireland are:

- The measure of success for the use of PFI must be that it delivers value for money, but never at the expense of the terms and conditions of NHS staff.
- We must ensure the detailed scope of PFI project requirements is clear and well planned before procurement commences.
- We must ensure prior to commencing procurement that projects are affordable and can deliver value for money.
- We must ensure that we only use the PFI procurement route where it is suitable and appropriate in terms of project size, scope, and capacity to deliver value for money in accordance with HM Treasury guidelines.

- We must continue to use, and further develop, the Exemplar Design process, developed in Northern Ireland by Health Estates Agency for PFI projects, and thus ensure more robust costing and planning of projects. This approach is now being adopted in GB as best practice by HM Treasury.
- We must ensure high standards of contract management in the public sector in order to achieve a high performance by the PFI operator throughout the period of the contract period.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of foreign nationals treated for alcohol related injuries or illnesses in the A&E Departments of each hospital in Northern Ireland, in each year for the last five years. (AQW 1270/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of foreign nationals treated for alcohol related injuries or illnesses in the A&E Departments of each hospital in Northern Ireland, in each year for the last five years is not available.

Drug Misuse

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his department has to deal with drug abuse in North Down. (AQW 1271/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The *New Strategic Direction for Alcohol & Drugs (NSD)* launched by my Department in May 2006 contains a number of proposed outcomes in relation to addressing drug misuse across Northern Ireland.

In support of the NSD, the Eastern Drugs & Alcohol Co-ordination Team outlined its proposals for addressing alcohol and drug misuse across the whole of the Eastern Board area in its Local Action Plan. A range of additional programmes have subsequently been put in place to support the local implementation of the NSD covering the 18-month period October 2006 to March 2008.

These include counselling and mentoring services for under-18s, targeted education and prevention work, training and community support, as well as family support services. In addition, at a local level, the Eastern Health & Social Services Board is responsible for the commissioning of adult treatment services based on its assessment of the level of need.

Early Support Services for Deaf Children

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the draft principles for early support services for deaf children, tabled at the Regional Newborn Hearing Screening Group meeting on 28 November 2005, will be approved and taken forward, in partnership with the Department of Education. (AQW 1273/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The draft principles are being considered as part of the Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy, which is currently being developed by my Department. My officials continue to work collaboratively with the Department of Education in taking forward the work of the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme Steering Group.

Early Years Support for Deaf Children

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an update on his department's input into the development of an inter-departmental strategy on early years support services for deaf children, identified through the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme, which was introduced in 2005. (AQW 1274/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A Support Services Sub-group of the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme (NHSP) Steering Group, comprising representatives from my Department, the Department of Education (DE) and the voluntary sector was set up. As part of the work of this sub-group, DE commissioned an audit of existing provision in relation to the impact of the NHSP on Educational Services for the Hearing Impaired. The key findings of the DE audit, which was completed in March 2006, indicate that existing Education and Library Boards (ELBs) Hearing Impaired Services can cope with an increased demand. DE has asked the ELBs to continue to keep the resources required for the impact of the NHSP under review.

An initial audit of current service delivery in respect of family support and multi-agency working was also carried out by the sub-group. Following this, Family Friendly Development days were held with the multidisciplinary teams from every children's hearing service and paediatric hearing service site in Northern Ireland and more than 150 professionals attended. Recommendations emanating from this audit are being considered as part of the Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy, which is currently being developed by my Department.

Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Teams

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of funding his department has allocated to community groups involved in anti-drugs initiatives, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1279/07)

Mr McGimpsey: We are unable to provide the information in the manner requested.

The following Table shows the breakdown of funding allocated to the local Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams from DHSSPSNI in respect of the Alcohol and Drugs Budget for the last five years which includes funding to community and voluntary based organisations.

Year/ Board	Northern	Southern	Eastern	Western	Annual Total
2006/07	1,514,484	960,780	1,991,818	1,877,961	6,345,043
2005/06	1,485,844	941,842	1,952,348	1,838,214	6,218,248
2004/05*	1,449,604	918,870	1,904,730	1,793,380	6,066,584
2003/04	1,174,248	776,459	1,618,273	1,629,639	5,198,619
2003/02	1,145,608	757,521	1,578,803	1,589,892	5,071,824
Total	6,769,788	4,355,472	9,045,972	8,729,086	28,900,318

* Substitute Prescribing Funding introduced April 2004 (approx £920k)

Omagh Health Services

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are his proposals for health professionals in the Omagh area to deliver acute services. (AQW 1297/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Health services in Omagh are, and will continue to be, delivered by a wide range of professionals including primary care teams, allied health professionals, dental practitioners, pharmacists, hospital clinical staff and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS).

Our future plans include the provision of two new hospitals in the South West, a new acute hospital to the north of Enniskillen and a new local hospital at Omagh. The hospital at Omagh will provide a wide range of services including urgent care, outpatients, diagnostics, some inpatient provision, day surgery and renal dialysis. These services will be delivered as necessary by a wide range of health professionals.

Health Care Services in Co Tyrone

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the health care situation in Co. Tyrone, compared to that in other areas of Northern Ireland. (AQW 1298/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Equality of access to health care services for all within Northern Ireland is a priority for my Department, and my officials continue to develop policy that will deliver modern high quality services to the whole population, including those in Co. Tyrone.

In support of this aim I am fully committed to progressing the implementation of Developing Better Services and the provision of high quality hospital services for the population of Northern Ireland, including the South West. The significant investment being spent on two state of the art hospitals, a local hospital in Omagh and an acute hospital to the North of Enniskillen, will, in conjunction with enhanced primary and community care services, allow us to continue to provide modern, high quality services for the 21st century designed to meet patient needs.

GP Recruitment in Co Tyrone

Dr Kieran Deeny asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the impact that the closure of the three acute hospitals (Omagh, Magherafelt and Dungannon) providing for the people of Co. Tyrone is having on GP recruitment in the area. (AQW 1299/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Western Health and Social Services Board has confirmed that it has not experienced difficulties in the recruitment of GPs by practices in the Co Tyrone area.

However, to allow for the further development of primary and community care services, my Department has taken steps to increase the numbers of GP training places, and additional investment over the next three years will see a yearly increase in the annual output of trained GPs. In 2007/08 funding has been provided for 55 training places, rising to 65 by 2009/10.

Satellite Cancer Centre in the North-West

Mr Pat Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland regarding the establishment of a satellite cancer centre in the north west. (AQW 1306/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I have had no discussions with the Irish Minister for Health and Children about the

establishment of a satellite cancer centre in the north west.

Specialist regional services for cancer in Northern Ireland, including radiotherapy services, are provided by the Cancer Centre at Belfast City Hospital (BCH), which opened in March last year. The Cancer Centre was developed to meet Northern Ireland's needs with respect to radiotherapy until 2015.

My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Children, is currently assessing the potential of further collaboration and co-operation to improve the health of the population and the provision of health services for people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The provision of cancer services is one area that will be explored within that process.

Response Times for Queries

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his proposals to ensure that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust puts in place an effective system of communication with specific timescales within which responses to letters, emails and telephone calls should issue.

(AQW 1309/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I have delegated the responsibility for answering this question to the Chief Executive of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. I understand that she has replied as follows:

The Northern Health and Social Services Trust strives to ensure that all letters, emails and phone calls that are received are responded to as quickly as possible.

We attempt to deal with all enquiries from MLAs in relation to specific cases as quickly as possible, taking into consideration the individual circumstances of the case. However, the maximum time for responses to be made would be 20 working days, in accordance with the timescales laid down within the Complaints Procedure.

As advised in my email to you on 29 June 2007, I would ask you to process any correspondence or phone calls through my office at Trust Headquarters and I will ensure that a prompt response will be made and, where the nature of the enquiry may require time to compile, you will be kept advised.

Prevention and Awareness of Fraud

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report on the steps taken to prevent fraud arising out of compensation claims against Health and Social

Services Boards, Health and Social Care Trusts and other agencies. (AQW 1316/07)

Mr McGimpsey: In addition to general guidance on fraud awareness and prevention the Department has put in place measures to ensure financial probity when HSC organisations are handling claims. HSS Boards and HSC Trusts and agencies are expected to report their compliance rates against controls assurance standards and these are audited on an annual basis.

Respite Care

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria that must be met to qualify for respite care; which organisation determines the criteria; and what measures are in place to ensure that assessments for respite care are subject to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 1321/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The need for all social care services is subject to individual assessment by the appropriate professional staff against agreed criteria. Health and Social care Trusts agree access criteria with their Health and Social Care Boards to reflect local levels of need and the availability of resources. Respite care is just one of the needs that may be identified as part of a care assessment. As with all public bodies, Health and Social Care Boards and Trusts are required to comply with the requirements of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in carrying out their functions, including assessment of care needs.

Review of Clinical Pathology Service

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail whether his department has carried out an impact assessment on the provision of health-related services if the pathology laboratory at Altnagelvin Hospital is centralised to a location in Belfast or Dundonald; and what is his assessment of the impact upon patients in the north-west region, in the absence of such a service. (AQW 1332/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There is no proposal to relocate the pathology laboratory at Altnagelvin Area Hospital to Belfast or Dundonald.

On 28 November 2006 the Department issued for consultation the recommendations of a review of clinical pathology laboratory services in Northern Ireland. The report of the review makes twenty-three recommendations which aim to ensure the sustainability of high quality hospital laboratory services across Northern Ireland. Included in the recommendations

are proposals for reconfiguration of the current service delivery profile.

Under the proposals, all pathology services currently provided at Altnagelvin Area Hospital would continue to be provided there on the present basis with the exception of histopathology and cytopathology services where, it is proposed, that a single laboratory in Belfast should provide services to the whole of Northern Ireland. An integrated team of pathologists, clinical scientists, biomedical scientists and cytoscreeners would provide a service across the region, with part of that team permanently located at Altnagelvin Area Hospital. Large acute hospitals, including Altnagelvin, would retain facilities for urgent diagnostic work in these specialties.

The consultation period on the Pathology Review ended on 28 February 2007 and the Department is currently considering the responses. Final recommendations on the review will be announced later in the year.

Burials in Grounds at Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people who lie buried in the grounds of the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh; (b) the planned timetable and process for the exhumation and reburial of these bodies; and (c) whether the records for, or identities of, those buried in the grounds are known to his department. (AQW 1333/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A survey of the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital site commissioned by the Western Health and Social Care Trust has indicated that at least 140 unmarked graves may be present in a small portion of the site which is unconsecrated ground. Further work is currently in progress to establish the total number of people who have been buried there.

The timing and details of an exhumation and reburial process cannot be finalised at this time until further evidential information is gathered under archaeological license.

Some details of identities of those buried in the grounds have been found in the Hospital Chaplaincy records but many of these are incomplete. As part of the exhumation and reburial process, procedures will be put in place, in conjunction with the archaeological team, to gather and record available information on all remains found.

Legal Service Fraud

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list those solicitors known to have defrauded (a) Health and Social Care Trusts; and (b) Health and Social Services Boards, in cases where the solicitors were acting on behalf of these organisations; and to outline the steps taken to recover associated monies. (AQW 1379/07)

Mr McGimpsey: There has been one case of suspected fraud involving the senior partner in Brangham and Bagnall solicitors which provided legal services to a number of HSS Trusts and one HSS Board. Following a forensic investigation, a firm of solicitors acting on behalf of the Department and the HPSS has initiated civil proceedings to recoup the losses through the insurance protection scheme in respect of the legal profession. This action is currently ongoing.

Waiting Times

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average time a patient who has self-harmed, and presents in an Accident and Emergency department, waits to see a psychiatrist; and to outline, broken down by parliamentary constituency, the number of such patients that were discharged without a referral to a psychiatrist. (AQW 1397/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1397/07, by the 23 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Nursing Staff

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money that is paid to agencies for the supply of nursing staff, across all hospitals in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1404/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question, AQW 1404/07, by the 23 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Suicides in Craigavon Area

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the recent suicides in the Craigavon area, to detail the resources that have been, and will be in the future, allocated to the area to provide counselling and other advisory

services to young people; and what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education regarding the provision of a quality counselling service in this area.
(AQW 1429/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1429/07, by the 24 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Health Centre in Trillick

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the schedule for the delivery of a new health centre in Trillick, Co. Tyrone; and to provide detail on the budget being made available for this project.
(AQW 1442/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1442/07, by the 24 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Cushendall Fire Station

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the feasibility of combining Cushendall Fire Station with an ambulance station, when it is rebuilt.
(AQW 1443/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1443/07, by the 24 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Ambulance Times

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to comment on an incident on 25 June 2007, when the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service took almost two hours to transport an injured child from Glenarm to Antrim Hospital.
(AQW 1445/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1445/07, by the 24 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Ambulance Cover

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he recognises that there is a shortage of ambulance cover in North and

East Antrim; and if he has any plans to increase that cover.
(AQW 1446/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1446/07, by the 24 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

Blood Samples

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail whether blood samples of local haemophiliac patients are being tested, without their knowledge, for variant CJD.
(AQW 1461/07)

Mr McGimpsey: It will not be possible to reply substantively to your Written Assembly Question AQW 1461/07, by the 24 July 2007. I will reply before the end of recess.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bus Lay-bys and Shelters

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for each of the last three years, the amount spent by his department on (a) improving bus services; (b) providing, repairing or improving bus lay-bys and shelters; (c) establishing new conventional bus services linking isolated communities to villages and towns; and (d) developing innovative demand-responsive services for residents in deep rural areas in (i) Craigavon Borough Council area; and (ii) Banbridge District Council area.
(AQW 930/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I understand that my Department's Roads Service has spent approximately £147,000 over the last three financial years in providing and improving bus lay-bys and shelters in the Craigavon and Banbridge Council areas. The breakdown of this investment, which involves improving linkages to bus shelters, is as follows:

Council Area	Year	Costs	Measures
Craigavon Borough Council	2006/07	£32,000	Bus lay-bys have been provided at Drumgor 2 and Tullygalley East.

Affordable Housing

Mr Declan O’Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans she has to set a planning policy to allow for affordable housing in the North Coast area, with particular reference to the mid-Glens area. (AQW 1094/07)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Regional Development has lead responsibility for regional planning policy on the provision of affordable housing through the planning system. Accordingly, your question has been passed to me to answer.

In response to the growing affordability issue and complexity of the problem, the Government commissioned Sir John Semple to undertake an independent review into affordable housing in September 2006. His report, published on 4 April 2007, contained eighty wide-ranging recommendations which impact on a number of Departments. The Minister for Social Development has agreed to Chair an Interdepartmental Group to consider the Semple recommendations in greater detail and focus effort on progressing those recommendations which are accepted.

Existing regional planning policy is set out within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 12 – ‘*Housing in Settlements*’ published in July 2005. PPS 12 explained that it was not considered appropriate at that time to impose an arbitrary level of affordable housing to be delivered by the private market. However, if the situation warranted, mechanisms to address affordable housing would be considered further (PPS 12, Para 51). Officials in my Department have been liaising with colleagues in the Department for Social Development, Department of the Environment (DOE), and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to consider the need to revise PPS 12. Consideration is being given to the need for a broader definition of affordability, and to the most appropriate mechanism to secure affordable housing through the planning system. This work will need to take account of the advice of the Interdepartmental Group which is considering the Semple recommendations.

At present the primary vehicle to facilitate a local supply of affordable housing is through the identification of land for social housing purposes in development plans prepared by DOE Planning Service. The North Coast and the Mid-Glens area are covered by the North East Area Plan 2002 and the Draft Northern Area Plan 2016. The latter, which was published prior to PPS 12, contains Policy HOU 5 – Meeting Community Housing Needs. This seeks to address social or specialist housing needs where there is an identified need and it also makes reference to the broader issue of affordable housing. These matters

Council Area	Year	Costs	Measures
	2005/06	£41,200	Bus lay-bys have been provided at Drumgor 1, Moyraverty Road, Main Street Waringstown and Lake Street Lurgan Footway Link.
	2004/05	£46,800	Bus lay-bys have been provided at Drumlyn Hill, Drumgor 1, Belfast Road Dollingstown, Long Lane, Levin Road Lurgan.
Banbridge District Council	2006/07	£21,000	A bus stop and lay-by have been provided at Lawrencetown.
	2005/06	£6,000	A bus lay-by has been provided at Ballybrick/ Glenburn/ Mays Corner.
	2004/05	£Nil	

I am advised that the provision and maintenance of bus shelters by Roads Service is carried out through a contract with a private advertising company, at no cost to Roads Service.

During the past three years my Department has provided support to road passenger services as follows:

Year	Amount
2004/05	£36,967,000
2005/06	£58,132,000
2006/07	£61,214,000

Part of this expenditure has been aimed specifically at residents of the two council areas.

My Department has supported the provision of services for residents in deep rural parts of the Council area through providing Rural Transport Funding to Down Armagh Rural Transport as follows:

Year	Amount
2004/05	£56,000
2005/06	£63,125
2006/07	£82,275

In 2006/07 my Department spent £10,911 on door-to-door transport services in the Craigavon urban area and £16,912 in the Banbridge urban area. The door to door scheme is a transport service for people living in urban areas (defined as areas whose population is in excess of 10,000) who, through disability, find it difficult or impossible to use mainstream public transport.

will be addressed at an independent examination of the draft Plan that will be conducted in public.

Resurfacing in Castle Street, Comber

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the footpath, kerbs and carriageway at Castle Street, Comber. (AQW 1131/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, in general, the footways and carriageways in Castle Street, Comber, are in reasonable condition. However, numerous service openings over the years, particularly in the southern side footway detract from its appearance. Roads Service is also concerned about vehicles mounting the footway at some of the narrower sections of Castle Street to pass oncoming traffic.

In order to address this situation, Roads Service has plans to raise the kerbing and resurface the footway along the southern footway of Castle Street. While it would wish to undertake the work in this financial year, staff have been made aware of possible works in the area by two utilities. You will appreciate that in these circumstances, Roads Service would be reluctant to commence the scheme until the utility work has been completed in order to avoid a situation where a newly surfaced footway is re-excavated so soon after completion. Contact is being made with the utilities with a view to having their work brought forward if possible.

Finally, I am further advised that there are no plans to resurface the carriageway in Castle Street at this time.

Road Safety on the A43 Cushendall Road

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale for completion of the footpath from Martinstown to the local church. (AQW 1157/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service is aware of concerns over road safety issues on the A43 Cushendall Road and has been monitoring the safety record of the road.

The provision of a footway on the A43 from Martinstown to the Chapel has been included in the programme to be undertaken this financial year.

In addition a collision remedial scheme at the location of the fatal collision that occurred on New Year's Day 2007, near Cargan, is also programmed to be undertaken this financial year. Work will include the provision of kerbing, resurfacing and additional warning signage.

A route study is currently being carried out on the A43 to identify any further warning signage or road markings that may be appropriate to ensure that drivers are fully aware of the road layout. Any works identified will be addressed during this financial year.

Signs in Glarryford Area

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which the new directional signage for Rasharkin will be erected at the Frosses Road/Station Road (Glarryford) junction. (AQW 1158/07)

Mr Murphy: I am pleased to inform you that my Department's Roads Service has confirmed that the new direction sign to Rasharkin at Frosses Road / Station Road, Glarryford, was erected on 2 July 2007. This sign complements a series of other new direction signs recently erected within the Glarryford area.

Erection of Advertising Signs

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of occasions, in each of the last five years, that Roads Service has (a) removed illegal advertisements from Roads Service property; and (b) directed the removal of illegal advertisements from Roads Service property. (AQW 1182/07)

Mr Murphy: As you may be aware, the erection of advertising signs, without lawful authority, within the curtilage of a public road is an offence under The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993. Under the Order, my Department's Roads Service may remove any such signs and may recover any expenses reasonably incurred. The erection of such signs can be unsightly, can create a distraction for road users and can be dangerous to pedestrians and cyclists.

In general Roads Service aims to have the signs removed as soon as possible and local personnel undertake periodic checks to identify offences. If resources permit, an attempt may be made to have the signs removed by agreement. However, on occasions, particularly in urban areas where there may be extensive violations, Roads Service may take immediate action to have the offending signs removed without consultation.

In relation to part (a) of your question, I am advised that within Roads Service's Eastern Division, where the erection of such signs is a particular problem, a means of recording the unlawful signs removed was introduced in 2005. In the other three divisions, where the problem is not as acute, details are not retained. However, it has been possible to provide an estimate of

the numbers involved in those divisions. These figures are summarised in the table below:

	No of Signs Removed			
	Northern	Southern	Eastern	Western
2005/06	-	-	4780	-
2006/07	1700*	1500*	4557	1175*
2007/08 to date	-	-	1660	-

* Estimated figure.

Details of the number of occasions when Roads Service directed the removal of illegal advertisements are not held.

Erection of Flags

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of occasions, in each of the last five years, that Roads Service has (a) removed illegally erected national flags from Roads Service property; and (b) directed the removal of illegally erected national flags from Roads Service property. (AQW 1184/07)

Mr Murphy: First of all, I should explain that my Department's Roads Service has signed up to the Multi Agency Protocol, arising from 'A Shared Future' – the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland. This protocol, which was published by the Government on 4 April 2005, addresses the issue of the display of flags in public areas. The aim of the Protocol is to provide a proactive approach, with support from communities and their representatives, to address the removal of flags from arterial routes, town centres and from particular locations, such as interface areas or near schools, hospitals and churches.

The Protocol recognises that an effective resolution to the issues surrounding flags and emblems is more likely to be achieved through co-operation with local communities. It requires widespread community support, for the partnership established by the Protocol to be effective.

When inter agency consultation is required by the protocol, the Agency that is in the most effective position to consult, negotiate or resolve the situation will take the lead, with the Police Service of Northern Ireland assuming this responsibility where appropriate. The Police also take the lead where the display of any flags or emblems is causing tension, or having a detrimental affect on the quality of life in a community.

Under the protocol, Roads Service will, when called upon by the lead Agency, provide the access equipment and resources to remove unwanted flags,

once agreement has been reached on their removal, particularly if their location proves to be inaccessible to members of the community concerned. In doing so, as a responsible employer, Roads Service has to take account of the possible risk to their workers in removing flags and emblems.

You may also be interested to know that research of flagging on arterial routes during July/September 2006 shows a decrease of almost 40% of symbols by the end of the reporting period. This includes flags, bannerettes and bunting.

With regard to the removal of illegally erected national flags, I must advise that Roads Service does not record the type or affiliation of illegally erected flags. However, the table below details the number of occasions that Roads Service has removed illegally erected flags from its property in the past three years (no records are held prior to 2004/05):

Year	No of Occasions when Roads Service removed illegal erected flags
2004-05	9
2005-06	20
2006-07	35

Erection of Flags

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of occasions, in each of the last five years, that Roads Service has (a) removed paramilitary flags or symbols from Roads Service property; and (b) directed the removal of paramilitary flags or symbols from Roads Service property. (AQW 1186/07)

Mr Murphy: I refer the Member to my recent reply to his Assembly Question AQW 1184/07 in which I explained the multi-agency protocol for the removal of illegally erected flags.

With regard to the removal of illegally erected paramilitary flags or symbols, I must advise that my Department's Roads Service does not record the type or affiliation of illegally erected flags or symbols. However, the table below details the number of occasions that Roads Service has removed illegally erected flags and symbols from its property in the past three years (no records are held prior to 2004/05):

Year	No of Occasions Roads Service removed illegal erected flags and symbols
2004-05	84
2005-06	39
2006-07	55

Bonfire Management

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development what are the responsibilities of the Roads Service in relation to bonfires that are erected on its property, in particular in relation to (a) public liability insurance in the event of a serious injury; (b) damage to ground; and (c) section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 1188/07)

Mr Murphy: I can advise that my Department's Roads Service does not approve of, or support the unauthorised use of departmental property either for the siting of bonfires, or for the storage of bonfire materials. It is Roads Service policy to remove such material, particularly where there is a danger to road users or nearby residents. My Department has discretionary powers, contained in the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, which deal with obstructions on an adopted highway. This does not, in law, make Roads Service liable to pay compensation to persons whose property is damaged. Liability for property damage rests with those responsible for erecting the bonfire.

While Roads Service would wish to respond as positively as possible to instances of this problem, taking into account its statutory obligations, including those arising under Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, there are some sensitive aspects to be considered.

Bonfire management is an interagency issue and it is not always easy to find quick fix solutions when problems arise. The support, co-operation and involvement of local communities is an important factor and this was recognised in the report of the interagency group which produced guidelines on bonfire management. A copy of the report can be found on the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service website: www.ehsni.gov.uk. A copy of this report is available in the library.

Roads Service's experience has been that many of the complaints received from the public are related to the stockpiling of materials on sites adjacent to public roads. In most cases, these sites are not owned by Roads Service. On occasions where the overspill from bonfire stockpiles obstructs the public road or footway, Roads Service will remove it or arrange for it to be pushed back off the road onto the bonfire site, in consultation with the police and local communities as necessary. However, Roads Service has a duty of care to its staff and the immediate and ongoing safety of personnel tasked with removal work is always taken into account in consultation with the police and other parties.

There are relatively few instances where bonfires are actually brought onto the public road for lighting. However, where bonfires are lit on or near the public

road, Roads Service will arrange for burnt out debris to be removed and will carry out any repairs to carriageways, footways and street lights that may be needed.

Free Travel

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the free bus and rail travel scheme to cover women at state pension age of 60. (AQW 1191/07)

Mr Murphy: I have no current plans to introduce free travel for women aged 60 and over. However, following a review of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme, I have made bids as part of the Budget 2007 process to secure the resources to extend the Scheme in a number of ways, including lowering the eligible age for free travel for all men and women to 60. Any extension of the scheme will be dependent upon securing the necessary resources which means that the case for such an extension will need to be considered alongside not only other possible changes to the scheme, but against many other spending priorities which will be put before the Executive later this year. An extension of the scheme would also require that both equality impact and public consultation processes were successfully completed.

Investment in Rail Network

Mr Mark Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will outline his department's expenditure on improving the railway line between Derry/Londonderry and Belfast, for each of the last three years; and to detail the amount his department intends to spend on this work in each of the next three years. (AQW 1207/07)

Mr Murphy: In 2003, the Railways Review Group (RRG) was established to consider the immediate investment needs of the NIR network and in particular, those of the lines north of Ballymena and Whitehead. As a result of the RRG report, Ministers agreed to provide total funding of £23.6 million (£17.2 million of which was capital) to maintain services on these lines at their present levels and to prevent deterioration. Further investment in the rail network was not envisaged until an assessment had been made of the benefits of the investment to date, including the purchase of the 23 new train sets. Accordingly, there has been no expenditure on improvements to the Derry line in the last three years.

However, Translink has recently submitted to the Department an economic appraisal of options in support of a £12.0 million project to deliver track life extension on parts of the Ballymena to Derry Line. This is currently being evaluated by the Department's

Economists ahead of the business case being forwarded to DFP for approval. Meantime, problems have arisen on the line close to Ballymoney where wet beds are leading to deterioration of the track. This requires urgent attention to avoid speed restrictions or possibly closure. The Department has already approved a capital grant of £489,000 to enable this to be addressed.

With regard to the future, as part of an inter departmental working group, my Department has worked in conjunction with Northern Ireland Railways to examine a range of investment options for future railways provision. As a result, I have now submitted a bid for additional funding to upgrade the Derry line as part of the second Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. Future levels of spending on the line and on the rail infrastructure generally will be considered by the Executive Committee in producing ISNI 2 and Budget 2007, and future budget allocations will therefore be set as a result of that process. I cannot predict the outcome at this stage but I am hopeful that it will be possible to invest on rail infrastructure generally and on the Derry line in particular to enable services to be improved.

Ballykelly and Dungiven Bypasses

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to specify a completion date for (a) the Ballykelly bypass; and (b) the Dungiven bypass.
(AQW 1229/07)

Mr Murphy:

(a) **Ballykelly bypass**

My Department's Roads Service advises that a bypass of Ballykelly is not currently included in their major works programme. However, a scheme was included in an additional £400 million package of proposed Strategic Road Improvement (SRI) schemes which was published for public consultation in 2006.

Work on the assessment of the expanded SRI Programme is at an advanced stage. However, as it has not yet been finalised, I am presently not in a position to advise on details of its content or timing.

(b) **Dungiven bypass**

Proposals for a bypass of Dungiven have been merged with plans to dual the A6 from east of Dungiven to Derry. Work on the development of the scheme has progressed and an initial report on the various corridor options has been completed. Roads Service proposes to commission consultants, imminently, to expand on this work and to bring forward a preferred route.

It is envisaged that it may take several years to complete the statutory procedures and, ultimately, the timing of the scheme will be dependant on the availability of funding. However, the scheme is currently planned to commence in the latter part of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan period, which ends in 2015.

Water and Sewerage Services

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale for completion of repairs to the sewerage system at the junction of Tamblough Park, Ballykelly, and the main Derry/Londonderry to Limavady Road, to prevent the leakage of sewerage from a manhole at this location.
(AQW 1231/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issues raised are operational matters, I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to these questions.

Water and Sewerage Services

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to provide a mains water supply free of charge, to those rural residents still without a mains supply.
(AQW 1232/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issues raised are operational matters, I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

Cullybackey Bypass

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Regional Development when he will bring forward plans for a road bypass for Cullybackey.
(AQW 1252/07)

Mr Murphy: I would refer the Member to my recent answer to AQW 1025/07.

Rail Fares

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Regional Development what was the average rise in rail fares (a) across Northern Ireland; and (b) on the three busiest rail routes, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1257/07)

Mr Murphy: The average rise in rail fares in Northern Ireland, on local lines, in the last three years was as follows:

- 2007/08 No increase.
- 2006/07 10.0% increase.
- 2005/06 5.0% increase.

The three busiest rail routes in Northern Ireland in terms of passenger journeys are

- Portadown to Belfast;
- Bangor to Belfast; and
- Larne to Belfast.

The average rise in fares on these lines was the same as the Northern Ireland local line average.

Rail Routes

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Regional Development to detail the three busiest rail routes in Northern Ireland, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1260/07)

Mr Murphy: The three busiest rail routes in Northern Ireland in terms of passenger journeys are:

- Portadown to Belfast;
- Bangor to Belfast; and
- Larne to Belfast.

The passenger journeys on these routes for the last three years are as follows:

PASSENGER JOURNEYS (MILLIONS)

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Portadown	1.9	2.2	2.5
Bangor	1.5	1.9	2.0
Larne*	1.8	1.5	1.7

* the drop in Larne line passenger journeys in 2005/06 was the result of disruption to service caused by track relay.

Dualling of the A3 Portadown to Armagh Road

Mr William Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the proposed

dualling of the A3 Portadown to Armagh road, to cover the entire route. (AQW 1265/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service published a consultation document listing proposals to expand the Strategic Road Improvement Programme in July 2006. This expanded Programme contained proposals to construct a dual carriageway from Portadown to Richhill which is the more heavily trafficked section of this route. The schemes which were included were selected on the basis of environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration (which are the Government's five key criteria for transportation projects).

The responses that the Department received to this consultation document are being considered at present, and included a request for a dual carriageway from Portadown to Armagh.

While this assessment is at an advanced stage it is not yet finalised, and I am therefore not in a position to confirm which schemes, including the extent of dualling on the A3, may be added to the current Strategic Road Improvement Programme.

Bonuses Payable to Northern Ireland Water Staff

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain why the bonuses payable to Northern Ireland Water staff for 2006/2007 were set by Northern Ireland Water, a private company, for employees who were civil servants in the year for which the bonuses were payable. (AQW 1267/07)

Mr Murphy: The assets and liabilities in respect of Water Service (including responsibility for bonuses payable to staff) were transferred to Northern Ireland Water Limited (NIW) on 1 April 2007. NIW staff who were NI Civil Servants, were covered by the NICS 2006/07 pay award, and who were eligible for bonus payments, have received bonuses in accordance with the terms of that settlement.

Traffic Calming Measures

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the feasibility of placing traffic calming measures on all roads outside schools, in order to enhance road safety for children. (AQW 1275/07)

Mr Murphy: The demand for traffic calming greatly exceeds the capacity of my Department's Roads Service to provide schemes. An assessment procedure enables Roads Service to identify sites where the greatest benefits may be achieved, primarily in terms of accident reduction.

Traffic calming is only considered on routes subject to a speed restriction. Other traffic management measures, such as signs and road markings, may, however, be used to improve road safety at locations where traffic calming is not considered appropriate. Hence, while traffic calming measures may be introduced in the vicinity of some schools, it is not considered feasible to place them on all roads outside schools.

The issue of safer travel to schools has been recognised and Roads Service, in partnership with the Department for Education, the Department of the Environment's Road Safety Branch, the Education and Library Boards, the Health Promotion Agency, Translink and Sustrans, is delivering the Travelwise NI, Safer Routes to Schools Initiative. This initiative, together with the Speed Management at Rural Schools initiative, which aims to introduce safety measures to manage speeds outside rural schools where the national speed limit (60mph) applies, encourages the increased use of sustainable travel options and ensures that journeys to school are safer.

In addition, the use of variable speed limits outside schools on rural roads, where the national speed limit applies, is being considered. The use of variable signs, which are displayed only when relevant, offers a way in which the drawbacks of permanent speed limits at schools can be minimised and may actually enhance driver acceptance of any restriction imposed. It is intended to establish pilot sites in 2008.

Parking Enforcement

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Regional Development what is the rationale behind the 'persistent offender' section of Parking Enforcement Unit; and to detail how such measures are implemented. (AQW 1280/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that there is no section within the Parking Enforcement Unit dealing specifically with 'persistent offenders'.

I can advise that it is intended to give consideration to clamping or removing the vehicles of people who persistently disregard parking and waiting restrictions, even if they pay their penalties. This would provide an additional deterrent to those people who are regularly prepared to park illegally and pay any penalty charges that this may incur. However, the main purpose of this clamping or removing vehicles facility would be to recover debts owed to Roads Service by people who have not paid their Penalty Charge Notices. The timescale for introducing such a facility, and the criteria for identifying persistent offenders, are currently under consideration.

Water and Sewerage Charges

Mr David McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of funding, for the years 2008/09 and 2009/10, that his department will receive from the Department of Finance and Personnel, in order to offset water charges. (AQW 1293/07)

Mr Murphy: On 10 May, the Executive agreed to the deferral of water and sewerage charges in this financial year (2007/08). The Executive also decided to conduct a comprehensive review to address the longer term approach that should be adopted in relation to financing water and sewerage services. The funding requirements of the Department for Regional Development for 2008/09 and 2009/10 will be considered as part of the Budget 2007 process and should be informed by stage 1 of the Executive's review.

Display of Flags

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for the removal of paramilitary flags and emblems, or any messages of support for such organisations, from lamp posts on public roads owned by his department. (AQW 1310/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has signed up to the Multi Agency Protocol, arising from 'A Shared Future' – the policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland. This protocol, which was published by the Government on 4 April 2005, addresses the issue of the display of flags in public areas. The aim of the Protocol is to provide a pro-active approach, with support from communities and their representatives, to address the removal of flags from arterial routes, town centres and from particular locations, such as interface areas or near schools, hospitals and churches.

The Protocol recognises that an effective resolution to the issues surrounding flags and emblems is more likely to be achieved through co-operation with local communities. It requires widespread community support, for the partnership established by the Protocol to be effective.

When inter agency consultation is required by the protocol, the Agency that is in the most effective position to consult, negotiate or resolve the situation will take the lead, with the Police Service of Northern Ireland assuming this responsibility where appropriate. The Police also take the lead where the display of any flags or emblems is causing tension, or having a detrimental affect on the quality of life in a community.

Under the protocol, Roads Service will, when called upon by the lead Agency, provide the access equipment and resources to remove unwanted flags, once agreement has been reached on their removal, particularly if their

location proves to be inaccessible to members of the community concerned. In doing so, as a responsible employer, Roads Service has to take account of the possible risk to their workers in removing flags and emblems.

You may also be interested to know that research of flagging on arterial routes during July/September 2006 shows a decrease of almost 40% of symbols by the end of the reporting period. This includes flags, bannerettes and bunting.

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of trains that have used the Knockmore railway line since its discontinuation in 2003; (b) what types of trains these were; and (c) the date on which the last train travelled on the line. (AQW 1323/07)

Mr Murphy: The number of trains that have used the Knockmore line since 29 June 2003 (when the line ceased to be used for scheduled services) is 236.

The types of trains were:

- 194 trains used for training purposes (for new train drivers);
- 11 ballast trains (for infrastructure works);
- 24 passenger trains (using the line as a diversionary route in times of emergency), and;
- 7 empty trains (performing repositioning activities in support of the above mentioned passenger trains).

The date the last train travelled the line was 9 February 2007 (for training purposes).

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's expenditure on maintaining the Knockmore railway line in (a) 2006; (b) 2005; (c) 2004; and (d) 2003. (AQW 1324/07)

Mr Murphy: Expenditure on maintaining the Knockmore railway line for the financial years in question was as follows:

2006/07	£109,000
2005/06	£120,000
2004/05	£171,000
2003/04	£121,000

Traffic Calming Measures

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's expenditure on traffic calming measures in (a) the Strangford constituency; and (b) the other 17 constituencies, in the 2007/08 and 2008/09 financial years. (AQW 1328/07)

Mr Murphy: Financial allocations for Traffic calming schemes follow the guidelines contained in the 10 year Regional Transportation Strategy.

The proposed spend in the Strangford constituency for 2007/08 is £30,000. The spend in the other 17 constituencies is planned at £2,270,000.

It is not possible to give accurate figures for our proposed expenditure on traffic calming measures in the financial year 2008/09, but it is anticipated that the total financial allocation for Roads Service will be similar to this year. The individual financial allocation for the Strangford constituency will be dependent upon the prioritising of proposed schemes in the constituency, in competition with other proposed schemes within the Roads Service division serving this geographical area.

Maintenance of Private Wells

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure that Northern Ireland Water maintains the wells that provide the water supply to homes, draining water from the Clay Lakes at Shrigley, Killyleagh. (AQW 1335/07)

Mr Murphy: Northern Ireland Water is not responsible for maintaining private wells. The Department of the Environment has oversight of private supplies.

Street Lighting

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to install overhead street lighting from the entrance to the City of Derry/Londonderry airport on to the A2. (AQW 1337/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that there is street lighting on the access road from the City of Derry Airport to the main A2 Clooney Road including the junction on the A2. There are currently no plans to install any additional street lighting on the A2 at this location.

However, under proposals to dual the A2 from Maydown Roundabout to the City of Derry Airport,

the proposed new junctions will include appropriate street lighting.

Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by his department in each of the last two years; and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys. (AQW 1346/07)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Regional Development conducted three staff surveys in 2005/2006 at a cost of £347. There were no surveys in 2006/2007.

Traffic Calming Measures

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development (a) what criteria is used to assess whether a location merits traffic calming measures; and (b) how are these locations prioritised. (AQW 1359/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service is committed to the achievement of the targets outlined in The Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy, through the implementation of road safety engineering measures and, in this context, we place high priority on the introduction of traffic calming schemes in residential areas.

Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, priorities must be established. I should also explain that the funding for traffic calming measures is allocated on a Divisional basis and not by individual Council or Constituency area.

On receipt of a request for the provision of traffic calming measures, Roads Service will carry out an assessment of the area in question. The assessment procedure takes into account various factors such as; personal injury collision statistics; the volume, type and speed of vehicles using the road; environmental factors including the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops, public buildings; and whether the road in question is used as a through route.

The findings of the assessment process are used to give each site a priority rating and list these in merit order. If a scheme is identified and included in Roads Service's traffic calming programme, implementation is subject to the successful completion of residents' consultation and legislative processes. If objections are received to proposals to traffic calm a particular road, it may mean that Roads Service will not be able to implement the scheme.

Bypass for Kilrea

Mr Adrian McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has for a bypass for Kilrea. (AQW 1361/07)

Mr Murphy: I should explain that the composition and delivery of the major works programme of my Department's Roads Service, is consistent with the level of investment proposed under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), published in December 2005. The ISNI sets out a high level view of planned investment up to 2015, with proposals for up to £1.4 billion of strategic road improvement schemes. Around £1 billion of these schemes have already been identified and, with priorities focused on the key Transport Corridors, it was not possible to include a bypass for Kilrea within the substantial but finite level of funding available.

Roads Service is currently considering responses to a consultation exercise on a further £400m of major works proposals. Work on this reassessment is at an advanced stage, but it has not yet been finalised. Therefore I am not yet in a position to advise on the schemes which may be added to our programme.

Flooding in West Winds Estate, Newtownards

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of dealing with blockages and flooding in the drainage system in the West Winds estate, Newtownards. (AQW 1363/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is unable to provide detailed costs of work associated with the flooding incidents in the West Winds Estate, Newtownards, arising as a result of blockages in the storm drainage systems.

Roads Service personnel responded to a number of flooding incidents in the area and costs incurred were not recorded specifically for each location.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is unable to provide detailed costs of work associated with the flooding incidents in the West Winds Estate, Newtownards, arising as a result of blockages in the storm drainage systems as they are not responsible for all the sewers and drains within the estate and consequently any information provided would be incomplete.

Drainage System in West Winds Estate, Newtownards

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to replace

the drainage system in the West Winds estate, Newtownards, with specific reference to the replacement of the current piping system. (AQW 1367/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issue raised is an operational matter, I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

Moss Road, Ballygowan

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development if an upgrade of the Moss Road, Ballygowan, is part of the Minor Works programme. (AQW 1378/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises that it had planned to resurface the Moss Road, but that the scheme had to be postponed, pending the completion of developer-led road works associated with a housing development adjacent to the Moss Road.

Roads Service also has an ongoing minor improvement scheme at Moss Road, to enhance the sightlines at the junction with the Ballykeigle Road.

There are no plans to carry out any other minor improvement schemes along this road at this time. I have, however, asked Roads Service officials to make contact with you to discuss any further improvement measures you have in mind.

Rural Planning Policy

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the rural planning policy in relation to replacement dwellings; and to detail whether the policy specifies that a single storey dwelling shall be replaced with a single storey dwelling. (AQW 1382/07)

Mr Murphy: Policy CTY 5 of draft Planning Policy Statement 14 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside' governs applications for 'replacement dwellings' in the countryside. This policy allows for a replacement dwelling where the visual impact would not be significantly greater than that of the existing dwelling and which takes into account the character of vernacular buildings in the locality. Approval to replace older dwellings deemed as examples of a vernacular tradition of building may be withheld although permission to upgrade rather than replace is likely.

Principal amongst the considerations in all cases is that residential use has not been abandoned. This is assessed by considering a number of matters, including:

- The physical condition of the dwelling;
- The period the dwelling has not been in use;
- Whether there has been any intervening use; and
- Evidence of the owner's intentions.

The policy does not specify that the replacement must be like-for-like, that is to say, replace a single storey with a single storey, but rather that the siting and design of the proposed new dwelling combine to ensure that an appropriate level of integration within the landscape is achieved and that the visual impact is not significantly greater than the existing dwelling house to be replaced. Each case is likely to be different and must therefore be considered on its individual merits.

Upgrading the A5/N2 Route

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to meet with Ministers in the Republic of Ireland's government, to secure early progress on the issue of upgrading the A5/N2 route from Derry/Londonderry to Dublin. (AQW 1394/07)

Mr Murphy: long with the Chancellor's package announced on 22 March, the Irish Government confirmed its intention to make available a contribution of £400million/€580million, to help fund an unprecedented package of infrastructure investment, including a major new roads programme to provide dual Acarriageway standard on routes within Northern Ireland serving the North West Gateway of Letterkenny/Derry and on the eastern seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne.

The Northern Ireland Executive has confirmed its acceptance in principle to taking forward the development of these two major roadworks projects and the North / South Ministerial Council at its Plenary Meeting on 17 July 2007 agreed the proposed investment.

Resurfacing Scheme

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to resurface the Drumenny Road, from its junction with Ballinderry Bridge Road and the Diamond, Ardboe; and if he will give an indicative timescale for the completion of this work. (AQW 1414/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service have advised me that a resurfacing scheme on a 1 kilometre

stretch of the Drumenny Road, between Mullan Road and Derrycrin Road, is planned for the 2008/2009 financial year. It is also planned to surface dress the 1.6 kilometres stretch, from Battery Road to the Diamond, in the 2008/2009 financial year.

A third stretch, of 0.75 kilometres in length, from Ballinderry Bridge Road to Mullan Road, is scheduled to be resurfaced after the completion of sewerage and housing development works, which is expected in the 2009/2010 financial year.

These three stretches, when completed and taken with resurfacing work carried out over the past 3 years, will see the complete length of the B161 Drumenny Road resurfaced.

Increase in Traffic Volume

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the increase of traffic volume in Northern Ireland, (a) overall; (b) in cities; and (c) in major towns, in the last five years; and to detail the projected traffic volume in five years' time. (AQW 1426/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service does not categorise traffic flows into groups such as traffic flow in cities or major towns, due to differences in the characteristics of traffic flows in different towns. Traffic flow is dependent on a number of factors, including the network of roads within the town and whether there is a major trunk road through the town (e.g. Dungiven). Therefore, some of the traffic on major roads within a town may not be solely a reflection of the characteristics of the town that the road passes through.

The increases in overall traffic volumes across Northern Ireland are provided in the table below.

Year	Overall % Increase
2006	Not yet available
2005	1.4%
2004	0.6%
2003	1.18%
2002	5.4%
2001	0.73%

The 10 year Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS), published in 2002, contains an estimate of traffic growth over the lifetime of the Strategy. Estimates made at that time suggested that traffic volumes would grow at under 2% per annum over the period 2002 - 2012. Roads Service continues to use this figure. This is comparable with National Rates of Traffic Growth

for Great Britain which forecast traffic growth to be between 1.18% and 1.83% per annum to 2010.

Background

- Roads Service collects traffic volume data by means of 273 automatic census points strategically located across the road network. The information is recorded either for 365 days per year, or for one week in each quarter during the year, and an annual average is calculated.
- Roads Service produces an annual Traffic and Travel Information Report, which presents the traffic volumes in a variety of formats for each site. Traffic flows obtained from these census points are used to calculate the overall increase in traffic using the road network.
- Roads Service produces a traffic growth figure for the whole of Northern Ireland. This is not disaggregated into any further sub groups, such as cities or major towns.
- Forecasting is a difficult and uncertain process. Traffic growth varies from road to road, and no average forecast can be expected to predict accurately growth everywhere. Traffic growth is dependent on several different sets of factors.
- Growth in the number of car trips originating in a location will depend, for example, on growth in the number of people living there and growth in the proportion of people who own cars. Any area where employment and population are growing rapidly would consequently experience a high rate of traffic growth.

Congestion Charges

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to the implementation of congestion charges in Northern Ireland's major urban areas; and, if so, to detail the rate at which these charges would be fixed. (AQW 1427/07)

Mr Murphy: The issue of congestion charges was considered during the development of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP). I have recently reviewed my Department's position on this issue and can confirm that I agree with the policy position stated in paragraph 7.27 of the BMTP. As such, I do not propose to give further consideration to the implementation of congestion charging in urban areas in the North at this time.

Regional Transportation Strategy

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to encourage

greater use of public transport by commuters, with particular reference to increased traffic volume on Northern Ireland's roads. (AQW 1428/07)

Mr Murphy: In pursuit of the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) which is aimed at encouraging more use of public transport and greater levels of walking and cycling, my Department, Roads Service and Translink are working together to make public transport more attractive and a real alternative to the private car. The RTS vision is to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life. Examples of actions already taken or currently being pursued are:

- Some 23 new train sets were recently introduced to the rail network. This has helped to achieve an increase in patronage of 31% between 2002 and 2007;
- The Department is bidding for additional funding to upgrade the Derry line and enhance rail services generally with the purchase of more new trains;
- A study is currently underway into the feasibility of two pilot Rapid Transit routes in the Belfast area. Rapid Transit is a form of public transport that offers faster and more reliable services;
- Between 2003 and 2007 DRD assisted Translink in the purchase of 542 new buses at a cost of almost £71million. It also plans to provide a further £61million for more new buses in the period to March 2009. The modernised fleet has already helped generate an increase in passenger numbers of 15% over the two years to March 2007;
- Park and ride schemes are being promoted from locations on the outskirts of Belfast and Roads Service and Translink are working in partnership to deliver an agreed Quality Bus Corridor network for the Greater Belfast area. Elsewhere, infrastructure and service improvements are being undertaken. Raised kerbs for urban bus stops and at well-used stops in housing areas will help all passengers, including those with buggies and wheelchairs, to board fully accessible low floor buses. A minimum frequency level for local bus services is envisaged and priority measures will be introduced for buses entering or exiting bus stations;
- Roads Service, through its Travelwise initiative, is raising awareness of a range of sustainable transport measures, including the promotion of public transport to employers, commuters and schools. This entails undertaking information days for businesses, holding public events, placing articles in the media and working directly with school management teams; and

- A pilot 'Personalised Travel Planning' scheme recently began in South Belfast to promote sustainable travel, including public transport.

Car Parking in Omagh

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider making Roads Service-owned car parking facilities adjacent to Tyrone County Hall, Omagh, available to the public at weekends; and if he will consult with the Western Education and Library Board, Omagh District Council and the Department of the Environment regarding creative solutions to practical parking problems in Omagh. (AQW 1439/07)

Mr Murphy: I am informed that the car park located adjacent to County Hall, Omagh, forms part of premises managed by the Department of the Environment's Planning Service who have stated that on the basis of legal and security advice, it would not be appropriate to open the car park for public use at weekends in the interests of public and staff safety.

I can confirm, however, that all of my Department's Roads Service-owned car parks are available to the public at weekends. Roads Service officials will also be happy to discuss solutions to any roads-related problems with interested parties and indeed some discussion has already taken place with Omagh District Council and representatives from Omagh traders regarding car parking provision. Should Omagh District Council consider that there is merit in having a meeting with representatives from the Department of the Environment and the Western Education and Library Board my Roads Service staff, based in Omagh, would be willing to attend.

Disabled Parking Spaces

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what are his plans to introduce disabled parking spaces in Dundonald village. (AQW 1448/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has no proposals at present to provide further disabled parking spaces in Dundonald village. However, if the Honourable Member feels that there is a need for additional disabled spaces at specific sites in Dundonald, she should forward the details to the Divisional Roads Manager for Eastern Division, Mr Tom McCourt, Hydebank, 4 Hospital Road, Belfast, BT8 8JL, for consideration.

I should add that Roads Service officials have regular contacts with relevant interest committees/groups, such as Disability Action's Regional Access Committee and the Inclusive Mobility and Transport

Advisory Committee's (IMTAC) Personal Mobility Working Group. These contacts provide the mechanism for any perceived deficiencies in provision for those with disabilities to be brought to our attention and is in addition to the processing of applications for disabled parking bays, that may be submitted by individual blue badge holders.

A55 Knock Road Widening Scheme

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make a statement on the proposed development of the A55 Knock Road; and to outline the reasons for the selection of Option D as the preferred option. (AQW 1459/07)

Mr Murphy: Over the past year my Department's Roads Service has been developing a number of options for the A55 Knock Road widening scheme, to be considered in more detail upon commencement of the formal statutory procedures, which I announced on 14 May 2007.

As part of this work Roads Service officials held a two-day informal public consultation in June 2006; public meetings were also held on 11 November 2006 and 17 January 2007 and a further meeting with residents was held on 27 March 2007.

Now that the statutory procedures have formally commenced, Roads Service will carry out a detailed evaluation of the environmental impacts of the scheme, including a further evaluation of alternative options, the provision of right-turn facilities and the traffic impacts on the surrounding area. This work will be used to prepare an Environmental Statement, which will be published for public consultation.

Concurrent to this, detailed land vesting proposals will also be published. Following receipt of all objections and comments on these proposals, it may then be decided to hold a public inquiry. If this is the case, it will only be after receipt of the Public Inquiry Inspector's report that a final decision will be taken on the scheme's progression.

With regard to your reference to the preferred option, I am advised that Roads Service presented 3 improvement options for inspection at the public consultation in June 2006 and at a subsequent meeting with local residents on 17 January 2007. During this period officials continued to progress the preliminary design, while giving due consideration to the comments made.

I am informed that at a presentation to the Roads Service Chief Executive and Board members in early February 2007, permission was given for commencement of formal statutory procedures for the scheme. While this decision was based on a preferred option, I

should stress that the assessments include an evaluation of alternative scheme options, including those suggested by the residents association.

The preferred option was chosen as a cost effective way of providing 2 lanes in each direction between Glen Road and Kings Road, with improvements to the junction at Shandon Park and right turn facilities for side road traffic and private entrances. An alternative option to construct a dual carriageway with parallel service roads would provide little additional benefit in terms of improved journey times or road safety and would be significantly more expensive. It would also have the biggest impact on the environment and local property.

At the meeting with residents held on 27 March 2007, officials advised that no final decision had been taken regarding the scheme to be implemented and that such a decision would only be made after a formal consultation had been carried out and a public inquiry held, if required.

Finally, I can confirm that all those affected by the A55 Widening Scheme, including local residents, will have an opportunity to express their views and objections to the scheme when the Environmental Statement and other Statutory Orders are published in due course.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Accommodation

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the list for Housing Executive accommodation in the Ballymena Borough Council area, compared to the amount of accommodation available in that area; and what are her plans to provide accommodation for those who have been on the list for over a year.

(AQW 1137/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): At 31 March 2007, there were 1,411 applicants on the Housing Executive waiting list, of which 695 had been on the waiting list for more than one year. At the same date, 755 of the total applicants were deemed to be in housing stress. Of those, 402 had been on the waiting list for more than one year.

At 31 March 2007, the Housing Executive had 2,743 tenanted properties within the area covered by the Ballymena District Office. Re-lets accommodated 226 applicants during the year.

The Social Housing Development Programme plans to provide an additional 137 homes in the Borough

Council area over the current five-year planning period. The Ministry of Defence site at St Patrick's has the potential for mixed use development. In addition to current plans, part of the site may transfer for social housing, with potential for up to 60 houses.

Tenant Payments

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of housing benefit paid to those renting privately owned houses, broken down by Housing Executive Office, for the years (a) 2003/04; (b) 2004/05; (c) 2005/06; and (d) 2006/07; and also to give the total amount paid for each of the above years. (AQW 1152/07)

Ms Ritchie: Due to limitations imposed by its payments system, the Housing Executive is currently

unable to separate the total amounts paid per District Office to tenants of private landlords from those paid in respect of tenants of registered social landlords. The figures in the table below therefore contain both sets of payments for the years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. The Housing Executive is taking steps to separate these payments for the future.

A change in accounting methodology for the year 2006/07 means the total includes the amount of overpaid housing benefit that has been repaid by claimants and landlords. In previous years the total was net of the amounts repaid. This change means that the increase in expenditure between 2005/06 and 2006/07 is overstated. During the years in question the caseload for private tenancies and registered Housing Association tenancies was split on an approximate 70%/30% basis.

NIHE Office	2003-2004 £	2004-2005 £	2005-2006 £	2006-2007 £
Belfast	39,628,830.81	45,149,655.22	47,339,517.79	55,203,995.24
Bangor District Office	5,063,360.53	5,752,130.49	6,288,312.88	7,018,547.43
Newtownards District	3,559,209.04	4,045,792.31	4,754,499.95	5,584,571.27
Castlereagh District Office	2,387,826.35	2,708,769.05	3,038,592.08	3,427,287.99
Lisburn District 1	2,836,118.70	3,223,174.31	3,643,954.36	4,142,035.28
Lisburn District 3	1,873,564.59	2,120,169.38	2,839,298.69	3,607,880.78
Downpatrick District	5,802,712.40	6,580,290.63	7,356,873.96	8,561,270.09
Banbridge District	2,335,494.94	2,645,958.46	3,064,063.56	3,705,121.92
Newry District	11,058,834.25	12,607,929.64	13,228,374.57	13,915,812.21
Armagh District	4,480,104.11	5,089,722.05	5,188,648.99	5,680,298.80
Lurgan District	4,929,482.18	5,627,831.92	6,554,975.35	7,466,709.39
Portadown District	3,666,110.94	4,168,533.56	4,504,774.41	5,017,796.51
Dungannon District	3,870,141.31	4,384,771.95	4,503,302.94	4,943,470.76
Fermanagh District	4,273,586.12	4,851,407.31	4,780,736.98	5,206,020.47
Ballymena District Office	4,251,750.71	4,879,041.64	5,293,758.59	5,913,731.15
Antrim District Office	2,023,183.99	2,295,896.21	2,611,397.99	2,945,219.77
Newtownabbey District 1	1,997,972.61	2,271,439.01	2,629,153.11	2,970,954.97
Newtownabbey District 2	2,334,601.41	2,648,425.55	2,916,715.69	3,340,841.31
Carrickfergus District Office	2,275,209.36	2,592,789.00	2,990,099.46	3,453,758.34
Larne District Office	2,626,359.63	2,975,866.35	3,357,547.00	3,600,927.47
Ballycastle District Office	1,617,776.72	1,832,570.49	1,930,159.05	2,180,690.06
Ballymoney District Office	1,723,830.89	1,954,298.57	2,258,517.31	2,618,212.94
Coleraine District Office	4,688,399.34	5,303,058.97	5,545,421.47	6,307,711.17
Waterloo Place District	8,191,259.52	9,339,294.57	9,724,749.16	10,508,859.49
Waterside District	6,550,629.93	7,460,808.85	8,689,451.93	9,894,377.65
Collon Terrace District	5,163,359.15	5,853,693.10	6,922,327.97	7,935,088.96

NIHE Office	2003-2004 £	2004-2005 £	2005-2006 £	2006-2007 £
Limavady District	2,385,898.74	2,719,252.63	3,118,919.19	3,552,688.18
Magherafelt District	2,036,515.09	2,312,046.09	2,522,620.10	2,678,690.12
Strabane District	3,723,825.41	4,226,215.05	4,841,109.79	5,810,788.57
Omagh District	5,191,315.05	5,841,479.66	6,043,174.19	6,657,909.12
Cookstown District	2,041,126.14	3,029,577.59	2,598,017.66	2,896,417.72
Total Non Nihe Hb Spend	154,588,389.96	176,491,889.61	191,079,066.17	216,747,685.13

Good Relations

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with the Northern Ireland Office regarding the removal of ‘peace walls’. (AQW 1154/07)

Ms Ritchie: My Department works with communities that are frequently divided by boundaries. All too often this division is marked by a peace wall. I believe these barriers can reinforce division and discourage the development of good relations between people, and I heartily wish to see them removed.

I recognise however that the peace walls in many areas are there because of fear.

I believe the best way of removing this fear is through a process of engagement. Developing good relations between our communities is a very significant part of what DSD does. Our daily work in supporting and developing the capacity of communities, in promoting shared space through regenerating our cities and towns leads to positive engagement between communities. My department is committed to a range of positive action through the A Shared Future strategy and I intend to drive forward this side of our work.

To date I have had no discussions with NIO on this matter but intend to do so in the future.

Social Housing

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to list all housing executive estates that are currently under consideration with a view to designating them as shared future housing areas. (AQW 1155/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has proposed, through a selection process and community consultation, designating 30 existing social housing areas as shared future neighbourhoods, over a pilot three year period. The selected estates will be announced on completion of the consultation period.

Housing Benefit Claimants

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of claimants of housing benefit, broken down by (a) District Council area; and (b) Westminster constituency, in the last three years. (AQW 1165/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not hold information on claimants broken down by District Council area or Westminster constituency. The table below shows the numbers of claimants of housing benefit in the last three years broken down by Northern Ireland Housing Executive district office administrative area.

District	2006-2007	2005-2006	2004-2005
Belfast 1	6747	6533	6158
Belfast 2	6240	6298	6243
Belfast 3	7492	7424	7145
Belfast 4	5786	5864	5930
Belfast 5	2570	2677	2732
Belfast 6	2767	2913	2982
Belfast 7	2378	2530	2573
Bangor	3702	3717	3662
Newtownards	4265	4198	4235
Castlereagh	3272	3361	3248
Lisburn	4142	4110	4007
Poleglass	2687	2558	2480
Downpatrick	4058	3964	3810
Banbridge	2416	2322	2210
Newry	6029	5994	6100
Armagh	2942	2974	2991
Lurgan	4052	4048	3898
Portadown	2605	2607	2520
Dungannon	3056	3036	2943
Fermanagh	3370	3464	3500

District	2006-2007	2005-2006	2004-2005
Ballymena	3748	3743	3682
Antrim	2586	2687	2636
Newtownabbey 1	2382	2433	2432
Newtownabbey 2	2549	2549	2507
Carrickfergus	2321	2312	2277
Larne	2077	2120	2119
Ballycastle	1327	1314	1273
Ballymoney	1940	1903	1866
Coleraine	4236	4249	4220
Derry 1	4677	4697	4650
Derry 2	4242	4175	4121
Derry 3	4197	4181	4090
Limavady	2240	2226	2193
Magherafelt	1988	1974	1985
Strabane	3680	3514	3500
Omagh	3423	3411	3400
Cookstown	1784	1795	1774
Total	129973	129875	128092

DSD Spend on Consultancy Services

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's projected spend on consultancy services, in the 2007/2008 financial year. (AQW 1177/07)

Ms Ritchie: The projected spend on consultancy services in the 2007/2008 financial year for the Department for Social Development is £2,785,053. This spend relates to Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group.

Public Housing in East Derry/Londonderry

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has for the provision of more public housing in East Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 1221/07)

Ms Ritchie: The East Derry/Londonderry area comprises the Coleraine and Limavady districts.

In Coleraine, plans are to start 23 additional houses in 2007/08 and 118 additional houses over the following four year period.

In Limavady, plans are to start 11 additional houses in 2007/08 and 27 additional houses over the following four year period.

Market Value of Housing Executive Properties

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the valuation process for Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties, prior to sale. (AQW 1242/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has appointed, through a tendering process, external professionally qualified valuers to determine the market values of its properties.

When a tenant's eligibility to purchase has been established, the valuer is instructed to carry out a market valuation of the property. There is a 21 day target for completion of this valuation. The valuation forms the basis of an offer to purchase which is made to the tenant. If a tenant is dissatisfied with the market value placed on a property, a request for a re-determination (i.e. a revaluation) can be made. The re-determination is carried out by the District Valuer (Valuation and Lands Agency) and is binding on the tenant and the Housing Executive.

New Build Scheme for Comber

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale for commencement of the new build scheme for Upper Crescent, Comber. (AQW 1243/07)

Ms Ritchie: BIH Housing Association plan to start this 50 house scheme in the latter part of this year.

Works Contract

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what criteria is used by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to determine that a contractor is no longer suitable for tendering for Housing Executive schemes. (AQW 1245/07)

Ms Ritchie: Different criteria apply to two levels of contract.

Firstly, where the value, or aggregated value, of any proposed Works Contract exceeds £3,611,319, the Housing Executive is regulated by the Public Contracts Regulations 2006 (PCR 2006). For such contracts, the Housing Executive pre-qualifies contractors for the tender list. If the contractor, its directors or any other person who has powers of representation, decision or control of the contractor has been convicted of any of the offences detailed in Part 4 Regulation 23 of the PCR 2006, the contractor is excluded from the procurement process. The Housing Executive undertakes financial checks on all applicants to determine their capability to undertake a contract of the value of the

proposed works. The Housing Executive also evaluates the technical ability to perform the works, including skills, efficiency, experience and reliability. This also includes previous performance on works of a similar nature and value.

Secondly, for Works Contracts valued at less than £3,611,319, the Housing Executive is regulated by its Standing Orders. The Housing Executive also takes account of Public Sector Procurement Guidance and procurement best practice in line with the rest of the Public Sector in Northern Ireland. Additionally, and again in line with all public sector bodies, the Housing Executive uses Constructionline to assess the competence of contractors to undertake the works. The Housing Executive will also use information held by it as regards performance by contractors on past and current schemes

Egan Initiative

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to list those contractors that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), under the Egan Initiative, has determined unsuitable for the award of tenders in any forthcoming NIHE schemes, due to poor delivery of work in previous schemes. (AQW 1246/07)

Ms Ritchie: Under the Achieving Excellence in Construction (Egan) initiative, the Housing Executive is currently procuring a Framework Contract of three to five firms to undertake its Revenue Replacement/

External Replacement programme. This procurement is regulated by Public Contracts Regulations 2006. Tender documents issued to 13 contractors and completed tenders were to be received by the Housing Executive on 5 July 2007. The Housing Executive intends to award the Framework Contract in Autumn 2007. I have asked the Housing Executive to provide you with the information requested when this procurement exercise has been completed.

Egan Contracts

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what measures the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has put in place to prevent contractors that have been awarded tenders from subcontracting to contractors that have been judged unsuitable by NIHE; and what action will be taken against contractors found using such practices. (AQW 1247/07)

Ms Ritchie: Under Achieving Excellence in Construction (Egan) contracts, contractors are required to submit information as regards their supply

chain management and details of the aspects of work which they propose to sub-contract together with details of their proposed sub-contractors. All Housing Executive contracts require contractors to seek the prior approval of the Contract Administrator if they intend to sub-contract any portion of the works.

Northern Ireland Civil Service Special Bonus Scheme

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of non-pensionable bonuses that were paid to staff in her department in each of the last three years; and what steps she has taken to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 1248/07)

Ms Ritchie: Non-pensionable bonuses can be paid to staff at all grades to reward performance in two ways, as part of the annual pay award, or under the Northern Ireland Civil Service Special Bonus Scheme.

Performance related bonuses paid as part of the annual pay award are an important and integral element of the Northern Ireland Civil Service reward strategy, and are used to acknowledge and reward higher performing staff.

The Special Bonus Scheme is designed to reward members of staff in particularly demanding tasks or situations during the year or where good performance was achieved under particularly adverse conditions.

The award of performance related bonuses is therefore regarded as being complementary to, rather than as a substitute for, the award of consolidated pay increases.

The number of non-pensionable bonuses paid to staff in the Department for Social Development in the last 3 years is detailed in the table below.

Year	Performance Related Bonuses	Special Bonus Scheme
2004/2005	6289	1303
2005/2006	5637	1661
2006/2007	5897	1970

Please note that information can only be provided in relation to staff currently employed by the Department.

Sale of Housing Executive Property to Tenants

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the standard procedure for

selling Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties to tenants. (AQW 1301/07)

Ms Ritchie: The standard procedure for selling Housing Executive properties is detailed in the Housing Executive's '*Homes for sale: a tenant's guide to house purchase*' information booklet which is included with every house sale application form issued to tenants. The publication is available on the Housing Executive web site at www.nihe.gov.uk/publications/leaflets/Homes_for_SaleJune 05.pdf and also at all the Housing Executive District Offices. A copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The timescales for selling properties is as follows:

- Application to offer - 10 weeks
- Tenant acceptance period - 6 weeks
- Acceptance of offer to issue of contract - 8 weeks
- Tenant acceptance of contract - 8 weeks
- Signed contract of completion - 10 weeks

Average time from application to completion is 10 months.

Sale of Housing Executive Property to Tenants

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the time scale for selling Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties to tenants. (AQW 1302/07)

Ms Ritchie: The standard procedure for selling Housing Executive properties is detailed in the Housing Executive's '*Homes for sale: a tenant's guide to house purchase*' information booklet which is included with every house sale application form issued to tenants. The publication is available on the Housing Executive web site at www.nihe.gov.uk/publications/leaflets/Homes_for_SaleJune 05.pdf and also at all the Housing Executive District Offices. A copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The timescales for selling properties is as follows:

- Application to offer - 10 weeks
- Tenant acceptance period - 6 weeks
- Acceptance of offer to issue of contract - 8 weeks
- Tenant acceptance of contract - 8 weeks
- Signed contract of completion - 10 weeks

Average time from application to completion is 10 months.

Redevelopment of Queen's Parade, Bangor

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale within which her

department will produce its revised plans for the redevelopment of Queen's Parade Bangor.

(AQW 1317/07)

Ms Ritchie: DSD has employed GVA Grimley to conduct a detailed analysis of the current development proposal and to consider it in light of the views expressed during a public consultation in 2006. The consultants have completed a number of elements of the work and will shortly be meeting with the developer to discuss some concepts which GVA believe to be important to the success of the scheme.

Once these core concepts have been agreed, there will be a second round of public consultation to test the public view of the revised concept and to inform GVA Grimley's report to DSD. Subject to the GVA report, the Department will prepare a development brief which will bring together all the objectives, concepts and design principles which would contribute to the proper planning of the area. The Department will then invite Karl Greenfarm Ltd, as the major landholder, to respond to the brief. Once the Department receives a response it will then enter a period of negotiation with the developer, if necessary, to refine the scheme.

It is anticipated that this process should be completed by April 2008. At that stage, we would hope to have plans which DSD could support and which could be progressed into the Planning system.

Grant Funding to Forbairt Feirste

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of funding given by her department to Forbairt Feirste, in each year since 1998. (AQW 1318/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department for Social Development provided £7,000 in grant funding to Forbairt Feirste in 1998 for the appointment of consultants to develop an existing proposal for an Irish language business centre for West Belfast. There has been no further funding awarded to this organisation since 1998.

Demolition of Housing Executive Property

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the proposed timetable for the demolition of Northern Ireland Housing Executive-owned houses in the Antrim Borough Council area, which are vacant and in a state of disrepair, and which are not in line for any further repairs. (AQW 1322/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has identified 20 flats for demolition within the Dunamoy Drive area

of Stiles. The appointed contractor is currently on site removing asbestos from the dwellings and the demolitions will be completed before the end of July 2007.

The Housing Executive has identified a further 32 flats and maisonettes in Chainé Court, Ballycraigy and is in the process of rehousing the remaining three tenants to allow the demolition of the affected properties during this financial year.

Housing Executive Owned Properties in Antrim Borough Council

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive-owned properties in the Antrim Borough Council area that are (a) unoccupied; and (b) in a state of disrepair; and to outline when a programme of repairs will commence. (AQW 1325/07)

Ms Ritchie: At 30 June 2007 there were a total of 241 vacant Housing Executive properties within the area covered by the Housing Executive's Antrim District Office, as detailed below.

Awaiting Imminent Relet	Pending demolition	Included in improvements schemes	Used for decanting	Pending sale/transfer	Total
30	49	31	37	94	241

A total of 36 of these properties require major repairs, although 5 are in the process of being sold. The remaining 31 dwellings are included in current or future planned improvement schemes to allow them to be relet.

Work is underway on 3 properties, with 19 scheduled to start later in 2007/08 and 9 scheduled to start in 2008/09.

DSD Staff Surveys

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of staff surveys carried out by her department in each of the last two years; and what was the total cost of carrying out such surveys. (AQW 1347/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department for Social Development carried out the following surveys during the last 2 years:

Year	Number of Surveys	Costs
April 2005 – March 2006	7	1 survey - cost £1,200 (estimate).
		2 survey – nil cost.
		4 surveys - minimal cost – carried out within existing resources.
April 2006 – March 2007	10	1 survey cost £387.92 (estimate).
		9 surveys - minimal cost – carried out within existing resources.

Tendering for NIHE Contracts

Miss Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the process of appeal against determinations by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) that a contractor will no longer be suitable for tendering for NIHE schemes. (AQW 1358/07)

Ms Ritchie: Contractors who are unsuccessful in meeting the qualifying criteria for contracts are offered a debriefing at each stage of the procurement process. This is undertaken by the Chairperson of the Evaluation Committee, with a procurement officer present. The contractor is given details of each area scored by the Committee and is informed of areas which did not meet the qualifying criteria.

In the event of the contractor not being satisfied with the reasons given an appeal can be made to the Head of Procurement who will subsequently meet the contractor, hear the evidence and take legal advice before issuing a written detailed and reasoned adjudication to the contractor.

The tender documentation indicates that a final appeal may be made to the Courts in Northern Ireland.

Bonfire Management

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in relation to bonfires that are erected on its property, in particular, in relation to (a) public liability insurance in the event of a serious injury; (b) damage to ground; and (c) section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 1380/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive 'self insures' against all public liability claims up to a limit of £500,000. This includes injury liabilities which arise from incidents on Housing Executive property, including bonfire related incidents. Catastrophe insurance is secured to cover up to £10m in respect of single

incidents, where claim settlement costs exceed the self-insured limit of £500,000.

A good relations and community led approach to best manage bonfires, to reduce their numbers and reduce the cost of reinstating sites is in place. Support is given to local communities to focus on more acceptable expressions of culture, which extends to the control of bonfires by way of local agreements. One of the general benefits in providing support to improve bonfire management is reduced clean up costs and repairs to the ground.

Clearance of bonfire sites identified as being greater than 1.5msq in diameter is dealt with as part of the Grounds Maintenance contract. All burnt litter and debris less than this, is considered part of normal litter lifting operation through the response maintenance programme. Within seven days of a bonfire being burnt, all bonfire debris, including ashes and material not burnt or scattered, are removed. Grass areas damaged are made good.

Local bonfire management initiatives are monitored closely to ensure good relations duties under Section 75 (part 2) and community relations policy into action on the ground, through a partnership approach.

Combating Anti-Social Behaviour in Housing Executive Areas

Mr Fra McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what measures she will implement to combat anti-social activity in housing estates across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1415/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Housing Executive has in place Anti-Social Behaviour Policies and Procedures to address anti-social activity when it arises on its estates. The Housing Executive receives approximately 4,500 reports of anti-social behaviour each year to its 35 District Offices. The vast majority of these reports relate to low level anti-social behaviour (pets or noise), which are resolved by the District Office without recourse to legal action.

There does, however, remain a need to provide some form of cautionary or supportive intervention. This may take the form of a warning letter to the perpetrator advising them of their unacceptable behaviour. Over 60% of all cases are resolved with a warning letter. Other options available include the use of:

- Acceptable Behaviour Contracts or mediation if both parties are willing to participate.
- Working with another agency (social services, health trust etc.) should an underlying vulnerability be identified which may have contributed to the reported anti-social behaviour.

- Where the reported anti-social behaviour is of a more serious and persistent nature the Housing Executive will use its legal powers (as contained in the Housing (NI) Order 2003 and the Anti Social Behaviour (NI) Order 2004) to stop the anti-social behaviour and protect the wider community. All legal action is dependent on the quality of evidence available. To this end, agencies will work closely with victims and communities to ensure that those who engage in serious anti-social behaviour are brought before the courts. Work also goes on with the PSNI and other statutory and voluntary sector organisations to secure sufficient evidence to support:

- A Decree for the repossession of a property
- An Injunction to stop the anti-social behaviour
- An Anti -Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)

Urban Development Grant Scheme

Mr Fra McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what financial assistance is available to businesses in the Castle Street, King Street and Bank Square area, in addition to Public Realm Development funding. (AQW 1416/07)

Ms Ritchie: The Department's Urban Development Grant scheme is available, subject to satisfactory appraisal and approval of eligible proposals, to businesses in the King Street area since it falls within Lower Falls Neighbourhood Renewal area.

Housing Executive Community Centres

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive houses in the Antrim Borough Council area that are (a) used as community centres; and (b) used as community centres, but are currently underused or vacant. (AQW 1417/07)

Ms Ritchie: There are nine Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in the Antrim Borough Council District currently being used as community centres. None are vacant or currently underused.

Affordable Housing

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development if she will undertake a review of the sale of Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock to tenants, as part of a wider affordable housing strategy, with a view to increasing the number of homes that are owner-occupied. (AQW 1424/07)

Ms Ritchie: Sir John Semple's independent review into affordable housing in Northern Ireland made eighty recommendations, including a Review of the House Sales Scheme. The Interdepartmental Group which I have established is tasked with considering all of Sir John's recommendations and will examine how the House Sales Scheme can make a contribution to affordable housing.

Affordable Housing

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans to address the need for affordable housing in the (a) Omagh District Council area; and (b) the Strabane District Council area. (AQW 1425/07)

Ms Ritchie: My Department is tackling the issue of affordable housing through a variety of programmes and schemes including the Social Housing Development Programme, a house sales scheme for social tenants, the housing benefit system and the shared equity scheme operated by Co-ownership Housing Association.

Sir John Semple's independent review into affordable housing in Northern Ireland made eighty recommendations, which are wide ranging and will impact on a number of Departments. I have therefore established an Interdepartmental Group, which is tasked with considering all of Sir John's recommendations. This group met on 5 July, and will meet bi-monthly, and report at the end of the first year. An action plan with target dates will be agreed shortly.

Specifically for Omagh and Strabane, the Social Housing Development Programme for the next 5 years comprises 52 and 95 units, respectively.

Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of oral tribunals on Incapacity Benefit appeals that were processed to conclusion; and the number of these that overturned the original decision, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1431/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not available separately in relation to oral and written tribunals. The information provided relates to appeals which were determined either by way of an oral hearing or decided by the tribunal on the papers alone.

The total number of Incapacity Benefit appeals that were processed to conclusion and the number of these that had the original decision overturned were:

	Total Appeals	Number Allowed
2004/2005	3,126	1,170
2005/2006	3,855	1,270
2006/2007	4,406	1,616

Disability Living Allowance Appeals

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of oral tribunals on Disability Living Allowance appeals that were processed to conclusion; and the number of these that overturned the original decision, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1432/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not available separately in relation to oral and written tribunals. The information provided relates to appeals which were determined either by way of an oral hearing or decided by the tribunal on the papers alone.

The total number of Disability Living Allowance appeals that were processed to conclusion and the number of these that had the original decision overturned were:

	Total Appeals	Number Allowed
2004/2005	5288	1493
2005/2006	5304	1546
2006/2007	4563	1560

Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of written tribunals on Incapacity Benefit appeals that were processed to conclusion; and the number of these that overturned the original decision, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1433/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not available separately in relation to oral and written tribunals. The information provided relates to appeals which were determined either by way of an oral hearing or decided by the tribunal on the papers alone.

The total number of Incapacity Benefit appeals that were processed to conclusion and the number of these that had the original decision overturned were:

	Total Appeals	Number Allowed
2004/2005	3,126	1,170
2005/2006	3,855	1,270
2006/2007	4,406	1,616

Disability Living Allowance Appeals

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of written tribunals on Disability Living Allowance appeals that were processed to conclusion; and the number of these that overturned the original decision, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1434/07)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is not available separately in relation to oral and written tribunals. The information provided relates to appeals which were determined either by way of an oral hearing or decided by the tribunal on the papers alone.

The total number of Disability Living Allowance appeals that were processed to conclusion and the number of these that had the original decision overturned were:

	Total Appeals	Number Allowed
2004/2005	5288	1493
2005/2006	5304	1546
2006/2007	4563	1560

Pension Credit

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, further to AQW 416/07, to outline why it was not possible to provide a breakdown of new claimants for pension credit by constituency; District Council area and Social Security Office, when a similar breakdown was provided for pension credit claimants in AQW 379/07. (AQW 1444/07)

Ms Ritchie: The questions relate to different subject data. AQW 379/07 requested details of the number of people in receipt of Pension Credit, and AQW 416/07 asks for the number of new claimants for Pension Credit for the last five years. The answer to AQW 416/07 was provided on the basis that new claims referred to the number of claims to Pension Credit regardless of their outcome; allowed, disallowed or withdrawn. The Agency does not retain information relating to allowed, disallowed, withdrawn claims by constituency, District Council area and Social Security Office and could not therefore provide the information requested in that format.

However, the Agency does hold a subset of information in the format requested in relation to the number of allowed claims to Pension Credit and this is set out in the tables below:

TABLE 1: PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANT ONFLOWS BY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE/JOBS & BENEFITS OFFICE BOUNDARY:2003/04 TO 2006/07

	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007
Andersonstown	346	317	214	157
Antrim	616	332	204	131
Armagh	386	258	194	111
Ballymena	787	374	311	130
Ballymoney	490	249	190	119
Ballynahinch	322	154	97	50
Banbridge	423	238	163	92
Bangor	841	415	270	132
Carrickfergus	446	192	138	65
Coleraine	627	321	244	137
Cookstown	235	169	142	80
Corporation Street	668	480	355	201
Downpatrick	299	208	119	87
Dungannon	298	233	199	96
Enniskillen	554	397	269	175
Falls Road	282	270	216	145
Foyle	436	391	340	239
Hollywood Road	948	545	381	180
Kilkeel	148	100	91	42
Knockbreda	779	382	248	135
Larne	363	180	133	88
Limavady	259	163	129	77
Lisburn	796	409	283	147
Lisnagelvin	404	288	206	150
Lurgan	559	339	274	145
Magherafelt	408	241	166	92
Newcastle	215	127	92	40
Newry	565	433	315	197
Newtownabbey	672	344	244	126
Newtownards	551	321	246	114
Omagh	323	246	190	105
Portadown	427	239	187	97
Shaftesbury Square	404	229	166	95
Shankill Road	393	195	176	109
Strabane	333	275	225	149

* Pension Credit is a centralised benefit and therefore has no Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office indicator. Table 1 is a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 35 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries. Customers whose postcode can not be allocated to a Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary are not included in this analysis.

TABLE 2: PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANT ONFLOWS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA: 2003/04 TO 2006/07

	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007
Antrim	440	223	152	104
Ards	791	428	299	144
Armagh	448	290	207	116
Ballymena	721	337	287	116
Ballymoney	335	166	117	75
Banbridge	425	232	163	89
Belfast	2,970	1,950	1,436	847
Carrickfergus	445	192	138	65
Castlereagh	743	332	220	122
Coleraine	596	316	242	134
Cookstown	273	200	170	91
Craigavon	851	519	421	214
Derry	811	650	532	381
Down	655	413	267	149
Dungannon	365	281	225	116
Fermanagh	499	351	239	159
Larne	362	179	133	88
Limavady	283	192	145	83
Lisburn	938	555	386	231
Magherafelt	403	232	157	87
Moyle	219	99	84	52
Newry & Mourne	735	549	413	247
Newtownabbey	875	459	298	151
North Down	763	388	272	119
Omagh	328	257	202	106
Strabane	339	275	220	152

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to District Council on the basis of their postcode. Customers whose postcode can not be allocated to a District Council are not included in this analysis.

TABLE 3: PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANT ONFLOWS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY: 2003/04 TO 2006/07

	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007
Belfast East	973	560	358	186
Belfast North	1,165	711	532	299
Belfast South	794	416	299	163
Belfast West	866	695	524	370

	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007
East Antrim	944	439	326	187
East Londonderry	879	508	387	217
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	772	544	387	248
Foyle	811	650	532	381
Lagan Valley	959	508	338	195
Mid Ulster	768	520	404	205
Newry And Armagh	864	607	445	257
North Antrim	1,275	602	488	243
North Down	944	470	318	142
South Antrim	898	492	324	180
South Down	983	640	447	252
Strangford	965	533	383	188
Upper Bann	1,086	638	511	267
West Tyrone	667	532	422	258

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Customers whose postcode can not be allocated to a Parliamentary Constituency are not included in this analysis.

Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans

Mr Gerry Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to specify the date on which her department made the decision to redefine Action Plans devised by local Neighbourhood Partnerships as ‘agendas for change’; and whether this change had prior Ministerial approval. (AQW 1452/07)

Ms Ritchie: Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans, developed by Neighbourhood Partnerships to identify and prioritise local needs have not been formally redefined and remain central to the successful implementation of Neighbourhood Renewal. Whilst some of the actions in these plans lend themselves to early implementation, others will require further discussion with relevant statutory bodies to ensure they provide the most appropriate and effective response to the identified need. As such, these Action Plans provide an “agenda for action” in each neighbourhood.

Belfast Regeneration Office

Mr Gerry Adams asked the Minister for Social Development what level of statutory involvement the Belfast Regeneration Office has secured in regard to (a) funding of; and (b) representation on, Neighbourhood Partnerships in West Belfast. (AQW 1453/07)

Ms Ritchie: Most Neighbourhood Partnerships are not formally constituted bodies and do not, therefore, directly receive funding. My Department has, however, made money available for technical assistance to enable the Partnerships to develop Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans for their areas. The money awarded by DSD is normally managed by a lead partner organisation. For example, the Colin Neighbourhood Initiative Partnership which had been in existence before Neighbourhood Renewal receives funding from Department for Social Development (DSD) to deliver a number of programmes and the Greater Shankill Partnership which is core funded by DSD as one of the 5 Belfast Area Partnerships.

The following table shows the statutory organisations that are represented on each of the Neighbourhood Partnerships in West Belfast and Greater Shankill. In addition, BRO has established an inter-Departmental group to consider how best to implement Neighbourhood Renewal actions that cut across a number of Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in Belfast.

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Statutory Body represented on Neighbourhood Partnership
Andersonstown	Belfast City Council Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Council for Catholic Maintained Schools Department for Employment and Learning Department for Social Development Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Greater Falls	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Department for Social Development Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Greater Shankill	Belfast Education and Library Board Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Department for Social Development Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Lenadoon	Belfast City Council Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Council for Catholic Maintained Schools Department for Employment and Learning Department for Social Development Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Upper Springfield/Whiterock	Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Department for Employment and Learning Department for Social Development Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships

Mr Gerry Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to explain whether future funding for community activity from her department is conditional upon applicants providing written evidence that they are (a) endorsed by the Neighbourhood Partnership; and/or (b) providing services congruent with the Neighbourhood Partnership draft action plan, otherwise known as 'agenda for change'. (AQW 1454/07)

Ms Ritchie: My Department provides funding for community activity through a number of programmes including Neighbourhood Renewal, each with different criteria. In relation to Neighbourhood Renewal specifically, funds continue to be available to support services and activities where these clearly address local priorities and needs as identified in Action Plans, developed and agreed by individual Neighbourhood Partnerships.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Wednesday 29 August 2007

Financial Year	Expenditure
2004/2005	£00.00
2005/2006	£49,000.00
2006/2007	£50.61

Expenditure on Legal Fees by CCMS and ELBs

Written Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Ulster-Scots Expenditure

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education how much money her department has spent in relation to Ulster-Scots, in each year since the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages came into force in the United Kingdom. (AQW 360/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I list below expenditure in relation to Ulster-Scots since July 2001.

Financial Year	Expenditure
2001/2002	£00.00
2002/2003	£00.00
2003/2004	£69.95

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each year since 2000, the expenditure on legal fees, broken down by € (i) each Education and Library Board; and (ii) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on (a) appeals from parents against decisions regarding placement as a result of a statement of special needs; (b) suspension of pupils from primary, post-primary and special schools; (c) grievance procedures from teachers; (d) grievance procedures from school principals; and (e) disciplinary action involving administrative or advisory staff. (AQW 1197/07)

Ms Ruane: I have been advised that legal fees incurred for each year since 2000, broken down by (i) each Education and Library Board and (ii) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools in relation to (a) appeals from parents against decisions regarding placement as a result of a statement of special needs; (b) suspension of pupils from primary, post-primary and special schools; (c) grievance procedures from teachers; (d) grievance procedures from school principals; and (e) disciplinary action involving administrative or advisory staff, are as follows:

a. Appeals from parents against decisions regarding placement as a result of a statement of special needs.

AUTHORITY	Financial Year 2000/2001	Financial Year 2001/2002	Financial Year 2002/2003	Financial Year 2003/2004	Financial Year 2004/2005	Financial Year 2005/2006	Financial Year 2006/2007
BELB			£4,700.00	£2,350.00	£750.00		£1,468.75
NEELB				£1,468.75			
SEELB							£4,112.50
SELB				£4,112.50		£3,525.00	
WELB							
CCMS*							
Total			£4,700.00	£7,931.25	£750.00	£3,525.00	£5,581.25

The fees detailed above are in respect of legal fees incurred in respect of the appeals to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal. The figures exclude legal expenditure incurred in respect of judicial review fees since the latter are not appeals.

*As an area Board maintains the statement of special needs regardless of the type of school attended, (controlled, maintained, voluntary grammar, grant maintained, integrated) CCMS would not incur any legal fees in this area.

b. Legal fees incurred in relation to suspensions of pupils from primary, post primary and special schools.

Authority	Financial Year 2000/2001	Financial Year 2001/2002	Financial Year 2002/2003	Financial Year 2003/2004	Financial Year 2004/2005	Financial Year 2005/2006	Financial Year 2006/2007
BELB							
Primary							
Post Primary							£587.50
Special							
Total							£587.50
SEELB							
Primary							
Post Primary					£4,700.00	£4,503.77	
Special							
Total					£4,700.00	£4,503.77	
CCMS							
Primary					£43,539.12		£13,963.37
Post Primary				£4,347.00	£10,079.29	£10,269.50	£8,838.63
Total				£4,347.00	£53,618.41	£10,269.50	£22,802.00
Grand Totals				£4,347.00	£58,318.41	£14,773.27	£23,389.50

The information supplied for the Education and Library Boards has been supplied by the Education and Library Boards in-house Solicitors who act for the controlled sector in cases of this nature. There were no legal fees incurred by the NEELB, SELB and WELB since 2000, in relation to suspensions of pupils from primary, post primary and special schools. The information supplied in respect of CCMS is derived from legal bills of costs supplied by CCMS's external solicitors, and in one instance the Children's Law Centre, to the Chief Legal Adviser for approval.

c. Legal fees incurred in respect of grievance procedures from teachers.

None of the Boards maintain records in respect of in-school grievances raised by teachers which are a matter for the school principal and individual boards of governors in controlled schools. Such matters normally do not incur expenditure on external legal fees. Boards may however, on occasion, incur legal costs in respect of unresolved grievances from teachers who have taken legal action, such as a claim before the Office of the Industrial Tribunal & Fair Employment Tribunal, on the basis, by way of example only, of sex discrimination, constructive dismissal, disability discrimination, racial discrimination etc. Whilst Boards would hold information in respect of the legal fees incurred in cases of this nature, cases are not further subcategorised and therefore such costs can not be readily separately identified.

CCMS have confirmed that they have not incurred any costs associated with grievance procedures for teachers.

d. Legal fees incurred in respect of grievance procedures from school principals.

None of the Boards maintain records in respect of in-school grievances from school principals which are a matter for individual boards of governors in controlled schools. Such matters within the controlled sector normally do not incur expenditure on external legal fees. Boards may however, on occasion, incur legal costs in respect of unresolved grievances from principals who have taken legal action, such as a claim before the Office of the Industrial Tribunal & Fair Employment Tribunal, on the basis, by way of example only, of sex discrimination, constructive dismissal, disability discrimination, racial discrimination etc. Whilst Boards would hold information in respect of the legal fees incurred in cases of this nature, cases are not further subcategorised and therefore such costs can not be readily separately identified.

CCMS have confirmed that they have not incurred any costs associated with grievance procedures for school principals.

e. Legal fees incurred in respect of disciplinary action involving administrative or advisory staff.

The Boards normally do not incur legal expenditure on disciplinary action involving administrative or

advisory staff. Where legal advice is required it is normally provided in-house by the Board's Human Resources sections who, where necessary, obtain advice from the Board's in-house solicitors.

Where disciplinary action results in dismissal this may result in legal fees, where the employee dismissed challenges the dismissal on the basis that it is unfair. Whilst Boards hold information in respect of legal fees

incurred in respect of unfair dismissals, the unfair dismissal cases are not further categorised by type, by way of example only – redundancy, misconduct, capability, ill-health, some other substantial reason. Costs in relation to dismissal following disciplinary action, cannot, therefore be readily separately identified.

CCMS legal fees in respect of disciplinary action involving administrative or advisory staff:

Authority	Financial Year 2000/2001	Financial Year 2001/2002	Financial Year 2002/2003	Financial Year 2003/2004	Financial Year 2004/2005	Financial Year 2005/2006	Financial Year 2006/2007
CCMS			£17,419.00	£10,044.00		£2,115.00	£6,201.00

The 2006/07 costs above include expenses relating to a teacher case, as this particular case was not indemnified by the area Board, and CCMS was liable. This situation is unusual.

Salaries of the Chief Executives of ELBs

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the salaries received by the Chief Executives of each of the Education and Library Boards.

(AQW 1451/07)

Ms Ruane: The salaries received by the Chief Executive of each Education and Library Board are outlined in the table below. Figures reported, in bandings of £5k, are consistent with the reporting requirements of the Remuneration Report detailed within each ELB Annual Report and Account document.

Board	Amount £000'S
BELB	85-90
NEELB	100-105
SEELB	80-85
SELB	95-100
WELB	95-100

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Workplace 2010

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each building the department proposes to sell as part of the Workplace 2010 proposals, (a) the average annual maintenance costs for the past five years; and (b) expenditure on building modernisation and improvement since 1999. (AQW 1292/07)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): The details of the average maintenance costs and expenditure as requested are set out in the attached annexes.

Annex A provides annual average maintenance costs for the past 5 years. Annex B provides expenditure on building modernisation and improvements since 1999.

ANNEX A ANNUAL AVERAGE MAINTENANCE COST FOR THE LAST 5 YEARS (APRIL 2002 – MARCH 2007)

Note: For buildings proposed to transfer as part of WP2010

Premises	Leasehold / Freehold	Annual Average £
Hollywood JBO	Freehold	21,586.00
Bangor SSO	Leasehold	26,761.00
Foyle JBO	Freehold	101,392.00
Waterfront Plaza	Leasehold	1,042.00
Lisnagelvin JBO	Freehold	40,378.00
Knockbreda JBO	Freehold	16,948.00
Newtownabbey JBO	Freehold	34,818.00
Interpoint	Leasehold	38,248.00
Antrim JBO	Freehold	40,586.00
Andersonstown SSO	Freehold	44,700.00
Coleraine JBO	Freehold	34,217.00
Ballymena County Hall	Freehold	253,547.00
Lisburn JBO	Leasehold	35,022.00
Carlisle House	Leasehold	15,093.00
Castle Buildings	Freehold	420,911.00

Premises	Leasehold / Freehold	Annual Average £
Castlecourt	Long Leasehold	312,924.00
Causeway Exchange	Leasehold	12,701.00
Dungannon JBO	Freehold	105,938.00
Armagh JBO	Freehold	17,760.00
Newry JBO	Freehold	15,076.00
Ballynahinch SSO	Freehold	12,708.00
Ballymoney JBO	Freehold	22,302.00
Kilkeel JBO	Freehold	12,792.00
Larne JBO	Freehold	70,812.00
Enniskillen JBO	Freehold	46,692.00
Clarence Court	Freehold	257,056.00
Coleraine County Hall	Freehold	203,681.00
Shaftsbury Square JBO	Leasehold	12,062.00
Craigantlet Buildings	Freehold	147,430.00
Dundonald House - Annex A	Freehold	12,763.00
Dundonald House - Annex D	Freehold	12,688.00
Dundonald House - Annex C	Freehold	15,613.00
Dundonald House	Freehold	309,624.00
Dundonald House - Annex B	Freehold	16,251.00
James House	Leasehold	17,089.00
Ferguson/Royston House	Leasehold	9,089.00
Windsor House	Leasehold	17,472.00
Goodwood House	Leasehold	30,567.00
Hillview Buildings	Freehold	7,442.00
Hydebank	Freehold	97,583.00
Klondyke	Leasehold	52.00
Lesley Exchange	Leasehold	404.00
The Lighthouse	Leasehold	12,624.00
Lincoln Building	Leasehold	109,778.00
Marlborough House	Freehold	182,320.00
Millennium House	Leasehold	4,613.00
Netherleigh	Freehold	138,585.00
Orchard House	Freehold	150,747.00
Centre House	Leasehold	27,716.00
Rathgael House (2 buildings Old & New)	Freehold/Long leasehold	384,778.00
Rathkeltair House	Freehold	73,723.00
River House	Leasehold	41,415.00
Rosepark Site	Freehold	79,429.00

Premises	Leasehold / Freehold	Annual Average £
Shankill JBO	Freehold	33,027.00
Magherafelt JBO	Freehold	32,751.00
Limavady JBO	Freehold	25,939.00
Lurgan JBO	Freehold	28,128.00
Banbridge JBO	Freehold	9,964.00
Corporation Street SSO	Freehold	62,295.00
Carrickfergus JBO	Freehold	11,492.00
Newtownards SSO	Freehold	25,076.00
Cookstown SSO	Freehold	16,507.00
Falls Road JBO	Freehold	34,565.00
Portadown JBO	Freehold	18,356.00
Ballymena SSO	Leasehold	22,652.00
Downpatrick SSO	Freehold	33,263.00
Omagh JBO	Freehold	35,974.00
Strabane SSO	Freehold	33,448.00
Newcastle SSO	Freehold	12,653.00
Adelaide House	Freehold	176,896.00
Design Centre	Leasehold	58,636.00
Waterside House	Freehold	106,256.00
Clare House	Leasehold	0.00
Knockview	Freehold	7,644.00
Massey House	Freehold	11,521.00
Grand Total		4,924,591.00

ANNEX B
TOTAL SPENT ON BUILDING MODERNISATION & IMPROVEMENT (APRIL 1999 – MARCH 2007)

Note: For buildings proposed to transfer as part of WP2010

Premises	Leasehold / Freehold	Total Spent £
Hollywood JBO	Freehold	3,372,885.38
Bangor SSO	Leasehold	113,773.77
Foyle JBO	Freehold	3,174,369.05
Waterfront Plaza	Leasehold	922,135.97
Lisnagelvin JBO	Freehold	166,022.50
Knockbreda JBO	Freehold	2,438,090.11
Newtownabbey JBO	Freehold	2,585,467.93
Interpoint	Leasehold	544,937.60
Antrim JBO	Freehold	2,016,817.28
Andersonstown SSO	Freehold	254,927.61

Premises	Leasehold / Freehold	Total Spent £
Coleraine JBO	Freehold	4,810,071.19
Ballymena County Hall	Freehold	583,165.88
Lisburn JBO	Leasehold	284,088.32
Carlisle House	Leasehold	1,661,826.61
Castle Buildings	Freehold	5,406,238.12
Castlecourt	Long Leasehold	289,063.74
Causeway Exchange	Leasehold	3,871,945.19
Dungannon JBO	Freehold	347,154.94
Armagh JBO	Freehold	3,034,589.17
Newry JBO	Freehold	1,121,538.27
Ballynahinch SSO	Freehold	156,553.22
Ballymoney JBO	Freehold	1,809,095.28
Kilkeel JBO	Freehold	1,157,913.70
Larne JBO	Freehold	2,251,784.52
Enniskillen JBO	Freehold	3,149,669.56
Clarence Court	Freehold	962,661.77
Coleraine County Hall	Freehold	1,405,469.33
Shaftsbury Square JBO	Leasehold	1,623,895.69
Craigtanlet Buildings	Freehold	732,160.22
Dundonald House - Annex A	Freehold	8,054.66
Dundonald House - Annex D	Freehold	26,794.98
Dundonald House - Annex C	Freehold	57,494.41
Dundonald House	Freehold	356,992.89
Dundonald House - Annex B	Freehold	25,971.13
James House	Leasehold	5,508,143.17
Ferguson/Royston House	Leasehold	85,946.85
Windsor House	Leasehold	357,916.55
Goodwood House	Leasehold	2,444,987.86
Hillview Buildings	Freehold	-3,000.00
Hydebank	Freehold	87,274.33
Klondyke	Leasehold	3,677,943.92
Lesley Exchange	Leasehold	47,814.70
The Lighthouse	Leasehold	2,936,682.53
Lincoln Building	Leasehold	516,509.70
Marlborough House	Freehold	562,444.38
Millennium House	Leasehold	1,023,344.96
Netherleigh	Freehold	212,112.40
Orchard House	Freehold	117,074.41
Centre House	Leasehold	294,242.05

Premises	Leasehold / Freehold	Total Spent £
Rathgael House (2 buildings Old & New)	Freehold/Long leasehold	747,401.72
Rathkeltair House	Freehold	423,965.00
River House	Leasehold	36,346.48
Rosepark Site	Freehold	1,991,329.90
Shankill JBO	Freehold	2,294,663.72
Magherafelt JBO	Freehold	951,929.41
Limavady JBO	Freehold	1,800,791.41
Lurgan JBO	Freehold	2,113,584.13
Banbridge JBO	Freehold	1,756,017.84
Corporation Street SSO	Freehold	120,240.43
Carrickfergus JBO	Freehold	2,117,757.81
Newtownards SSO	Freehold	1,940.66
Cookstown SSO	Freehold	28,078.44
Falls Road JBO	Freehold	2,704,726.70
Portadown JBO	Freehold	1,959,704.01
Ballymena SSO	Leasehold	136,349.15
Downpatrick SSO	Freehold	65,014.08
Omagh JBO	Freehold	2,555,679.07
Strabane SSO	Freehold	35,861.19
Newcastle SSO	Freehold	27,550.29
Adelaide House	Freehold	618,622.40
Design Centre	Leasehold	248,972.60
Waterside House	Freehold	310,494.90
Clare House	Leasehold	6,200,000.00
Massey House / Knockview	Freehold	36,431.44
Grand Total		97,876,510.58

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Provision of New Fire Station in Coleraine

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has for the provision of a new fire station in Coleraine; and what is his assessment of the impact of this new facility on fire and rescue provision in Portrush and Portstewart. (AQW 1230/07)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Northern

Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has identified Coleraine Fire Station for replacement in its Strategic Infrastructure Development Plan.

NIFRS continually assesses emergency fire and rescue service cover throughout Northern Ireland. Prior to constructing a new Coleraine station, NIFRS will, therefore, review cover in the area, including Portrush and Portstewart, to ensure the best possible service can be achieved within available resources. The new station will improve the provision of emergency response cover making it possible to introduce variable crewing and by enabling firefighters to train in a purpose-built facility.

Mental Health Provision, Causeway Hospital

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to enhance provision for mental health patients at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. (AQW 1233/07)

Mr McGimpsey: A number of initiatives to enhance mental health provision in Causeway Hospital are currently being developed. These include -

The extension of a 24-hour Crisis Response Service to cover the whole of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, which will reduce pressure on inpatient beds.

An enhanced adult mental health liaison service.

The introduction of a Trust wide bed management service to ensure capacity is being used to its maximum effect across the whole Trust area.

Breast Screening Waiting Lists

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, the number of women currently awaiting breast screening. (AQW 1303/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information is not available in the format requested broken down by Trust. In relation to the Health and Social Services (HSS) Board areas, there are no women waiting for breast screening in the Southern and the Western HSS Board areas. There are approximately 7,000 women awaiting breast screening in the Northern HSS Board area, where there is a 16 month backlog for mobile screening. This will fall to 8 months from October 2007. There is no backlog for the static unit at Antrim Area Hospital. In the Eastern HSS Board area there is a backlog of approximately 7,000 with an 8 month delay. A regional breast screening plan has been drawn up to address the backlog and progress is being closely monitored by my Department. Funding has also been made available

to the Northern Trust to purchase a second mobile screening unit.

Breast Screening Waiting Times

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, breast screening waiting times. (AQW 1304/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The information is not available in the format requested broken down by Trust. In relation to the Health and Social Services (HSS) Board areas, there are no women waiting for breast screening in the Southern and the Western HSS Board areas. There are approximately 7,000 women awaiting breast screening in the Northern HSS Board area, where there is a 16 month backlog for mobile screening. This will fall to 8 months from October 2007. There is no backlog for the static unit at Antrim Area Hospital. In the Eastern HSS Board area there is a backlog of approximately 7,000 with an 8 month delay. A regional breast screening plan has been drawn up to address the backlog and progress is being closely monitored by my Department. Funding has also been made available to the Northern Trust to purchase a second mobile screening unit.

Psychiatric Referral Times for Self-harming Patients

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average time a patient who has self-harmed, and presents in an Accident and Emergency department, waits to see a psychiatrist; and to outline, broken down by parliamentary constituency, the number of such patients that were discharged without a referral to a psychiatrist. (AQW 1397/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Following investigation by Health and Social Care Trusts, the information requested is not available on the current electronic Emergency Care monitoring systems.

Cost of Agency-supplied Nurses

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money that is paid to agencies for the supply of nursing staff, across all hospitals in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1404/07)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department publishes information on the cost of agency supplied nurses on a six-monthly basis.¹

The most recent figures available are for the monitoring period October 2006 to March 2007. The total cost recorded was £7.39 million for this period.

£6.33 million was recorded for April 2006 to September 2006.

Published reports can be found on the Departmental Internet site at <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm>

¹ These figures include all agency nursing staff both hospital and community.

Number of Agency-supplied Nurses

Ms Sue Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of agency-supplied nurses that are working in hospitals in Northern Ireland; and to detail the average length of time they are in post. (AQW 1406/07)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of agency nursing staff is not held centrally. Health and Social Care Trusts were asked to supply information on the number of agency nurses employed at 30th June 2007 and their replies are set out below;

The Northern HSC Trust paid for approximately 14 whole time equivalent (wte) agency nurses during the month of June.

The Western HSC Trust reported that an average of 22 wte agency nurses were employed during June.

The South Eastern Trust were unable to supply a figure for the number of agency nurses employed for a particular date and stated that the Trust does not block book nursing agency staff.

The Southern HSC Trust recorded 10 agency nurses working on 30th June 2007.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust recorded 60.7 agency nurses working on the 30th June 2007. Of this figure 9 agency nurses were working on a single shift basis in Belfast City Hospital.¹

It should be noted that Trusts reported where agency nursing staff are employed on a shift by shift basis, it was not possible to provide any meaningful information on average length of time in post.

For agency staff engaged for more than a single shift the average length of time in post for the remainder ranged from 2 weeks to one instance of 33 months.

¹ The Mater, Royal and Musgrave Park hospitals could not provide information on the number of Agency nurses working on 30th June 2007 on a single shift basis.

Suicides in Craigavon Area

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the recent suicides in the Craigavon area, to detail the resources that have been, and will be in the future, allocated to the area to provide counselling and other advisory services to young people; and what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education regarding the provision of a quality counselling service in this area.

(AQW 1429/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust provide support and counselling for children through a 4-Tier model ranging from primary care to specialist inpatient settings. Within Craigavon/Banbridge locality 26 Health Visitors, 8 School Nurses and 94 Social Workers are trained in the promotion of good mental health, early recognition of problems and early intervention. The Trust also provides grant aid funding to the following voluntary organisations who provide Tier 1 support - Contact Youth, D.A.W.N. project, Care in Crisis, Breakthrough and React.

There are 10 Tier 2 staff in the Craigavon and Banbridge locality who provide a range of clinic and community based services/interventions to Children and Young People, e.g., Young Persons Project. Practitioners include, Nurses trained in Mental Health practices, Social Workers and one Psychologist.

A Southern Trust wide service provides more specialised Tier 3 services for children with more severe and complex and persistent mental health disorders and illness. There are 18 staff within this specialist service. An additional member of staff has been seconded to address issues arising from the recent suicides.

Tier 4 inpatient treatment can be accessed at Donard Ward, Knockbracken. Residential respite care is also available at Cherry Grove, Lurgan, which caters for young people with a range of needs.

During the 2006/07 school year counselling support was available to post primary schools in the Craigavon area. In addition, programmes to promote a positive approach to mental health and well being were on offer in some schools.

From September 2007 the Independent Counselling Service for Schools will be operating in all post primary schools which wish to use it. Some £1.8m has been allocated to support this service across Northern Ireland in 2007/08 school year.

Regionally, the Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy, "Protect Life – A Shared Vision", was launched on 30 October 2006. The Strategy, which contains over 60 actions, aims to tackle the issue of suicide by taking a dual population and targeted

approach, and this year I have allocated over £3 million to support the Strategy's implementation.

As part of the implementation of this Strategy, my Department has been piloting a suicide prevention telephone helpline, which specifically targets young people in North and West Belfast, and a self-harm mentoring initiative in the Western Health and Social Service Board. Both Pilots are supported by peer mentoring and counselling services, and I am now keen the telephone helpline and relevant support and counselling services are made available across Northern Ireland as a matter of urgency.

I have allocated £1.8 million of the £3 million allocation in this financial year to support local communities with the development and operation of initiatives that will help to reduce the Northern Ireland suicide rate, and in doing so, I have specifically asked that provision be made for those new initiatives which reach out to young people. A new GP Depression Awareness Training programme is also being rolled out across Northern Ireland, and the new "Share It" mental health awareness public information campaign is being re-run in July.

In response to the recent clusters of suicide across Northern Ireland, I have established a Ministerial co-ordination group, whose primary function is to ensure that suicide prevention is a priority for all relevant Government Departments and to enhance cross-departmental co-ordination on the issue. Membership of the group includes the Education Minister and the two junior OFMDFM Ministers.

Health Centre in Trillick

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the schedule for the delivery of a new health centre in Trillick, Co. Tyrone; and to provide detail on the budget being made available for this project.

(AQW 1442/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Western Health and Social Services Board are currently working with the GP Practice in Trillick to identify a possible site to build upon, or suitable renovation for the replacement of the GP premises. This project is part of the Western Board's Capital Development programme and cost rent funding for the scheme has been earmarked by the Board. It is anticipated that a suitable site will be identified within the coming months; it would then take approximately one year for the scheme to be operational. The scheme will be based on two GPs. There are no current plans to provide a health centre in Trillick.

Combined Ambulance and Fire Station in Cushendall

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the feasibility of combining Cushendall Fire Station with an ambulance station, when it is rebuilt.

(AQW 1443/07)

Mr McGimpsey: I think it is in the best interests of the public that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) continue to maintain a close relationship and share facilities at locations throughout Northern Ireland where this is deemed appropriate. However there is no current plan to either establish an Ambulance Service station, a deployment point or combined station in Cushendall.

NIAS will continue to monitor and analyse trends in Accident and Emergency activity in the Cushendall area. This will inform future decisions on the best location for ambulances to be based in order to achieve an 8-minute response standard.

Ambulance Response Times

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to comment on an incident on 25 June 2007, when the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service took almost two hours to transport an injured child from Glenarm to Antrim Hospital.

(AQW 1445/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) received an emergency call to the Glenarm area on Monday 25 June 2007 at 20:58hours and, in line with current protocols, the nearest available A&E ambulance was despatched.

This ambulance was, in fact, near Armoy village, having left Ballycastle ambulance station some 10 minutes earlier to provide cover in the greater Ballymena area where, according to NIAS's recently introduced tactical deployment plan, the next emergency call was most likely to occur. The ambulance arrived at the scene at 21:54hours and left for Antrim Hospital at 21:59hrs arriving at 22:55hrs.

This call was assigned Category B status (serious but not immediately life threatening) and did not, therefore, require the 8 minute response time for life-threatening calls. I regret that, on this occasion, the overall journey time to hospital was longer than desirable because of the distances involved and the high level of demand for emergency responses in the area at the time.

Ambulance Cover in North and East Antrim

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he recognises that there is a shortage of ambulance cover in North and East Antrim; and if he has any plans to increase that cover. (AQW 1446/07)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Health and Social Services Board (NHSSB) is responsible for commissioning ambulance services, in the North and East Antrim area, from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS).

The Northern Board is currently working with the NIAS to ensure the achievement of the Northern Ireland PFA Target of responding to 65% of Category A calls (life threatening) within 8 minutes during 2007/08.

Some key elements of this work include an analysis of ambulance performance using spatial systems modelling, specialist mapping models and an analysis of historical emergency call data. NIAS is also currently working with the Department to introduce Satellite Navigation and Automatic Vehicle Locating Systems to its entire fleet. This system will enable ambulance controllers to identify and task the ambulance nearest to an incident thereby improving response times to life-threatening calls. These various initiatives will lead to improvements in response times across Northern Ireland.

Testing of Haemophiliac Blood Samples

Dr Alasdair McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail whether blood samples of local haemophiliac patients are being tested, without their knowledge, for variant CJD. (AQW 1461/07)

Mr McGimpsey: No blood samples of local patients with haemophilia are being tested for variant CJD nor is the matter under consideration in the Health Service in Northern Ireland.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

New Claimants for Pension Credit

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, further to AQW 416/07, to outline why it was not possible to provide a breakdown of new claimants for pension credit by constituency; District

Council area and Social Security Office, when a similar breakdown was provided for pension credit claimants in AQW 379/07. (AQW 1444/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

TABLE 1: PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANT ONFLOWS BY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE/JOBS & BENEFITS OFFICE BOUNDARY: 2003/04 TO 2006/07

	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Andersonstown	346	317	214	157
Antrim	616	332	204	131
Armagh	386	258	194	111
Ballymena	787	374	311	130
Ballymoney	490	249	190	119
Ballynahinch	322	154	97	50
Banbridge	423	238	163	92
Bangor	841	415	270	132
Carrickfergus	446	192	138	65
Coleraine	627	321	244	137
Cookstown	235	169	142	80
Corporation Street	668	480	355	201
Downpatrick	299	208	119	87
Dungannon	298	233	199	96
Enniskillen	554	397	269	175
Falls Road	282	270	216	145
Foyle	436	391	340	239
Hollywood Road	948	545	381	180
Kilkeel	148	100	91	42
Knockbreda	779	382	248	135
Larne	363	180	133	88
Limavady	259	163	129	77
Lisburn	796	409	283	147
Lisnagelvin	404	288	206	150
Lurgan	559	339	274	145
Magherafelt	408	241	166	92
Newcastle	215	127	92	40
Newry	565	433	315	197
Newtownabbey	672	344	244	126
Newtownards	551	321	246	114
Omagh	323	246	190	105
Portadown	427	239	187	97

	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Shaftesbury Square	404	229	166	95
Shankill Road	393	195	176	109
Strabane	333	275	225	149

* Pension Credit is a centralised benefit and therefore has no Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office indicator. Table 1 is a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 35 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries. Customers whose postcode can not be allocated to a Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundary are not included in this analysis.

TABLE 2: PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANT ONFLOWS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA: 2003/04 TO 2006/07

	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Antrim	440	223	152	104
Ards	791	428	299	144
Armagh	448	290	207	116
Ballymena	721	337	287	116
Ballymoney	335	166	117	75
Banbridge	425	232	163	89
Belfast	2,970	1,950	1,436	847
Carrickfergus	445	192	138	65
Castlereagh	743	332	220	122
Coleraine	596	316	242	134
Cookstown	273	200	170	91
Craigavon	851	519	421	214
Derry	811	650	532	381
Down	655	413	267	149
Dungannon	365	281	225	116
Fermanagh	499	351	239	159
Larne	362	179	133	88
Limavady	283	192	145	83
Lisburn	938	555	386	231
Magherafelt	403	232	157	87
Moyle	219	99	84	52
Newry and Mourne	735	549	413	247
Newtownabbey	875	459	298	151
North Down	763	388	272	119
Omagh	328	257	202	106
Strabane	339	275	220	152

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to District Council on the basis of their postcode. Customers whose postcode can not be allocated to a District Council are not included in this analysis.

TABLE 3: PENSION CREDIT CLAIMANT ONFLOWS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY: 2003/04 TO 2006/07

	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Belfast East	973	560	358	186
Belfast North	1,165	711	532	299
Belfast South	794	416	299	163
Belfast West	866	695	524	370
East Antrim	944	439	326	187
East Londonderry	879	508	387	217
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	772	544	387	248
Foyle	811	650	532	381
Lagan Valley	959	508	338	195
Mid Ulster	768	520	404	205
Newry and Armagh	864	607	445	257
North Antrim	1,275	602	488	243
North Down	944	470	318	142
South Antrim	898	492	324	180
South Down	983	640	447	252
Strangford	965	533	383	188
Upper Bann	1,086	638	511	267
West Tyrone	667	532	422	258

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Customers whose postcode can not be allocated to a Parliamentary Constituency are not included in this analysis.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Thursday 6 September 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the extent to which procurement measures can ensure that the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland contributes to reducing current inequalities; and in particular, those in relation to long-term unemployment.
(AQO 196/07)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): OFMDFM is working with the Strategic Investment Board and with the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel in exploring how social objectives can be addressed within the public procurement process. This work will impact on projects taken forward under the Investment Strategy and will build on a successful pilot scheme, operated by the Central Procurement Directorate, to facilitate the long-term unemployed into work through public sector contracts.

OFMDFM, in conjunction with the Equality Commission and Central Procurement Directorate, is also sponsoring a Working Group tasked with producing a comprehensive guide on equality and sustainable development considerations in public procurement, which will be published later in 2007.

Reduction of Departments

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is its assessment of the Secretary of State's assertion that reducing the number of Executive departments from eleven to six can improve delivery of policy objectives;

and whether the department is in possession of the Northern Ireland Office blueprint on departmental reductions.
(AQW 248/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: No such assessment has been made by us and nor is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in possession of a Northern Ireland Office blueprint on departmental reductions. The efficiency and effectiveness of current departmental arrangements will be matters among others for the Efficiency Review Panel which we intend to establish later this year.

Civic Forum

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if funding has been set aside for the Civic Forum in this financial year, 2007/2008.
(AQW 284/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: In order to make provision for the return of the Civic Forum a preliminary budget of £516,000 was set aside based on the running costs of the Forum in 2002.

We are considering carrying out a review of the Forum to examine its structure and role and the mechanisms for engaging with civic society. The proposed review would consider the most appropriate support and resourcing arrangements for the Forum.

Washington Bureau

Mr Samuel Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what opportunities for cooperation between the United States of America and Northern Ireland have been identified and developed by the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, DC over the past four years.
(AQW 374/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Opportunities now exist with US organizations in a number of priority sectors. Business opportunities have been created with organizations in four regions and with the Federal Government. A strong workforce development relationship now exists with North Carolina. The National Institute of Health and Georgetown University are working with our universities. Educational exchanges have been established with three states, our conflict resolution experience has been shared with US universities and the World Bank. Cultural partnerships have been developed with the Smithsonian Institute, the Library of Congress and sporting organizations. Opportunities are now developing in agriculture and regeneration.

RUC Part-time Reserve Pensions

Mr David McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what representations it will make to the Secretary of State in pursuance of the right of members of the former Royal Ulster Constabulary Part-Time Reserve to proper pension provision, as agreed without division by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 20 November 2001.

(AQW 752/07)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: As Junior Minister Paisley indicated in his response to a recent Assembly debate on this issue (Official Report 26 June), we have conveyed to the Secretary of State the concerns raised by members during that debate.

A copy of the letter has been placed in the Library.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Flood Plain Map

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her department intends to produce a flood plain map for Northern Ireland, and if this will be made available on the internet.

(AQO 130/07)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency is developing a series of flood risk maps for Northern Ireland in accordance with its interim flood mapping strategy. The initial phase mapping that is currently being produced will indicate the extent of flood plains assuming no defences in place. It is planned that this will be available on the internet by March 2008.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Foras na Gaeilge

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if Foras na Gaeilge will be required to provide an English language version of the minutes of its board meetings on its website.

(AQW 232/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): In accordance with the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 the working language of the Irish Language

Agency of the Body is Irish. As part of development work currently underway on the Foras na Gaeilge website, Foras are considering arrangements for minutes of its future Board meetings to be made available online in Irish. The Department has written to Foras na Gaeilge requesting that such minutes also be translated into English and posted on the English language section of their website.

Minutes of North/South Meetings

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts & Leisure if the Arts Council of Northern Ireland will publish on its website the minutes of all North–South plenary and committee meetings with An Chomhairle Ealaíon. (AQW 523/07)

Mr Poots: The Arts Council do not publish the minutes of meetings of the North South sub committee. A report is generally made to the Council and this is recorded in the published minutes of the Council. The same practice applies with regard to the plenary meetings. The Arts Council will raise the issue of publication of the minutes of plenary meetings with An Chomhairle Ealaíon at their next plenary meeting.

Cloghy Footpath

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will conduct a new survey in relation to the request for a footpath between 50 and 62 Main Road, Cloghy, in light of the fact that the last survey was carried out in 2004, since when the population and volume of traffic has risen considerably.

(AQW 578/07)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I have asked my Department's Roads Service to reassess this proposal to provide a footway between 42 and 70 Main Road, Cloghey.

The assessment will include a pedestrian and vehicle survey between both locations, to determine the amount of pedestrian and vehicular activity in the area. The assessment will be completed before the end of August 2007.

My officials will write to you directly to advise you of the outcome of this further assessment.

Gaelic Games

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, to detail the number of people registered as playing Gaelic Games in Northern Ireland, as amateur and professional players in (a)

youth teams; (b) men's teams; and (c) women's teams.
(AQW 1370/2007)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) does not retain information on the number of people registered as playing Gaelic Games in Northern Ireland, nor is such information available, except at disproportionate cost.

Safety at Sports Grounds

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the criteria for inclusion in the Safety at Sports Grounds programme. (AQW 1205/07)

Mr Poots: In order to be considered for inclusion in Sport Northern Ireland's (SNI) Stadia Safety Programme applicants must demonstrate to SNI that their project can satisfy the following criteria:

- strategic importance;
- improved spectator safety and comfort;
- safety management arrangements;
- financial need;
- viability;
- additionality; and
- security of tenure

In addition, applications must be for capital projects, from properly constituted organisations with no outstanding issues relating to non-compliance with the conditions associated with any previous SNI award.

Registered Footballers

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of people registered at football clubs in Northern Ireland, as amateur and professional players, in (a) youth teams; (b) men's teams; and (c) women's teams. (AQW 1369/07)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) does not retain information on the number of people registered at football clubs in Northern Ireland, nor is such information available, except at disproportionate cost.

EDUCATION

Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education what actions her department has been able to report to the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group, in relation to its obligation to take 'resolute action' to promote the Ulster-Scots language within the education system. (AQW 366/07)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department of Education has reported the following actions to the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group:

- to provide funding through the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), to support the publication of Ulster-Scots educational materials for use in primary schools and in post-primary schools.
- to support the implementation of Part II of the Charter through the provision of various elements of the (now previous) statutory curriculum which will continue through the revised curriculum when it is introduced from 2007 onwards.
- that it had written to CCEA to ensure that Ulster-Scots cultural heritage is reflected as appropriate when exemplars or guidance materials are being prepared for schools.
- provided comments on the Road Map for Ulster-Scots to attain Part III status under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which was prepared by the Partnership Board of the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group.

Unfilled School Places

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education what definition her department uses to determine an 'unfilled' place in a school; and, using this definition, if she will detail the number of 'unfilled' places there are in Northern Ireland schools. (AQW 501/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department uses two measures, unfilled places and surplus places, for short-term and long-term planning respectively.

The calculation of surplus places in post-primary schools is based on the enrolment which can be accommodated by the total physical capacity of teaching spaces, less the actual number of pupils attending. For primary schools, the methodology for calculating surplus places is based on the schedules of accommodation in the Department of Education Building Handbook for primary schools, which uses enrolment bands to determine the number of classrooms that a school should have e.g. the enrolment band for a 7 classroom school is in the range 176 - 205 pupils. However, many primary schools have a number of classrooms which are not used for teaching purposes. Therefore, to make some allowance for the non-teaching spaces, the methodology for calculating surplus places has deemed the capacity of each primary school to be the lower end of the enrolment band. The actual enrolment is subtracted from this to produce an estimate of the surplus places. Based on enrolment numbers from the October 2006

Schools Census, there are estimated to be 36,600 surplus places in the primary school sector and 18,500 surplus places in the post-primary sector in the North of Ireland.

An unfilled place is defined as the difference between a departmentally approved enrolment number and the actual enrolment. In setting the approved enrolment number the physical capacity of a school is only one of the factors the Department has regard to. It also takes account of the annual level of demand for places at an individual school based on local demography and levels of parental preference. Unfilled places at schools in an area are used only in the context of considering the justification for requests for increases to the enrolment number of the most popular school(s) in an area and are therefore part of the process of managing and facilitating local demand. They are therefore not used as an aggregate indicator or a measure of spare capacity in the schools' estate.

Surplus School Places

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education what definition her department uses to determine a 'surplus' place in a school; and, using this definition, if she will detail the number of 'surplus' places there are in Northern Ireland schools.

(AQW 502/07)

Ms Ruane: The Department uses two measures, unfilled places and surplus places, for short-term and long-term planning respectively.

The calculation of surplus places in post-primary schools is based on the enrolment which can be accommodated by the total physical capacity of teaching spaces, less the actual number of pupils attending. For primary schools, the methodology for calculating surplus places is based on the schedules of accommodation in the Department of Education Building Handbook for primary schools, which uses enrolment bands to determine the number of classrooms that a school should have e.g. the enrolment band for a 7 classroom school is in the range 176 - 205 pupils. However, many primary schools have a number of classrooms which are not used for teaching purposes. Therefore, to make some allowance for the non-teaching spaces, the methodology for calculating surplus places has deemed the capacity of each primary school to be the lower end of the enrolment band. The actual enrolment is subtracted from this to produce an estimate of the surplus places. Based on enrolment numbers from the October 2006 Schools Census, there are estimated to be 36,600 surplus places in the primary school sector and 18,500 surplus places in the post-primary sector in the North of Ireland.

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School Dinners

Ms Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how many schools provide school dinners where food is prepared on site, by school type and Board area. (AQW 876/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked two related questions concerning the school meals service, I shall reply to these together.

The number of schools that provide school dinners where food is prepared on site is as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Controlled	31	112	76	101	51	371
Maintained	35	59	32	114	77	317
Grant-Maintained Integrated	3	4	4	4	3	18
Voluntary Grammar*	22	10	11	12	9	64
Total	91	185	123	231	140	770

* Includes Preparatory Departments.

The number of schools that serve school dinners but do not prepare them on site is as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Controlled	50	73	63	29	39	254
Maintained	44	32	45	43	78	242
Grant-Maintained Integrated	1	7	4	3	4	19
Voluntary Grammar*	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	95	113	112	75	121	516

* Includes Preparatory Departments.

School Dinners

Ms Michelle McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how many schools serve but do not prepare school dinners on site, by school type and Board area. (AQW 877/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked two related questions concerning the school meals service, I shall reply to these together.

The number of schools that provide school dinners where food is prepared on site is as follows:

	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Controlled	31	112	76	101	51	371
Maintained	35	59	32	114	77	317
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Maintained	44	32	45	43	78	242
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Voluntary Grammar*	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	95	113	112	75	121	516

* Includes Preparatory Departments.

School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children currently taking school meals at primary schools in (a) the state sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 953/07).

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked two questions concerning the number of children currently taking school meals, I shall reply to these together.

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 taking meals on the day on which census information is gathered. The figures from the 2006 census were as follows:

NUMBERS TAKING MEALS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

	Controlled Sector	Maintained Sector	Integrated Sector*	Voluntary Grammar Sector	Total
BELB	4,169	6,341	317	725	11,552
NEELB	9,366	4,736	585	97	14,784
SEELB	5,711	4,300	721	364	11,096
SELB	6,700	12,066	590	24	19,380
WELB	4,944	10,923	411	0	16,278
Total	30,890	38,366	2,624	1,210	73,090

* Includes controlled and grant-maintained integrated schools

NUMBERS TAKING MEALS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

	Controlled Sector	Maintained Sector	Integrated Sector*	Voluntary Grammar Sector	Total
BELB	2,055	4,591	1,110	6,275	14,031
NEELB	6,271	3,037	1,148	4,575	15,031
SEELB	4,797	2,513	1,877	3,860	13,047
SELB	6,682	8,251	1,236	5,900	22,069
WELB	3,757	6,945	947	4,530	16,179
Total	23,562	25,337	6,318	25,140	80,357

* Includes controlled and grant-maintained integrated schools

School Meals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children currently taking school meals at secondary schools in (a) the state sector; (b) the maintained sector; and (c) the integrated sector, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 955/07)

Ms Ruane: As the Member for Strangford has asked two questions concerning the number of children currently taking school meals, I shall reply to these together.

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 taking meals on the day on

which census information is gathered. The figures from the 2006 census were as follows:

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Total	23,562	25,337	6,318	25,140	80,357

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Ulster-Scots Language

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the dates on which the previous Permanent Secretary met with myself to discuss the accommodation of the Ulster-Scots language and culture within the education system, and what actions were taken in response to those representations. (AQW 994/07)

Ms Ruane: The previous Permanent Secretary met with you on 9 November 2004, 14 September 2005 and 15 November 2005 to discuss Ulster-Scots issues.

The Department continues to meet its obligations under the European Charter with regard to Ulster-Scots and is introducing Citizenship as part of the revised curriculum from September 2007, which will provide opportunities for young people to explore cultural heritage, diversity and respect for others.

The Department provided funding in 2005/06 for the publication of the Ulster-Scots Agency's primary

curriculum materials and agreed to consider similar provision for post-primary materials when they are ready for publication. The Department also wrote to CCEA in November 2005 asking it to ensure that Ulster-Scots cultural heritage is appropriately reflected within its curriculum guidance materials.

Newbuild Schools

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Education if she is aware of any criteria or guidelines yet to be developed and/or issued by her department, which have delayed capital projects in relation to new build schools, including that of Crossroads Primary School, Kilrea. (AQW 1050/07)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Review recommended that future building projects should be compatible with an area-based planning approach. The Department of Education will be working with the education sector in progressing this approach. In putting forward proposals for school capital projects the relevant education authority needs to consider the longer term viability of the school and how it would meet the needs in the local area. The Department would expect to see such issues addressed in economic appraisals. The proposed scheme for Crossroads Primary School is currently at the appraisal stage.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Complaints Mechanism

Mr Alex Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration he is giving to the introduction of legislation for a student complaints mechanism for Queen's University Belfast, to replace the current "visitor" model. (AQW 1436/07)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): In my Department's policy consultation document "A Consultation on Proposals to Introduce Variable Deferred Tuition Fees, Access Agreements and a Review of the Student Complaints System", published in April 2004, consultees were asked whether an independent adjudicator should be established to hear student complaints in Northern Ireland and end the Visitor system in both Northern Ireland universities. The majority of responses were heavily weighted in favour of change to make the system more clearly independent of the universities.

In light of the consultation responses, it was agreed that the option to extend the remit of the Ombudsman, to include the adjudication of student complaints, could be considered as part of OFMDFM's proposed

review of the Offices of the Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, following restoration of the Assembly.

OFMDFM has now advised the Department that a timetable for consultation, implementation and amendments to the Commissioner for Complaints Order 1996 has yet to be set following restoration of the Assembly. When the review is carried out, the option to extend the Ombudsman's remit, to include the adjudication of student complaints, can be considered.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Indigenous Renewable Sources

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give the target for the proportion of electricity to be generated from indigenous renewable sources by 2012. (AQW 422/07)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The Department's Strategic Energy Framework published in June 2004 specifies a 12% target for the proportion of Northern Ireland's electricity consumption that is to be met from indigenous renewable energy sources by 2012.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the numbers of foreign nationals currently living in Northern Ireland by (a) constituency; and (b) District Council area. (AQW 954/07)

Mr Dodds: The LFS sample size does not support the production of sufficiently reliable estimates at constituency or district council level.

Targeting Social Need

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the areas that Invest Northern Ireland considers to be new Targeting Social Need areas, for the purpose of achieving its target of 75% investment in such areas. (AQW 1127/07)

Mr Dodds: In targeting 75% of first-time inward investment towards areas of greatest need, Invest NI utilises the DETI disadvantaged area maps which are based on data from the income and employment domains of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation

Measure 2005. The areas recognised as 'disadvantaged' include Derry, Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown, Newry and Mourne and Dungannon Council areas together with parts of Belfast. The detailed maps are available on the DETI website at www.detini.gov.uk.

Bombardier Jobs

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assurances he has received that the financial assistance given by his department to Bombardier Aerospace, Belfast, will result in the availability of a substantial number of jobs.

(AQW 1167/07)

Mr Dodds: In answering this question, I am assuming that the Member for Strangford is referring to the announcement I made during my visit to Paris Air Show on 19 June. In that announcement, which related to Bombardier's new Resin Transfer Moulding facility at Dunmurry, I welcomed Bombardier's investment of £8.2 million towards which Invest NI would contribute £1.5 million in Selective Financial Assistance. The project, which safeguards sixty highly skilled jobs, will enable Bombardier Aerospace in Northern Ireland to exploit global market opportunities and add significant value to the Northern Ireland Aerospace Sector.

ENVIRONMENT

Green Shopping

Mr David Hilditch asked the Minister of Environment if she will give an assessment of how to encourage shoppers to go green; and of the possibility of banning plastic bags and excess packaging given out by supermarkets.

(AQW 398/07)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): Many shoppers are becoming increasingly aware of, and concerned about, environmental issues and as a result are making "greener" choices. All of us have a role to play in helping to protect our environment and in so far as consumer behaviour is concerned, retailers need to help and encourage their customers who want to reduce their impact on the environment. The UK's major supermarket and convenience stores link large global supply chains with the mass consumer grocery market and are therefore well placed to promote reductions in household waste. I welcome, therefore, the various initiatives by many key retailers to reduce

the environmental impact of carrier bags and to be more efficient in their use of packaging materials.

The Department funds the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) as part of Government's waste strategies across the UK. WRAP's Retail Innovation Programme works in partnership with leading retailers, brand-owners, suppliers and designers to reduce the amount of packaging at source and increase its recycled content.

As regards a ban on plastic bags, alternatives often entail their own environmental problems and we need to consider all of the issues before deciding on the most appropriate way forward for Northern Ireland.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all policies and codes of practice relating to the operations of Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 197/07)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The policy framework for Northern Ireland Water (NIW) as statutory undertaker with responsibility for delivery of water and sewerage services is reflected in the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006. This, together with the Licence to appoint NIW and under environmental legislation, provides for Codes of Practice relating to:

- environmental and recreational duties (Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006, Art 10);
- work on private land (Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006, Art 244);
- customers and relations with the General Consumer Council (Licence, Condition G);
- arrangements in connection with domestic customers having difficulty paying bills and for collection outstanding customer debt (Licence, Condition H); and
- liability for charges with domestic customers occupying metered premises (Licence, Condition I).

A copy of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 is available in the Assembly Library.

Cloghy Footpath

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will conduct a new survey in relation to the request for a footpath between 50 and 62 Main Road, Cloghy, in light of the fact that the last

survey was carried out in 2004, since when the population and volume of traffic has risen considerably. (AQW 578/07)

Mr Murphy: I have asked my Department's Roads Service to reassess this proposal to provide a footway between 42 and 70 Main Road, Cloghy.

The assessment will include a pedestrian and vehicle survey between both locations, to determine the amount of pedestrian and vehicular activity in the area. The assessment will be completed before the end of August 2007.

My officials will write to you directly to advise you of the outcome of this further assessment.

Moira Bypass

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to bring forward a bypass for Moira. (AQW 735/07)

Mr Murphy: An assessment of the requirement for major road improvements to the strategic road network in the greater Belfast area was conducted by my Department's Roads Service, as part of the development of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015. This Plan covers the Lisburn City Council area and the road network around Moira.

The assessment for the Plan did not identify the need for major road improvements around Moira and consequently there are currently no plans to bring forward a bypass in that area. I can, however, confirm that a traffic management study of the main junctions in Moira is currently being undertaken. This will consider possible minor junction improvements between the M1 motorway roundabout and the Kilmore Road junction.

Road Upgrades in West Tyrone

Dr Kiernan Deeny asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures are currently in place to repair, upgrade and modernise the roads in West Tyrone; and what funding has been made available to Roads Service in the Omagh District Council area. (AQW 736/07)

Mr Murphy: With regards to the first part of your question, I should explain that as with all public roads, my Department's Roads Service currently repair roads in West Tyrone in accordance with the Roads Maintenance Standards for Safety, where all public roads are inspected on designated cycles and any defects repaired within well established time scales.

With regards to the second part of your question, I can advise that The Regional Transportation Strategy,

which was approved by the Assembly in 2002, is the basis upon which all transportation initiatives are being taken forward. This Strategy is achieved through the implementation of various Transport Plans. The two plans which include the West Tyrone area are the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTN TP) and the Sub Regional Transport Plan (SRTP). The RSTN TP includes proposals to provide the Strabane / Lifford Link and stage III of the Strabane Bypass, while the SRTP, published in June 2007, includes a range of measures planned for the towns of Omagh and Strabane.

In addition, in 2006, Roads Service issued a consultation document entitled 'Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015', which included proposals for a new route for the A5, from Victoria Bridge to Derry and improvements to the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen. Work on the assessment of this Programme is at an advanced stage, and as it has not yet been finalised, I am presently not in a position to advise on details of its content or timing.

You may be aware that as part of the Chancellor's package announced on 22 March the Irish Government confirmed its intention to make available a contribution of £400 million to fund an unprecedented package of infrastructure investment, including a major new roads programme to provide dual carriageway standard on routes within the North serving the North West Gateway of Letterkenny/Derry and on the eastern seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne.

I can confirm that during the 2007/08 financial year, expenditure in the region of £3.4 million is planned on Structural Maintenance operations such as resurfacing, surface dressing and structural drainage etc., while an additional £2.6 million will be deployed on Capital schemes in the Omagh District Council Area.

A2 between Bangor and Belfast

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Regional Development what plans he has to improve the efficiency of the traffic flow on the A2 dual carriageway between Bangor and Belfast. (AQW 741/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service advises that approximately 75% (12km) of the A2 between Belfast and Bangor is dual carriageway. The busiest section of this route, the Sydenham Bypass, has been identified in the Belfast Metropolitan Transportation Plan (BMTP), for substantial improvement. The proposed scheme, which is currently in the Roads Service Forward Planning Schedule of major schemes to be promoted within 5-15 years, will upgrade this 2.5km stretch to provide 3

lanes in each direction between Bridge End and Tillysburn.

Further improvements, proposed to be completed this financial year, include schemes to fully control right-turning movements from the A2 into Sullivan Place and Old Belfast Road in Holywood, and the signalisation of the junction at Palace Barracks. I am also advised that the PSNI propose to introduce a speed camera system (SPECS) which will detect average speeds and improve safety on the A2 from the Holywood Bypass to its junction with Coothall Road outside Bangor.

The BMTP also proposes a route management strategy to identify schemes to improve road safety along all key routes into Belfast and increase the capacity and safety of existing junctions where localised widening would be feasible. £4million has been identified in the Plan for this purpose, and consultants are currently completing a route management study of the A2 to identify any improvements required.

In relation to the remaining 4km of existing 4-lane single carriageway on the A2, I am advised that a scheme to improve this portion to dual carriageway standard would have a significant effect on adjacent properties, a major impact on the environment and would be very costly. In addition, due to constraints caused by the substantial number of junctions along the road, any improvements would have little impact on the vehicular capacity of the road or on journey speeds at peak times, without associated grade separation at a number of the junctions.

Tullynagardy Road, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to widen and re-surface the Tullynagardy Road, Newtownards. (AQW 775/07)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service have advised that there are no current plans to either widen or re-surface the Tullynagardy Road, Newtownards.

However, in accordance with the Roads Maintenance Standards for Safety, Roads Service will continue to inspect the Tullynagardy Road during routine designated inspection cycles and any defects found will be repaired within well established time scales.

Drains in the West Winds Estate

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times has Northern Ireland Water had to call their contractors to clear drains, both

storm and sewage, in the West Winds estate in Newtownards in the last 12 months. (AQW 817/07)

Mr Murphy: As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issue raised is an operational matter, I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

Drains in Carrickfergus

David Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the last date on which drain cleansing teams were working in Carrickfergus and, in particular, the Joymount area. (AQW 829/07)

Mr Murphy: I am advised that my Department's Roads Service aims to inspect, and clean where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice a year. Gullies in rural areas are inspected and cleaned if necessary once a year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staffing resource.

Within the Greater Belfast area there are some 136,000 storm water road gullies which require considerable resource on an ongoing basis for the inspection and cleansing of this network.

The first clean of all storm water gullies in Carrickfergus commenced on 2 January 2007 and is due to finish by 30 June 2007. The storm water gullies in the Joymount area were cleaned between 22 and 24 of March 2007.

Barron Road, Donemana, Water Mains

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upsize water mains supplying Barron Road, Donemana. (AQW 835/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

North Tyrone Supply Zone

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain what progress has been made in implementing the detailed zonal studies report for the North Tyrone supply zone. (AQW 836/07)

Mr Murphy: The Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 transferred responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services from the Department's Water Service Agency to a statutory water and sewerage undertaker. A government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been appointed as the undertaker and the issues raised are operational matters for it. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW (Mrs. Katharine Bryan) to write to you in response to this question.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Unclaimed Benefits

Mr Peter Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by benefit category, the amount of unclaimed social security benefits for the last five financial years. (AQW 203/07)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The information requested is not available as statistical data for all benefit categories. The Family Resources Survey provides details of estimates of unclaimed income related benefits and shows that the annual amounts unclaimed in respect of Income Support, Housing Benefit, Minimum Income Guarantee/Pension Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance (Income-Based) lies in the ranges shown in the attached table. This information is only available for the period 2002 – 2005.

ESTIMATED ANNUAL AMOUNT (£ MILLION) OF BENEFIT UNCLAIMED FOR SELECTED BENEFITS

Estimate based on period	Income Support	Housing Benefit	Minimum Income Guarantee/Pension Credit	Jobseeker's Allowance (Income-Based).
2002-04	5 - 82	6 - 37	na	12 - 76
2003-05	3 - 72	9 - 51	57- 134	3 - 35

Source: Family Resources Survey: Income Related Benefits, Estimates of Take-Up in Northern Ireland 2003/2005

Due to sampling constraints, results are presented as a range of values

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme for the Kilcooley estate, Bangor; and to outline the role Kilcooley Primary School will play in that programme. (AQW 578/07)

Ms Ritchie: A Vision Framework and Action Plan which sets out a series of measures to tackle deprivation in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor has been drawn up by the local Kilcooley Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership. To date over £1,175,000 has been spent on Neighbourhood Renewal projects in the Kilcooley Estate, 3 of which are based in the Kilcooley Primary School premises. The Department is currently awaiting a number of further funding requests under the Vision Framework and Action Plan and some of these are likely to include educational programmes which may involve the local primary school.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Visitors to Parliament Buildings

Barry McElduff asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number, age profile and geographical spread of visitors to Parliament Buildings in (a) the past year; and (b) the past two years; and to detail the measures undertaken to increase access to Parliament Buildings. (AQW 477/07)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Public Visitors to Parliament Buildings fall primarily into three categories which can be summarised as follows:

1. Those participating in the Assembly Education Programme;
2. Those participating in official Tours, Events and Functions and
3. Casual visitors (permitted entry to Great Hall only)

An analysis of visitor numbers by each of these categories is set out below for 2005 and 2006.

1 GRAND TOTAL OF VISITORS ON THE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

2005	2006	Total
6036	8494	14530

Geographical Spread - 2005			Age profile			
Education and Library board	Number of groups	Number of participants	Key stage	Age Group	Number of groups	Number of participants
BELB	48	1345	A/AS-Level	17-18	36	1073
NEELB	28	1083	GCSE	15-16	60	2016
SEELB	22	640	KS3	12-14	15	603
SELB	34	1220	KS2	9-11	15	658
WELB	9	243	KS1	5-8	1	48
Other	48	1505	Other	19+	62	1638
		6036				6036

Geographical Spread -2006			Age profile			
Education and Library board	Number of groups	Number of participants	Key stage	Age Group	Number of groups	Number of participants
BELB	53	1919	A/AS-Level	17-18	47	1365
NEELB	38	1361	GCSE	15-16	65	2172
SEELB	20	536	KS3	12-14	40	1742
SELB	36	1153	KS2	9-11	15	515
WELB	8	340	KS1	5-8	0	0
Other	112	3185	Other	19+	100	2700
		8494				8494

The Education Service liaises with all Education and Library Boards and schools in Northern Ireland to inform them of the programmes that are available.

2. GRAND TOTAL OF INVITED VISITORS ON TOURS, EVENTS AND FUNCTIONS

2005	2006	Total
23639	29207	52846

Geographical Spread where known		
Area	Number of visitors - 2005	Number of visitors-2006
Fermanagh	278	147
Antrim	1016	2301
Tyrone	505	362
Londonderry	200	253

Geographical Spread where known		
Area	Number of visitors - 2005	Number of visitors-2006
Armagh	431	823
Down	1134	1380
Belfast	823	2560
Republic of Ireland	319	470
Great Britain	133	1334
Other - known	1559	9697
Total	6398	19327

With many of the groups on tours, functions, etc, it is not possible to distinguish which countries they emanate from. The Northern Ireland Assembly does not collect specific information on the age profile of visitors on tours, events and functions.

3. CASUAL VISITORS

An accurate analysis of casual visitors to the building is not maintained primarily because of the restricted access available to them, i.e. entry to Great Hall only.

The measures set out below have been taken in order to increase access to the building.

- Information about access to Parliament Buildings is available on the website and in the Guide to the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Members are made aware that they can sponsor tours and events in Parliament Buildings in the Members' Handbook and are given guidance on the Assembly's intranet site, Assist.
- Letters about the Education Programme have been sent to all schools and MLAs.
- The Education Officers actively promote the programme through participation in teacher training events and meetings with the various education authorities.
- The scheme of work for Citizenship produced by CEA includes the Education Programme.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Friday 7 September 2007

Written Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Breast Screening Backlog

Mr Leslie Cree asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to deal with the backlog of approximately 7,000 women waiting for breast screening in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 28/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): There are a total of 26,400 Eastern Board women eligible for breast screening between 1 August 2007 and 31 July 2008 (7,000 backlog and 19,400 women invited as part of the routine breast screening programme). The Eastern Board currently screens 419 women per week and plans to increase this to 555 per week from September. This will reduce the backlog to approximately 3,600 by 31 July 2008 and it is anticipated that it will be cleared by the end of July 2009.

The breast screening programme is a rolling one which invites women from GP practices in turn on a three year cycle and any additional activity in one year would have to be replicated every third year or a backlog would develop again. The reduction in the backlog requires careful management to ensure that the situation does not recur and my Department is monitoring the situation closely.

Cost of Bonfire Clean-up

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the costs incurred by Roads Service in relation to the clean-up of bonfires held on 11 July. (AQW 30/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service may be involved with the removal of bonfire material from the public road network, either before or after the bonfire has been lit, and the subsequent removal of that material. Repairs to the road surface may also be required. The extent of Roads Service's involvement varies from year to year and also between local council areas.

While Roads Service does not monitor expenditure specifically related to bonfires, it is estimated that in the summer of 2007, around £60,000 was spent on attending/repairing bonfire sites.

Road Safety Measures on the A26 Frosses Road

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will introduce (i) further road safety measures on the A26 Frosses Road between Glarryford and Ballymoney; and (ii) roundabouts at the Kirk Road and Dervock Road junctions of the A26 Frosses Road. (AQW 42/08)

Mr Murphy: A number of improvements to the A26 route from Glarryford to the Dervock Road have been introduced over the past number of years. These have included a significant safety scheme carried out during the period 2001 to 2003 that provided upgraded road markings to indicate safe overtaking opportunities, edge of carriageway markings, improved junction safety through the introduction of coloured surfacing and traffic islands and improved signage. In addition climbing lanes have been introduced at Glenlough to provide overtaking opportunities for traffic travelling towards Ballymena; and at Ballinaloob for traffic travelling towards Ballymoney. The latter scheme also introduced a much improved junction layout at the Dunloy Crossroads junction. A roundabout has also been provided at the junction of the A26 Ballymoney bypass at the Kilraughts Road junction. My Department's Roads Service is currently progressing plans for the provision of a dual carriageway on this route from Glarryford to the junction of the A26 with the A44 Drones Road.

With regard to the second part of your question, the recently published Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015 has identified a number of junctions within Ballymoney

Town that may require upgrading during the plan period. However, this did not extend to or identify any issues with the junctions to which you refer in your question. I am not, therefore, in a position to offer any immediate likelihood of further improvements being introduced at these junctions. I understand that you had recently written to Roads Service, expressing concerns about the delays being experienced at the Dervock Road. Traffic surveys will be carried out at both the Dervock Road and Kirk Road junctions to quantify the extent of any delays being experienced and I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager to write to you with the results of these surveys when available.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 14 September 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Historic Crimes Investigation

Mr David Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if all Ministers, officials and policy advisers within the department are fully committed to co-operate with the Police Service of Northern Ireland in any historic crimes investigation, now and in the future. (AQW 86/08)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): All Ministers have affirmed the Pledge of Office as set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. One of the terms of that Pledge is a commitment “to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts, as set out in paragraph 6 of the St Andrews Agreement.”

All Northern Ireland Civil Servants, including policy advisers, are required to comply with the standards of behaviour set out in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Code of Ethics, which forms part of the contractual relationship between civil servants and Departments. The Code of Ethics states that civil servants must “comply with the law and uphold the administration of justice”.

Promotion of Northern Ireland in the USA

Mr Nelson McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in light of the recent Smithsonian Festival, what plans are in

place to promote Northern Ireland in the United States of America. (AQO 73/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: During the Smithsonian Festival Ministers had a very successful visit attending over 100 meetings and events. The support of the US Administration has provided a real window of opportunity which we must maximise. In the United States the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, DC promotes our interests and is engaged in a number of activities to promote our economy, science and research, skills, culture, education and our knowledge.

The Bureau is working with other Departments and organisations on economic initiatives with corporate America, networking with Irish and Scots-Irish communities, education and research partnerships with universities and schools, cultural and sporting activities and promoting our expertise and best practice at federal and state levels .

Invest NI which is the responsibility of our ministerial colleague Nigel Dodds, also has an important role to market Northern Ireland in the United States and has invested considerable resources in this.

An important outcome of the Executive’s visit in the summer is the US Government’s support for an investment conference next spring.

The First Minister intends to visit the United States later this year with colleagues to continue to promote Northern Ireland’s interests and in particular to focus on this very important economic work.

Junior Ministers

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if any of the Junior Ministers have attended, or will be attending, meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive.

(AQO 41/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Junior Ministers were appointed in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 8 May under the determination of 8 December 1999 which provided for two Junior Ministers whose function would be; “Assisting the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the exercise of their functions in relation to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.”

The Junior Ministers assist in all functions and have particular responsibility for:

- liaison with the Assembly in relation to Executive business;
- co-ordination of policy in relation to Children and young people’s issues; and

- co-ordination of policy in relation to Older people's issues.

Given their roles both Junior Ministers have attended, and will continue to attend, meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Special Advisers for Junior Ministers

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what representations were made to the present Secretary of State, and his predecessor, in respect of the appointment of special advisers to the Junior Ministers.

(AQO 38/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We wrote to the former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, on 18 May asking him to bring forward an amendment to the Civil Service Commissioners Order to allow the appointment of special advisers to the Junior Ministers.

Efficiency Review Panel

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will commit to the early establishment of an efficiency review panel with the widest possible remit.

(AQO 2/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The establishment of the Efficiency Review Panel to examine efficiency and value for money of aspects of the Strand One institutions is an important issue which needs to be carefully considered.

We have given a commitment to consult with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on our proposals for the establishment, remit and work programme of the Panel before bringing proposals to the Assembly for approval.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what interventions it has made in respect of the trade of local produce in the aftermath of the recent Foot-and-Mouth Disease outbreak.

(AQO 96/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The recent Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak clearly demonstrated the advantages of a devolved Government in protecting Northern Ireland's interests.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, with the support of the Executive, and the co-operation of the industry took swift and decisive action

to protect our farming industry from the threat posed and in securing an early exemption from an export ban.

Following international trading difficulties, we made contact with the Taoiseach, the Japanese Ambassador to the UK and several senior representatives within the US Administration to resolve export difficulties relating to our meat and dairy products.

We are delighted that we were able to secure their support and following our interventions the export restrictions were removed. This ensured that Northern Ireland could continue to export to the EU and world markets.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr William Irwin asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps it has taken to assist in the recent Foot and Mouth crisis.

(AQO 83/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The recent Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak clearly demonstrated the advantages of a devolved Government in protecting Northern Ireland's interests.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, with the support of the Executive, and the co-operation of the industry took swift and decisive action to protect our farming industry from the threat posed and in securing an early exemption from an export ban.

Following international trading difficulties, we made contact with the Taoiseach, the Japanese Ambassador to the UK and several senior representatives within the US Administration to resolve export difficulties relating to our meat and dairy products.

We are delighted that we were able to secure their support and following our interventions the export restrictions were removed. This ensured that Northern Ireland could continue to export to the EU and world markets.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any discussions it has had with the Government of the Republic of Ireland, aimed at identifying and developing additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the North-South Ministerial Council.

(AQO 117/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: At the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary meeting held on 17 July in Armagh the Council agreed to take forward the Review, provided for in the St Andrews Agreement, of the North/South Implementation Bodies and Areas for Co-operation. The Review will

commence later this month and a final report will be presented to the first North South Ministerial Council Plenary meeting in 2008.

A full report on the most recent Plenary meeting will be made to the Executive and to the Assembly in the near future.

Victims' Commissioner

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to report on the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner.

(AQO 58/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: Victims and survivors needs are a high priority for us and we want to get the decision on an appointment right. We will take the necessary time to do this, not least for those who have suffered so much during the Troubles. We would ask everyone to be patient; the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner is under active, detailed and careful consideration and we hope to make an early decision on this important appointment.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will outline the benefits of the North-South Ministerial Council meeting, held in Armagh on 17 July 2007.

(AQO 108/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The fifth Plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) took place in Armagh on Tuesday 17 July 2007. This meeting was significant in that it was the first meeting of the NSMC since 2002.

Ministers welcomed the opportunity to meet in the Council to consult, promote mutually beneficial co-operation and take a number of decisions on a range of issues within the Council's work programme. These are outlined in the Joint Communiqué from the Plenary which is available on the NSMC website at www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org.

A full report on the most recent NSMC Plenary will be made to the Executive Committee and the Assembly in the near future.

Victims' Strategy

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will provide a timeframe for the publication of a Victims' Strategy; and to detail the plans for consultation with the Assembly on this issue.

(AQO 1/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: It is hoped to publish a draft strategy for Victims and Survivors shortly. We are committed to engagement with the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at the earliest opportunity to discuss this important document.

NSMC and BIC Meetings

Mr Peter Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what actions were agreed at the recent meetings of both the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

(AQO 3/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: A British Irish Council (BIC) Summit and a North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary meeting took place on Monday 16 July and Tuesday 17 July respectively.

Ministers agreed a number of decisions on a range of issues within the BIC and the NSMC work programmes. These are outlined in the Communiqués which are available on the BIC and NSMC websites at www.britishirishcouncil.org/ and www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org.

A full report on the most recent BIC Summit and NSMC Plenary will be made to the Executive Committee and the Assembly in the near future.

Commissioner for Older People

Mr Mickey Brady asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will detail the current position on the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People.

(AQO 112/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The matter of an Older People's Commissioner was debated by the Assembly on Tuesday 5th June when an undertaking was given by the deputy First Minister to review the case for establishing such an office.

We have agreed however that such a review should be conducted, recognising the need to consult with the age sector, older people and the Departmental Committee. We aim to have the review completed by the end of 2007.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Land Inspections

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total number of

land inspections associated with Single Farm Payments that were carried out during (i) June 2007; (ii) July 2007; and (iii) August 2007. (AQW 31/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): In total 620 land inspections associated with Single Farm Payment were carried out during June, July and August 2007. The breakdown is as follows:

June 2007	89
July 2007	282
August 2007	249

Animals Rejected from Food Chain

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of animals presented for slaughter at Northern Ireland meat plants in the first six months of 2007, that were prevented by her department's personnel from entering the food chain due to lack of proper identification, perceived or otherwise. (AQW 33/08)

Ms Gildernew: During the first six months of 2007 44 cattle, 40 sheep and 8 deer were rejected from the food chain, due to lack of proper identification.

Over-Thirty-Months Rule

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on the Over Thirty Months Rule that continues to operate at Northern Ireland meat plants. (AQW 35/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Over Thirty Month (OTM) Rule which was introduced across the UK in March 1996 prohibited animals over thirty months entering the food chain.

On 7 November 2005, the Over Thirty Month (OTM) Rule was replaced throughout the UK with a BSE testing regime for all cattle over thirty months of age born on or after 1 August 1996.

Since that date these cattle have been eligible for entry into the food chain subject to a negative BSE test.

Number of Farmers in Northern Ireland

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmers in Northern Ireland, (i) in total; (ii) broken down by district council area; and (iii) broken

down by parliamentary constituency, for each of the last five years. (AQW 85/08)

Ms Gildernew: Information on the number of farmers recorded in the Northern Ireland Agriculture and Horticultural Census over the last five years is presented in Table 1 by district council area, and in Table 2 by parliamentary constituency.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF FARMERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY DISTRICT COUNCIL, 2002 – 2006.

District council	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Antrim	956	939	910	878	878
Ards	971	928	905	850	795
Armagh	2577	2504	2434	2380	2317
Ballymena	1665	1619	1561	1561	1528
Ballymoney	968	946	913	907	925
Banbridge	1530	1500	1444	1419	1400
Belfast	36	38	38	35	36
Carrickfergus	134	129	125	121	118
Castlereagh	158	152	149	141	151
Coleraine	996	956	949	923	855
Cookstown	1710	1704	1697	1664	1576
Craigavon	878	870	832	799	777
Derry	662	651	625	618	585
Down	1588	1562	1546	1482	1478
Dungannon	2394	2401	2347	2285	2308
Fermanagh	3933	3897	3836	3750	3844
Larne	698	695	686	678	670
Limavady	860	843	841	814	790
Lisburn	1189	1150	1122	1063	1072
Magherafelt	1724	1713	1674	1634	1625
Moyle	767	766	748	750	731
Newry and Mourne	3321	3283	3220	3193	3219
Newtownabbey	343	318	311	288	285
North Down	106	104	98	89	93
Omagh	2737	2700	2646	2633	2617
Strabane	1631	1625	1606	1571	1321
Total	34532	33993	33263	32526	31994

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF FARMERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY, 2002 – 2006.

Parliamentary constituency	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Belfast East	22	23	23	22	18

Parliamentary constituency	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Belfast North	10	9	9	9	11
Belfast South	15	9	10	9	13
Belfast West	14	15	16	13	9
East Antrim	841	830	816	809	798
East Londonderry	1855	1797	1788	1728	1642
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	5745	5728	5621	5483	5596
Foyle	662	651	625	621	582
Lagan Valley	1573	1540	1503	1441	1446
Mid Ulster	4013	3989	3935	3843	3760
Newry & Armagh	4306	4229	4115	4070	4027
North Antrim	3412	3331	3222	3222	3188
North Down	190	180	172	161	166
South Antrim	1297	1250	1216	1157	1159
South Down	3793	3721	3640	3543	3519
Strangford	1226	1184	1165	1099	1046
Upper Bann	1198	1182	1135	1087	1078
West Tyrone	4360	4325	4252	4209	3936
Total	34532	33993	33263	32526	31994

Foot-and-Mouth-Disease Outbreak

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what further actions are being taken as a result of the recent outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth Disease in Surrey. (AQO 79/08)

Ms Gildernew: I would refer the Member to the Statement which I made to the Assembly at Noon today.

Once the Commission Decision which is currently in place is revoked, it is my intention to review our certification requirements for product coming from Britain and product being exported from the North, with a view to reverting back to certification requirements that were in place before 3 August 2007 as soon as possible.

My aim has always been to return to normal trading practices as soon as it was safe to do so.

As exports to countries outside the EU remain an issue it is my intention to engage with the UK Government to support negotiations with the World Organisation for Animal Health, the OIE, which is the internationally recognised standard setting body for

animal health to regain country-wide officially FMD Free status for the UK.

North South co-operation will continue on animal disease control and trading practices, given the interest we share in preventing the introduction of a serious animal disease to the Island of Ireland.

Farm Safety

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will detail how her department is addressing the issue of improving safety, and preventing accidents, on farms. (AQO 131/08)

Ms Gildernew: I would like to extend my sincere sympathy to families who have had a loved one killed in a farm accident.

Improving safety and preventing accidents on farm is included as an integral component of all further and higher education programmes delivered by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, (CAFRE). Students enrolled on these programmes receive training in the safe use and operation of farm machinery, safe movement and handling of livestock, safe use of pesticides, emergency first aid procedures and safe lifting techniques.

CAFRE also offers a similar range of health and safety related training courses for farmers and family farm members. These courses are delivered at the CAFRE Campuses and at local out centres.

Single Farm Payment Applications

Mr Allan Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on farmers who made an unintentional error on their 2005 Single Farm Payment Application (IACS) Form. (AQO 50/08)

Ms Gildernew: 2005 was the first year of the Single Farm Payment Scheme and I accept that some applicants were unfamiliar with the Scheme rules and may have made genuine mistakes when completing their forms. These mistakes included overdeclaring land for example, land which may not have been eligible or where the farmer had not used the correct farm map. In some of these cases no further action was taken as the over declaration was less than 3% or 2 hectares but in all other instances these mistakes meant that, in accordance with EU rules, my Department had to apply penalties.

Unfortunately, there is little scope within these EU rules to waive such penalties, even when the mistakes were made unintentionally. Indeed, if my Department had considered these mistakes to have been intentional,

more stringent penalties would have been applied in line with EU rules on intentional errors.

As previously announced to Assembly colleagues, I have given farmers an additional opportunity in 2007 to correct their maps and 2007 application forms. Hopefully, this will mean that farmers will have picked up many of these ineligible areas before my Department identifies them as irregularities.

Equality Agenda in Rural Communities

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will outline how her department intends to address the equality agenda in relation to rural communities. (AQO 132/08)

Ms Gildernew: I refer my colleague to the equality impact assessment paper on the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007- 2013 which is currently out for public consultation. In this paper DARD has clearly outlined how it has been engaging with a wide spectrum of equality groups in recent months, to help gain a better understanding of the specific issues affecting rural communities.

This positive engagement will continue in the future too. I am keen to ensure that people who work and live in rural areas are treated every bit as fairly as their urban counterparts, and are made fully aware of the scope of the new Programme, and how it has the potential to bring positive benefits to disadvantaged groups in rural communities.

The consultation period runs until 2 November and during this time we will host a series of consultation events to discuss the new Programme with various interested groups. We want to hear their views and suggestions that will help us ensure that equality is mainstreamed into all aspects of delivery of the Programme.

Rural Childcare Strategy

Mrs Claire McGill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will give an update on progress on the Rural Childcare Strategy. (AQO 190/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Rural Childcare Stakeholders Committee has now met twice and is due to bring forward a report on Rural Childcare issues in January 2008. Membership of the group is wide and includes childcare specialists, community groups, women's interests and government representatives.

Inspections for Farmers

Mr Francie Brolly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what progress has been made on reducing inspections for farmers. (AQO 125/08)

Ms Gildernew: I am able to report that good progress has been made. This year, DARD has put in place arrangements whereby all the Cross-Compliance animal requirements are inspected as part of one on-farm inspection. This has reduced the number of separate on-farm inspection visits required by 800 when compared the figures for 2006. Also, it has been agreed in principle that, from 2008, DARD inspectors will undertake the health and safety related Cross-Compliance inspections (currently undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive), which will remove a further 400 separate farm visits.

I would also advise that recent legislative amendments introduced by the European Commission will enable eligibility and Cross-Compliance inspections for the 2008 scheme onwards to begin before the closing date for applications. This will enable us to spread inspections throughout the year and avoid unnecessary pressure at the end of the year.

All-Ireland Approach to Rural Development

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress that has been made in relation to an all-Ireland approach to rural development. (AQO 127/08)

Ms Gildernew: All Ireland co-operation on rural development is vital to ensure the sustainability of all our rural communities.

There have already been many positive examples of my Department working together with our colleagues in the South. This cross border co-operation has supported the creation of new industries and jobs and reinvigorated our Border areas.

I am very keen that this co-operation continues. Rural people face the same challenges across the whole island of Ireland, and a partnership approach pays dividends. To develop this further, I met with Ministers O'Cuiv and Devins on 7 September to discuss a range of rural development issues including rural childcare and their Rural White Paper, to share experiences and to look to opportunities for further co-operation in the future.

Support for Farmers

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support she is

giving to farmers in negotiating more favourable terms with supermarket chains for the sale of their produce.
(AQO 36/08)

Ms Gildernew: The multiple retailers are major markets for food and drink produced in the North and as such I have made it a priority to engage with them to discuss their policies for local sourcing and promotion of local produce.

I have already met with senior representatives of two of the major retailers in June and plan to meet others in the coming months. During these meetings I encouraged the retailers to support the sustainability of local supply chains and to take account of rising input costs faced by producers and processors. I also encouraged them to increase the amount of produce sourced from NI for their stores, both locally and in GB.

I have also just issued a letter to all the supermarkets locally seeking their view on the increase in price of feed and expressing my concern about the potential knock-on effects on producer margins.

I am committed to helping farmers develop strong and profitable relationships with their supply chain partners and my Department has been proactively facilitating such communication through the Supply Chain Awareness Programme for the past four years. I am also pleased to say that we are also currently providing facilitation support to groups of producers exploring market focused initiatives.

Delay in Single Farm Payments

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give an assurance that Northern Ireland farmers will not be put at a disadvantage, compared to farmers in the Republic of Ireland, through delays in paying out the 2007 Single Farm Payment.
(AQO 52/08)

Ms Gildernew: While I am not in a position to compare the 2007 payment position between here and the south, I can provide an assurance that there will be no unjustified delays in the issue of our 2007 Single Farm Payments. However, as payments can only be made on fully validated claims, if there is a query on a case this cannot be paid until the query is sorted out. Around 38,800 applications were received this year and good progress is being made in processing these with a sizeable percentage being query free. A timetable setting out payment targets will be published in November.

Biosecurity

Mr Cathal Boylan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans for ensuring that bio security is as effective as possible in ensuring

freedom from future outbreaks of Foot-and-Mouth and other diseases.
(AQO 116/08)

Ms Gildernew: I will continue to ensure that everything possible is done to keep us free from animal diseases that would have serious economic implications.

My Department has a system in place at ports to ensure that “dirty” vehicles are not permitted to enter the North. There are also systems in place that can easily be introduced at times of increased risk, for example, disinfection at ports as we have seen in the past month.

Our procedures for cattle traceability are excellent and this forms the basis for ensuring that animals are monitored closely and can be easily traced. During the recent Foot and Mouth outbreak, as an example, within 48 hours my Department had traced all 128 consignments of animals that had come from or through Britain since the beginning of July. This was fundamental to ensuring that if the disease had spread here we would have picked it up quickly.

As well as traceability my Department also has a long term commitment to education which includes biosecurity messages being issued in a timely manner and in response to heightened risk. This takes the form of leaflets, advertising and posters.

There is very close, on-going co-operation between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Food in Dublin on the prevention, surveillance and control of a range of epizootic diseases, such as FMD, Bluetongue and Avian Influenza.

This co-operation has included discussions about the assessment of risk, the preventive actions that would be taken in the respective jurisdictions and the importance of these being co-ordinated, the alignment of contingency planning, and the movement controls which would be necessary in the event of an outbreak.

This close level of North/South co-operation will continue, given the interest we all share in preventing the introduction of serious animal disease to the Island of Ireland.

Foot-and-Mouth-Disease Outbreak

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the ‘Fortress Ireland’ approach adopted following the Foot-and-Mouth outbreak in England, and its role in Northern Ireland’s exclusion from the European Union ban on produce from Britain.
(AQO 114/08)

Ms Gildernew: In my opinion, the “Fortress Ireland” approach was crucial in minimising the risk to the Island of Ireland during the recent Foot and Mouth outbreak. I, together with my officials, worked closely

with counterparts in Dublin to ensure a consistent approach was adopted throughout the Island which was proportionate to the risk. The Department already has close links with colleagues in Dublin and this close level of North/South co-operation will continue in the future.

Indeed the European Commission has recognised the unique position of the North which means that we were excluded from the EU ban and therefore allowed to continue to trade with other Member States.

Foot-and-Mouth-Disease Outbreak

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will outline the diplomatic efforts that were involved in ensuring that other countries understood and respected that Northern Ireland's exports were free of Foot-and-Mouth Disease. (AQO 120/08)

Ms Gildernew: The First Minister contacted the Japanese Ambassador in London and the deputy First Minister and I worked very closely with the US Administration.

At my request, the UK Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) wrote to all EU CVOs advising each of them that the North was free from FMD and had been since 2001. My officials then rang and spoke to a number of Member States to re-inforce the message.

We also spoke to countries such as Turkey where there were initial difficulties concerning hides and skins.

DETI and Invest NI were also very supportive and will continue to promote our produce at international exhibitions, Meet-The-Buyer events and by increasing the number of trade development visits to overseas exhibitions.

My CVO attended the Standing Committee of the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFAH) in Brussels on two occasions.

Letters of comfort were also provided to exporters who were experiencing difficulties with importing countries.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Bailiffs for Fisheries

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of bailiffs to service (i) Killylane Reservoir; (ii) Altnahinch Reservoir; and (iii) Dungonnell Reservoir; and to give his assessment of whether this number is sufficient. (AQW 67/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Department employs the Fisheries Conservancy Board on an agency basis to provide the bailiffing for these 3 fisheries which form part of the Department's Public Angling Estate. There are 64 fisheries in the Estate including Lough Erne.

There is no set number of bailiffs attending these fisheries rather the Department allocates a specific number of hours per season for each fishery. Bailiffing is undertaken by "blitzes" (several bailiffs at weekends or evenings) and single bailiffs at any time. The hours allocated are shown below.

Fishery	Evening and weekend visits	No of bailiffs	Blitz hours	Individual hours	Total hours
Killylane	4	2	30	33	63
Altnahinch	3	2	18	12	30
Dungonnell	1	2	6	12	18

Additional hours may be added if specific problems are identified.

The amount of bailiffing is based on the revenue available to the Department for this purpose. The level of bailiffing at the 64 fisheries is determined by the investment in each fishery (value of fish stocked) or its importance as a wild fishery. This is the most cost effective way to bailiff these fisheries at this time.

Eel-Fishing Community on Lough Neagh

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his strategy for assisting the eel fishing community on Lough Neagh. (AQO 123/08)

Mr Poots: My Department already implements a number of operational measures to assist the eel fishing community on Lough Neagh. This includes:

- the funding of a scientist to work specifically with the eel fishing community on Lough Neagh on eel research work; and
- the Freshwater Fishing Vessels Grant Scheme provides financial assistance primarily to the Lough Neagh commercial eel fishing community towards the cost of fishing vessels or a new engine for a fishing vessel.

The Department is currently developing an eel management plan for the Neagh/Bann catchment which includes Lough Neagh. This is required by an EU Eel Conservation regulation to address the current decline in European eel stocks. Whilst this is primarily a conservation measure it should also assist the continued viability of the local eel fishing industry.

For the first time the European Fisheries Fund includes a grant provision for the specific purpose of elver restocking. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is the lead NI department for delivery of the Fund. The provision of grant for elver restocking is currently under discussion between my Department and DARD.

Funding of GAA Clubs

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken to ensure that funding to local Gaelic Athletic Clubs is awarded fairly and in accordance with need, and that district councils that fail to comply are informed accordingly.

(AQO 13/08)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport in Northern including the distribution of funding to sport. All Sport Northern Ireland investment programmes are subject to open competition and have clearly documented procedures to ensure they address need, are transparent and that there is consistency in the assessment of applications for all sports including Gaelic Games. These procedures are also subject to independent internal and external audit in accordance with accountability requirements of public funding. In addition, all Sport Northern Ireland programmes are assessed to ensure that they take account of the need to promote equality of opportunity in line with the equality requirements imposed upon public bodies under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. District Councils are also subject to the same accountability and equality obligations.

Maritime Heritage

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps are being taken to preserve the maritime heritage of Northern Ireland.

(AQO 59/08)

Mr Poots: My Department's responsibilities on maritime heritage are outworked through our sponsorship of the National Museums of Northern Ireland. National Museums have significant and extensive maritime collections. Those collections include a photographic archive containing tens of thousands of images, hundreds of thousands of drawings from the Harland and Wolff shipyards and a number of full sized vessels. All are adequately being cared for and preserved.

Mobile Library Service

Mr Gerry McHugh asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to ensure that the mobile library service is expanded. (AQO 128/08)

Mr Poots: I appreciate that mobile libraries provide a greatly valued service, especially in rural areas. 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries', the DCAL Framework Policy for Libraries, encourages the use of mobile libraries to provide access to library services in rural areas.

Operational decisions regarding the most effective and efficient way to provide library services in any particular area are made by Education and Library Boards.

PRONI Online

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following the announcement of a relocation of the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland to Belfast's Titanic Quarter, what plans he has for, and what resources he intends to commit to, increasing the accessibility of public records online.

(AQO 40/08)

Mr Poots: A major project - with government funding to date of £740,000 - to make the extensive and detailed catalogues to the archives held in PRONI, available and searchable on-line will be completed before the end of 2007. This will open up PRONI's archives to both a local and world-wide audience, enable the public to be much better prepared in advance of a visit to PRONI and speed up the research time actually spent in PRONI. The public will be able to access PRONI's catalogues through the public library service and Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) thereby providing a more joined approach to information retrieval.

Alongside this major project, PRONI has completed 2 significant digitisation projects that are available on-line, and is currently completing 3 further projects to get the 1858-1900 wills, the early street directories and the historical Ordnance Survey maps for Northern Ireland (the latter in partnership with Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland) available on-line.

Electronic educational resources based on PRONI's rich archives have also been created to support the Northern Ireland curriculum, and are either available through LearningNI to all schools in Northern Ireland or directly on the Internet. Plans are well advanced to create an on-line exhibition in partnership with the Linen Hall Library and the Ulster Museum on the Ulster connections to the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The exhibition will draw extensively on PRONI's archives and will be of value to schools, universities and the life-long learner.

In addition PRONI is currently re-designing its website that will provide more information to customers using the archives with plans to include databases to particular series of archives.

Both present and future initiatives in regard to the enhancement of online access to the unique holdings of PRONI are considered within the overall context of DCAL resource priorities and the priorities of PRONI as a division of the Department. Those priorities will take full account of the need for PRONI to encourage the wider use of unique archive resources that are ‘the documented community memory’.

Business Plan for All-sports Stadium at the Maze

Mr David Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the timescale for presentation of a full business plan for an all-sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQO 80/08)

Mr Poots: A draft business plan has been passed to the 3 sports governing bodies – Soccer, Rugby and Gaelic Games – for their consideration. The independent consultants appointed to complete the business plan will then review and finalise the plan in light of the comments received from the 3 sports bodies. This process will hopefully be completed in the next few weeks. In parallel with this, but on a slightly longer timescale, work is in hand to address the governance and management arrangements for the Stadium. This work will also be taken forward in conjunction with the preferred developer for the Maze site.

Development of Recreational Sea Angling

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to ensure adequate investment is made into developing recreational sea angling in coastal areas. (AQO 121/08)

Mr Poots: My Department has no direct remit under the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 to develop recreational sea angling. Currently there is no funding allocated for this purpose.

However as the implementing body for a Peace II Water Based Tourism Measure we allocated funding totalling over £116, 000 to four commercial recreational sea angling projects. This funding was primarily to provide new or upgrade existing charter boat vessels for recreational coastal angling for the benefit of both local communities and tourists.

My department has commissioned a report into the social and economic impact of recreational fisheries,

angling and angling resources. The report includes sea angling. It is due to be published in the near future. I will be considering the recommendations contained in the Report.

I am also currently in discussion with Ards and Down Sea trout Enhancement Association regarding the feasibility of coastal sea trout angling on Strangford Lough.

Joint Projects

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the joint projects currently being undertaken by his department and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 124/08)

Mr Poots: Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, an Agency of DCAL, is working with a number of other organisations including the Department for Regional Development, NI Planning Service, Ordnance Survey Ireland, the University of Ulster Jordanstown and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the Republic of Ireland, on a Spatial Indicators project. This project covers Northern Ireland and the Border counties. It is funded through the EU INTERREG IIIA programme.

The Spatial Indicators project is based on work developed in an EU project named MOLAND (Monitoring Land Cover/Use Dynamics). MOLAND uses a modelling tool to predict the impact of spatial planning decisions, and to monitor and assess where development is likely to take place. The results enable organisations to proceed with planning decisions with a view of their likely consequences. The model also contains a set of indicators of urban and regional sustainability that can be used to compare between areas.

ENVIRONMENT

Eco-driving Campaign

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration she will give to the introduction of an “eco-driving campaign” similar to that launched by the Scottish Executive. (AQW 3/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I have no plans to introduce such a campaign in Northern Ireland but changes to driver training and assessment should help to promote eco-friendly driving. From 3 September 2007 the Theory Test for car and motorcycles has introduced more questions on the effects of certain driving behaviours on the environment. From September

2008 for drivers of buses and September 2009 for drivers of large goods vehicles, it is proposed to introduce into the practical test an assessment to demonstrate understanding of ways to reduce fuel consumption and reduce noise and pollution.

Mourne National Park

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment if she will confirm that she has no plans to include Carlingford Lough in any proposed Mourne National Park. (AQW 8/08)

Mrs Foster: The Mourne National Park Working Party will be presenting me with its recommendations about the proposed Mourne National Park later this month. After I receive its recommendations I will seek the opinions of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and the Environment and Agriculture and Rural Development Committees. The views of these bodies will help me decide how to proceed.

Ballycraigy Bonfire

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the scientific tests that were performed on, or after, 12 July 2007, to assess the environmental impact of the Ballycraigy bonfire. (AQW 115/08)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not regulate bonfire sites and has not carried out any scientific tests on or around the Ballycraigy bonfire site.

Planning Applications and PPS 14

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment if she will outline in detail the implications for all planning applications refused, or with an opinion to refuse, under Draft Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, in light of Mr Justice Gillen's decision of 7 September 2007. (AQW 122/08)

Mrs Foster: Following the Court's decision that the Department for Regional Development did not have the power to prepare draft PPS 14, the Judicial Review parties have been given one week to consider possible remedies and a further hearing will take place, today 14th September 2007. Planning Service is currently holding all applications that have been determined under draft PPS 14, including those where an opinion has already been presented to the District Council but no decision has been issued. Applications for single rural dwellings listed on Council schedules during the week beginning 10 September 2007 have been deferred. The implications for applications which have previously been

refused will be considered further in light of the outcome of the further Court hearing on 14 September 2007.

Waste Offences

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of people who have been prosecuted for waste offences, in each of the last five years. (AQW 125/08)

Mrs Foster: EHS does not hold records for these prosecutions prior to late December 2003, when it assumed responsibility for waste management from District Councils. Since then, EHS has overseen the following successful prosecutions for waste offences:

2003	3
2004	24
2005	61
2006	126
2007 (to date)	55

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Art in Hospitals Expenditure

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent by each hospital in Northern Ireland on art works, for each of the last five years. (AQW 18/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The information requested is not held centrally. The review, which I announced on 24 August 2007, will look at the pattern of spending on artwork in healthcare facilities. In particular, I have asked that clear guidance is produced on how resources should be found for works of art.

Gardening and Landscaping Expenditure

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent by each hospital in Northern Ireland on gardening and landscaping, in each of the last five years. (AQW 19/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not held for each hospital.

Hospitality and Entertainment Expenditure

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent by each hospital in Northern Ireland on hospitality and entertainment, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 20/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not available by hospital.

Transfer of Patients Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each of the last five years, the number of patients transferred to hospitals outside Northern Ireland owing to a lack of beds or personnel, broken down by hospital.

(AQW 21/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not available by hospital but some high level information is available by Commissioning Board and this is shown in the table below.

NUMBER OF PATIENTS TRANSFERRED TO HOSPITALS OUTSIDE NORTHERN IRELAND 2002/2003 – 2006/2007

Commissioning Board	Financial Year					Total
	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	
Northern	214	212	211	246	324	1,207
Southern	133	146	185	199	207	870
Eastern	328	345	363	366	346	1,748
Western	41	63	105	120	61	390
Total	716	766	864	931	938	4,215

Notes

The data include:

- Patients transferred for a specialist service not available within Northern Ireland; Patients transferred to hospitals with which the Commissioning Board holds a Service Level Agreement (SLA) except for Western Board which was unable to separately identify these patients within the timeframe available.

The data exclude:

- Patients admitted to hospitals outside Northern Ireland while on holiday or studying abroad;
- Patients admitted to state secure hospitals;
- Patients transferred to hospitals outside Northern Ireland due to waiting list initiatives.
- The data represent the actual number of patients being seen or treated in each financial year but do not reflect the frequency of each patient's visit to hospital. It should be noted that a patient may be counted in each of the financial years if their condition is kept under review.

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of directors and assistant directors in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area; the cost of their salaries and that of the Chief Executive; and how these costs compare with previous costs before the new arrangements were implemented.

(AQW 37/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I have delegated the responsibility for answering this question to the Chief Executive of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. I understand that he has replied as follows:

With reference to the above question, please find detailed below the response:

Job Title	Salary Band	Salary Range
Chief Executive	Band 2	£88,125 - £117,498
Director of Acute Services	Band 4	£66,093 - £88,125
Director of Children & Young People's Services	Band 4	£66,093 - £88,125
Director of Finance & Procurement	Band 4	£66,093 - £88,125
Director of Human Resources	Band 5	£56,650 - £75,534
Director of Mental Health & Disability	Band 4	£66,093 - £88,125
Director of Older People & Primary Care	Band 5	£56,650 - £75,534
Director of Performance & Reform	Band 4	£66,093 - £88,125

Bandings for the above posts have been set by the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety.

Job Title	Salary Band	Salary Range
Assistant Directors (24)	8C	£46,900 - £68,880
Assistant Directors (7)	8B	£39,346 - £50,733

Bandings for the Assistant Directors posts were determined by a desk top banding exercise in accordance with the new *Agenda for Change Pay Arrangements*. This desk top banding was carried out by trained management side and staff side representatives.

The cost of Chief Executives, Directors and Assistant Directors in the old structures is estimated to be of the order of £6.4m (the figures have to be treated with some degree of caution owing to definitional issues around Assistant Directors in the old structures) compared to an estimated £2.6m in the new structure. This latter figure does not reflect the cost of some posts/structures currently being consulted upon but is not likely to exceed £3m.

Tackling Violence in the Home Strategy

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has established an inter-Ministerial group to deliver on the Tackling Violence in the Home Strategy; and to detail the number of meetings that have taken place to date. (AQW 38/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I announced in the Assembly on 29 May 2007 my intention to establish an Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic Violence, in order to ensure the implementation of the Tackling Violence at Home Strategy. Recognising Northern Ireland's particular needs and planning to make best use of people's time, I have decided to expand the remit of the Group to include sexual violence.

I have written to Ministers Peter Robinson, Margaret Ritchie and Cairtriona Ruanne seeking their endorsement of the 2007/08 Domestic Violence Action Plan and informing them about the proposed Group. In order to establish the Group, I intend to seek the Executive's formal approval in early November and follow with the first meeting as soon as possible thereafter.

Community Health Village in Banbridge

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the commitment to the people of Banbridge after the closure of Banbridge Hospital, if he will provide a new community health village on the site; to give a timescale for completion of this work; and to give an indication of what plans currently exist for the site. (AQW 39/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust have produced a conceptual plan for a Community Health Village on the site of the former Banbridge Hospital. As part of this plan the new GP Group Surgery and the FOLD sheltered accommodation have already been developed at the location. The Health and Care Centre, and Day Centre projects proposed for this site are included in the Trust's business case for their Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme, which was submitted to the Department in July 2007 for assessment. It is expected that this appraisal of the PCCI business case, including Banbridge, should be completed before the end of 2007, at which time a decision on approval could be taken. This would then enable the project to progress to the procurement stage. This will, of course, be subject to the availability of the requisite capital and revenue resources, which is yet to be confirmed in the current Comprehensive Spending Review and associated review of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland later this year. Other plans for the site include the development of a memorial garden and community park which is to be provided by Banbridge District Council.

Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for the Altnagelvin Hospital Estate, (i) the number and location of inpatient beds; and (ii) the provision of professionals allied to medicine, allocated to people who have suffered a brain injury, spinal injury or who have a progressive neurological condition. (AQW 47/08)

Mr McGimpsey: (i) There are 17 beds, located at Spruce House in Altnagelvin Hospital, that are allocated to patients who have suffered a brain injury, spinal injury or who have a progressive neurological condition.

Most patients are admitted to these beds directly from home but in some cases they may be transferred from an acute bed within the main Altnagelvin Hospital where they had been admitted through A&E.

(ii) One physiotherapist is allocated to Spruce House for 10 hours per week to provide a service for patients who have suffered a brain injury, spinal injury or who have a progressive neurological condition.

Physiotherapists are allocated as required to patients with these conditions, who occupy acute beds, within the main Altnagelvin hospital as required.

There is no formal Occupational Therapy or Speech and Language Therapy cover for Spruce House. However, the Head Occupational Therapist / Head Speech and Language Therapist will see patients with such conditions when required.

No other Allied Health Professionals provide an input to these services at Spruce House.

Regional Disabled Services Unit at Musgrave Park Hospital

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he intends to take to reduce the waiting list for special seating for wheelchairs at the Regional Disabled Services Unit at Musgrave Park Hospital. (AQW 52/08)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department is working to bring about a significant programme of change in the delivery of the wheelchair service in Northern Ireland. The current review of the wheelchair service being carried out by the Regional Wheelchair Reform Group will ensure that service users can avail of a high quality, accessible, and responsive service. The Group's remit covers the complete spectrum of wheelchair services, including the area of special seating. It will report its findings and recommendations by March 2008.

Breast Screening Waiting Lists

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures have been put in place to tackle the breast-screening waiting lists and waiting times within the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 65/08)

Mr McGimpsey: A regional breast screening plan has been drawn up by the Chief Executives of the Health and Social Services Boards for the provision of an equitable breast screening service for Northern Ireland, and to address the backlog that has arisen as a result of suspension of the breast screening service in the Northern Board. The plan identified the need for a second mobile screening unit in the Northern Board. My Department has made funding available for this and the Northern Board has begun the procurement process.

Currently 370 Northern Board women are being screened every week compared with 250 women prior to October 2005. There is a 16 month backlog for mobile screening in the Ballymena area but this will fall to 8 months from October 2007 when screening in the Ballymena area is completed. The provision of the second mobile and use of unscheduled capacity at Antrim Hospital from October 2007 will increase the number screened and further help reduce the backlog. It is anticipated that the backlog will be fully cleared by 2009.

The breast screening programme is a rolling one which invites women from GP practices in turn on a three year cycle and any additional activity in one year would have to be replicated every third year or a backlog would develop again. The reduction in the backlog requires careful management to ensure that a backlog situation does not arise again and my Department is monitoring the situation closely.

Delayed Discharge of Patients

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people, broken down by Health and Social Services Board, who remain in hospital because an adequate care package is not available to facilitate their return home. (AQW 66/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of people, broken down by Health and Social Services Board, who remain in hospital because an adequate care package is not available to facilitate their return home is not available. However, the number of patients who had their discharge delayed due to 'no place or care package available' is available and is shown in the table below broken down by Health and Social Services Board of residence. Figures shown represent the situation at the end of April 2007, the latest month for which information is available.

Health and Social Services Board of Residence	Number of Delayed Discharges ¹ due to 'No Place or Care Package Available' April 2007
EHSSB	35
NHSSB	25
SHSSB	<5
WHSSB	8

Source: Departmental Return, DDI.

Notes:

Figures are presented in respect of the position at the last day of April 2007.

¹ Information is currently provisional and subject to change.

Please note that cell sizes that have a value of less than 5 have been masked in order to help protect confidentiality.

Withdrawal of Drugs for Alzheimer's Disease

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the anticipated financial savings that would be achieved as a result of withdrawing clinically effective drugs for the treatment of the early and late stages of Alzheimer's Disease. (AQW 98/08)

Mr McGimpsey: In November 2006, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) published guidance on four drugs used in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. This guidance was amended in September 2007. The Institute's conclusion was that three of these drugs (donepezil, galantamine and rivastigmine) were recommended as treatment options for people with Alzheimer's disease of moderate severity only. The other drug, memantine, was not recommended as a treatment option for people with moderately severe to severe Alzheimer's disease.

Using a costing template produced by NICE, it is estimated that implementation of this guidance in Northern Ireland would realise annual savings in the region of £400,000.

Cost of Alzheimer's Drugs

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost per annum of prescribing the Alzheimer's drugs Aricept, Reminyl and Exelon. (AQW 99/08)

Mr McGimpsey: During the 2006/2007 year the cost of prescribing these Alzheimer's drugs was:

Drug	Cost
Aricept	£2,205,113
Reminyl	£1,186,528

Drug	Cost
Exelon	£116,636

Number of People with Alzheimer's Disease

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people with Alzheimer's Disease, who are currently in receipt of community care services. (AQW 100/08)

Mr McGimpsey: This information is not collected centrally.

Patient Complaints

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by hospital, the total number of complaints made by patients in each of the last five years; the number of these that related to (i) misdiagnosis; (ii) unacceptable standards of care; and (iii) unsuitable treatment; and the total number and percentage of these that were upheld. (AQW 145/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information is not available in the format requested. The following represents the number of complaints made by patients in each of the last five years across HSC Trusts.

HSS Trust	Total number of complaints received				
	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Belfast City Hospital	163	120	195	153	163
Down Lisburn	274	289	282	299	373
Green Park Healthcare	188	132	138	203	222
Mater Infirmorum	119	136	92	98	91
North & West Belfast	130	150	110	143	153
Royal Group	657	490	415	621	839
South & East Belfast	205	271	282	252	294
Ulster Community & Hospitals	400	360	382	294	356
Causeway	420	506	455	456	531
Homefirst Community	148	185	286	327	264
United Hospitals	191	262	275	310	311
Armagh & Dungannon	86	85	77	69	99
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	106	82	90	128	100

HSS Trust	Total number of complaints received				
	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	225	193	168	220	194
Newry & Mourne	158	113	141	150	230
Altnagelvin Hospitals	234	200	229	213	333
Foyle	70	55	78	71	77
Sperrin Lakeland	82	95	54	64	136
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	168	145	181	144	178
Northern Ireland Total	4,024	3,869	3,930	4,215	4,944

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Upgrade of Sewerage System in Bangor

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the sewerage system in Bangor; and if he will give a timescale for the work to be carried out. (AQW 4/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): As Minister for Regional Development, I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, but the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 introduced by the previous administration transferred responsibility for the operational delivery of water and sewerage services to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). As the issue raised is an operational matter, I have asked Katharine Bryan, Chief Executive of NIW, to write to you in response to this question.

Improvements to Road and Rail Infrastructure

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken to improve the contribution of Northern Ireland's road and rail infrastructure towards our ability to compete economically with the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 43/08)

Mr Murphy: The Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) identifies strategic transportation investment priorities up to 2012. The strategic direction and underlying principles of the RTS were agreed by the Assembly in July 2002.

The RTS acknowledges that transportation is inextricably linked to the economy. The RTS was developed on the basis that enhancing the regional gateways identified in the Regional Development Strategy and creating an upgraded and integrated transport system, built around the Regional Strategic Transport Network incorporating the Key Transport Corridors, is essential for the future prosperity of the region.

Proposals to upgrade and improve these corridors were contained within the Regional Strategic Transportation Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP – 2005), which identified £1,567 million for major highway improvements and bus and rail services, up to the year 2015.

The composition and delivery of the major works programme of my Department's Roads Service is consistent with the level of investment proposed under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), published in December 2005. The ISNI sets out a high level view of planned investment up to 2015 with proposals for up to £1.4 billion of strategic road improvement schemes. Around £1 billion of these schemes have already been identified in the RSTN TP and Roads Service is currently considering responses to a consultation exercise on a further £400million of major works proposals.

The National Development Plan 2007-2013, launched in January 2007, contains proposals for Irish Government investment in North/South projects. At the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in July, the Irish Government indicated its intention to make available £400million to help fund major roads programmes, providing dual carriageway standard on routes within Northern Ireland on the Western Corridor and the Eastern Seaboard Corridor (Belfast to Larne). The Northern Ireland Executive has confirmed its acceptance, in principle, to taking forward these two major road projects. Roads Service is now engaged in developing a process for the governance, delivery, and funding of these projects including the early commencement of a route corridor study for the A5.

An interdepartmental working group led by my Department has now undertaken an assessment of investment, and considered options for future investment for the rail network. As a result, a bid for additional funding to purchase further new trains and to upgrade the Derry line has been submitted for consideration in drawing up the second Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The RTS contains a commitment to carry out a mid-term review which will include examining the progress of implementation to date, budgets secured and relevant developments since 2002.

Security of Rail Link to Dublin

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of meetings he has had with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, regarding the security of the rail link to Dublin.

(AQW 44/08)

Mr Murphy: I have not met with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to discuss the security of the rail link to Dublin. However, Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) liaises closely with the PSNI on matters concerning the security of the line. In the past six months senior operational managers from NIR have met with senior divisional PSNI officers on six occasions regarding security assessments / security incidents on the Belfast – Dublin line. In addition there have been numerous telephone communications at other operational levels between the two organisations.

Security Threat on Rail Link to Dublin

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the security threat against the Dublin rail link; and what steps he has taken to ensure that it remains free from disruption.

(AQW 45/08)

Mr Murphy: Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) liaises closely with the PSNI in terms of its response to reported security issues on the rail line. Where closure is considered necessary, this is done and the necessary contingency plans are implemented with co-operation from Iarnród Éireann. NIR, under the guidance and advice of the PSNI, works to ensure the earliest practical inspection, clearance and re-opening of the line, while at all times ensuring the safety of passengers and staff.

Assessing the level of threat is an issue for the PSNI rather than NIR or the Department for Regional Development. However, NIR has worked hard to achieve effective community relations on the route. Efforts have been made to raise awareness of the economic, environmental and social benefits that reliable access to public transport offers as well as the risks to safety, inconvenience and frustration to passengers that security alerts entail.

Road and Rail Infrastructure and Economic Competitiveness

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the contribution of Northern Ireland's road and rail infrastructure in

determining its ability to compete economically with the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 46/08)

Mr Murphy: Transport is a key driver of economic development. It provides the means for all citizens to access employment, social and educational services as well as leisure activities and for the efficient and timely movement of goods. A modern infrastructure is crucial to economic growth and competitiveness. We need high quality ports and airports to trade internationally and also high quality road and public transport linkages.

The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, published in December 2005, sets out a high level view of planned investment up to 2015 with proposals for up to £1.4 billion of strategic road improvement schemes. Around £1 billion of these schemes have already been identified in the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan and Roads Service is currently considering responses to a consultation exercise on a further £400million of major works proposals. The Regional Strategic Transport Network connects the major hubs and gateways here, including the air and seaports. The proposed strategic road improvements will improve the flow of traffic, including public transport and freight, across the region and contribute to competitiveness and economic growth here.

In addition all Ireland cooperation to develop a more integrated transport network can significantly contribute to the development of both the local economy and the economy of the island as a whole. Work is well advanced in upgrading the Belfast – Dublin road corridor as well as the Belfast – Dublin Enterprise service. There are also plans for improved roads provision for the Derry – Letterkenny North – West Gateway.

Modern Rolling Stock on the Belfast to Larne Line

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to advise of the estimated costs of providing modern rolling stock on the Belfast to Larne line, to a similar standard as that introduced to other rail services throughout Northern Ireland. (AQW 58/08)

Mr Murphy: Services on the Larne line are provided by a fleet of 9 x 3-car class 450 trains. Whilst these are older than the new C3K trains used elsewhere on the railway network, they are currently being refurbished at a cost of £3.5 million to provide a better standard of passenger comfort. To date 8 of the 9 class 450 trains have been refurbished, with the last one due to be completed by the end of November 2007.

The estimated cost of replacing the class 450 trains on the Larne line is £41.8 million. A further 2 new trains would be needed if passenger numbers on the

Larne line increased at a similar rate as on other lines since the introduction of the new C3K trains, bringing the total estimated cost to £54.4 million.

The Department for Regional Development has bid for additional funding for new trains as part of the second Investment Strategy.

Impact of New Train Sets

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the impact of introducing the 23 new train sets to Northern Ireland, in terms of increased passenger numbers on the (i) Belfast to Bangor line; (ii) Belfast to Portadown line; and (iii) Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line. (AQW 59/08)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company is in the process of producing a project benefit evaluation of the introduction of the 23 new train sets and, within this evaluation, an attempt will be made to isolate the passenger journey increases attributable to the new trains. It may, however, be difficult to make an accurate estimate of the increases due to the introduction of the new trains as there are many factors that influence passenger demand (economic conditions, fares, disruption through maintenance, road congestion).

Total passenger journey increases since the new trains were introduced are as follows:

- (i) Belfast to Bangor line – new trains were introduced between February and April 2005. Between 2004/05 and 2006/07 total passenger journeys increased from 1,517,000 to 1,957,000, an increase of 29%. Passenger journeys in 2004/05 were, however, depressed due to track relay on the line.
- (ii) Belfast to Portadown line - new trains were introduced between February and April 2005. Between 2004/05 and 2006/07 total passenger journeys increased from 1,941,000 to 2,505,000, an increase of 29%; and
- (iii) Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line – new trains were introduced between January and September 2005. Between 2004/05 and 2006/07 total passenger journeys increased from 850,000 to 1,020,000, an increase of 20%.

PPS 14

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the review of Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside; and to detail the number of meetings of the Executive Sub-Committee that have been held to date. (AQW 62/08)

Mr Murphy: The 5 July meeting of the Executive Committee agreed to undertake a review of rural planning policy. The review is being taken forward by an Inter-Departmental Group of Ministers. As a first step meetings with key stakeholders were held on 29 and 30 August. The first meeting of the Inter-Departmental Group is due to be held shortly.

Irish on Road Signs

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress his department has made in facilitating the legal use of Irish on road signs.

(AQW 63/08)

Mr Murphy: Road signs are authorised or prescribed by my Department under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, but the legislation does not make provision for signs in languages other than English. My Department's Roads Service officials are currently developing policy proposals to enable the authorisation of road signs in other languages, with a view to introducing amending legislation in line with the normal procedures and timetable for an Assembly bill.

I should point out that the Department had been in the process of working towards legislative change on this issue in 2005. However, the decisions arising out of the Review of Public Administration (RPA) meant that the relevant staff were directed to work on the legislative changes necessary to achieve the transfer of responsibility for local roads to the proposed new councils. The review of the local government aspects of RPA which is now underway has created a period of opportunity for Departmental officials to resume work on the detailed policy proposals for legislative change to allow the introduction of bilingual signage.

A draft operational policy has been prepared for the inclusion of Irish or Ulster Scots on certain road signs, as part of the Department's response to the European Charter on Regional and Minority languages. This policy will be consulted upon as part of the wider legislative development process and implemented once the necessary primary powers are in place.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will detail to which Northern Ireland Government department the government-owned company, Northern Ireland Water, is accountable.

(AQW 90/08)

Mr Murphy: Northern Ireland Water (NIW) was appointed as the water and sewerage undertaker by the Department for Regional Development under Article 13 of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006.

NIW has direct responsibility for the delivery of water and sewerage services and is subject to regulation by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation. My Department and DOE's Environment and Heritage Service also have some regulatory roles. These matters are set out in the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006. My Department is also NIW's sole shareholder.

Parking Fines in Warrenpoint

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of motorists who have been financially penalised to date, since the introduction of a one-hour parking time limit at Church Street, Warrenpoint.

(AQW 94/08)

Mr Murphy: Since October 2006, when my Department assumed responsibility for on-street parking enforcement, a total of 71 Penalty Charge Notices have been issued at Church Street, Warrenpoint for limited waiting contraventions. Details prior to this date are unavailable as this function was undertaken by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Train and Commuters

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to give the timetabled, and average actual, arrival times of morning trains arriving in Derry/Londonderry, that are designed for people commuting to work; and to outline any proposals by Northern Ireland Railways to encourage people to use the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry train for commuting to work.

(AQW 108/08)

Mr Murphy: The first train departure from Great Victoria Street, Belfast is at 06:50, arriving in Derry at 09:10. This is currently operated as an intercity service as opposed to a commuter train. In the last three months this train has had a punctuality of arrival of 84% on time or within 10 minutes, as allowed for by the Passenger Charter. In the same period overall punctuality on the Derry line stood at 90%.

Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) has immediate plans to improve running times by carrying out repair work to the track between Ballymena and Coleraine, with work already having commenced at a number of locations. It also has detailed plans to carry out comprehensive track life extension work between Ballymena and Coleraine and track repairs between Coleraine and Londonderry. These are due to be undertaken from late 2007 to 2009 subject to funding approval.

For the longer term NIR has outline plans to procure additional train sets and upgrade infrastructure in order

to facilitate hourly departure frequencies between Belfast and Derry. This would include two commuter services scheduled to arrive into Derry before 08:00 and 09:00 respectively. However these plans are dependant upon funding being made available and could not, in any case, be implemented before 2012.

Rail Transport and Sustainable Development

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the role and importance of rail transport in promoting sustainable development. (AQW 109/08)

Mr Murphy: It is widely accepted that the increased use of public transport helps reduce harmful emissions and reduces the carbon footprint per passenger journey. The Regional Transportation Strategy seeks to encourage greater use of public transport and other sustainable ways of travelling such as walking and cycling. My Department is working with transport providers to make public transport more attractive and a real alternative to the private car. Rail transport has an important role to play within the public transport sector. Whilst rail transport requires significant investment in infrastructure and rolling stock, and thus has to compete for resources with other transport modes, it has still been possible to make significant investment in rail in recent years. For example, the procurement of 23 new train sets has helped to achieve an increase in rail patronage of 31% between 2002 and 2007. For the future, my Department has submitted bids within the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) exercise for additional funding to allow for an upgrade of to the Derry line and to enhance rail services generally with the purchase of more new trains.

PPS 14

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline, in light of Mr Justice Gillen's decision of 7 September 2007, in relation to Draft Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, what policy will now apply from 16 March 2006 onwards. (AQW 123/08)

Mr Murphy: The recent Judgement by the Courts of the Judicial Review of PPS14 found in favour of Omagh District Council on the grounds that DRD did not have the statutory authority to promote PPS14. I shall consider fully all aspects of this Judgement in conjunction with other Ministerial colleagues. The Court has however given both parties one week (from Friday 7 September) to consider if they wish to provide evidence on the issue of remedies before finalising the judgement. Draft PPS14 will continue to be taken into

account in the decision making process until the final outcome of the legal proceedings.

Parking Fines in Enniskillen

Mr Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline whether Roads Service (i) recently granted approval to National Car Parks to impose penalties for off-street parking at Head Street, Enniskillen, at the rear entrances to the Darling Street properties; and (ii) consulted with the property owners and businesses affected by this decision, prior to granting any approval for the imposition of fines for off-street parking and business usage. (AQW 126/08)

Mr Murphy: As you will be aware NCP Services Ltd is contracted by my Department to enforce the parking and waiting restrictions placed on public roads. The location to which you refer consists of a carriageway marked by a double yellow line and a footway area to the side of the carriageway. A double yellow line restriction means "no waiting at any time" and it applies not only to the carriageway but also to the adjacent footway or verge. Therefore vehicles are not permitted to park on the footway at this location.

NCP Services Ltd was instructed by Roads Service to carry out normal enforcement in this area because it is believed to form part of the public road. No consultation took place with adjacent property owners or local businesses due to the fact that this is not a new restriction and has been in place for some time.

However, business owners in this street have recently claimed that the footway area to the side of Head Street is privately owned and does not form part of the public road network, therefore the waiting restriction does not apply.

Roads Service officials are currently trying to establish the exact boundary between the public road and private ground to clarify the situation. Until this is complete Traffic Attendants will only enforce against vehicles parked on the carriageway.

I have asked Roads Service to write to you when a boundary has been established and to inform you of the impact it will have to parking in this area.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Support Payments

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to advise on what time limit exists within which the Child Support Agency must pursue additional

payments, when the Agency has admitted that it has been responsible for the error. (AQW 57/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): There are no time limits within which the Child Support Agency must pursue additional payments, regardless of who is responsible for the error.

Where arrears are due to a parent with care, the Child Support Agency will always try to negotiate the best possible arrears agreement between the non-resident parent and the parent with care. Any agreement will aim to ensure a reasonable payment is made towards outstanding arrears, taking into account the financial circumstances of both parties, and, at the same time, not creating hardship for either party. Where the arrears are due to the Department, the Agency will negotiate a reasonable agreement with the non-resident parent. When agreement cannot be reached, the Agency will continue to pursue arrears using the full range of legislative powers available to it.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total cost of, (i) benefit fraud; (ii) housing benefit fraud; and (iii) the total percentage of monies paid out in benefits that this represented, in each year since 2001. (AQW 72/08)

Ms Ritchie: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. Table 1 shows the estimated cost, since 2001, of fraud in benefits administered by the Social Security Agency. Table 2 shows the estimated cost of Housing Benefit fraud for the years where figures are available. Costs are expressed as a percentage of the relevant benefit expenditure. The data quoted in Tables 1 and 2 was produced on a financial year basis until 2004/2005. The survey period moved to a calendar year from 2005.

TABLE 1
SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS (SSA): – ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD.

2001/02			2002/03			2003/04			2004/05			2005			2006		
Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost
£60.9	£3239	1.88	£34.5	£3347	1.03	38.8	£3179	1.22	£28.8	£3320	0.87	£28.6	£3406	0.84	£18.1	£3501	0.5

TABLE 2
HOUSING BENEFIT: - ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD

2001/02			2002/03			2003/04			2004/05			2005			2006		
Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost	Est Ben Fraud (m)	Ben Expend (m)	% lost
n/a	n/a	n/a	£6.7	£352.6	2.2	£0.0*	£365	0	£2.3	£392.2	0.6	£4.0	£403	1.0	£3.3	£438.9	0.8

* In this year while error was detected none was attributable to fraud

Ballycraigy Bonfire

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total cost of cleaning up and securing the site of the Ballycraigy bonfire; and how exactly this money was spent. (AQW 114/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has spent £9800 following the bonfire at Ballycraigy, Antrim. The required works involved clearing the site, renewing top soil and levelling the area.

Clearances of bonfires identified are dealt with as part of the NIHE Grounds Maintenance contract.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 21 September 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

RUAS and the Maze Site

Mr David McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to advise on the current status of the interest of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) in moving to the proposed Maze development site; and, if the interest is confirmed to be of a positive nature, if he can confirm that the RUAS's intention would be to include in its plans provision for an international competition area for promoting equestrian sports events. (AQW 1/08)

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister (Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness): In March 2007 the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) reaffirmed their interest in moving to the proposed Maze development site, and in particular the possible purchase of the area identified as the rural excellence zone in the Maze/Long Kesh Masterplan. This will be a matter between RUAS and potential Development Partners and OFMDFM cannot at this stage confirm the RUAS's intentions as regards an international competition area for promoting equestrian sports events.

Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2006-08

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail, broken down by government department, the objectives and targets stated in the Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2006-08 that remain incomplete at this stage; to give a timescale for their completion; to identify any which it is envisaged will not be completed by March 2008; and to outline the pressures causing difficulty in completion. (AQW 26/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: A monitoring report on progress against the objectives and targets stated in the Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget document was carried out by the Department of Finance and Personnel in September 2006. With the restoration of Devolution, responsibility for monitoring progress has now reverted to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. OFMDFM officials are in the process of consulting with Departments to update progress against targets up to September 2007. It is expected that this report will be completed and available before the end of the year.

The Executive will set out its priorities for 2008 and beyond, including its objectives and targets, in its draft Programme for Government document which will be published later in the year.

Single Equality Bill

Mrs Dolores Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the cost to the department and its agencies in relation to administration, staffing and consultations on work related to the Single Equality Bill, in each of the last seven years. (AQW 36/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness:

Year	Cost (£'000s)
2000/01	Not available
2001/02	96.1
2002/03	182.3
2003/04	233.9
2004/05	198.4
2005/06	47.0
2006/07	196.3
Total	954.0

The costs stated relate to expenditure on issues dealing specifically with single equality legislation. It has not been possible to extrapolate the cost of work undertaken by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on legislative reform (including single equality legislation) as part of its statutory duty. This formed part of more comprehensive work on equality issues. Departmental costs directly associated with the progression of single equality legislation in 2000/01 were included in the Divisional spend and are not available separately.

Northern Ireland Executive: Name Change

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it proposes to follow the example of the Scottish Executive, and change the name of the Northern Ireland Executive to the Northern Ireland Government. (AQW 55/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: There are currently no plans to change the name of the Northern Ireland Executive to the Northern Ireland Government.

Attacks on Orange Halls

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what assessment has been made of the impact of the recent spate of attacks on Orange Halls on the department's strategic objectives of promoting better community relations, a culture of equality and rights, and promoting social inclusion. (AQW 82/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: We totally deplore these acts and condemn utterly those people who carry out such attacks, which are a scourge on our society. We are totally committed to moving society forward; to make a real difference to the lives of all our people. We have already confirmed our commitment to challenging sectarianism and racism. We wish to see a future based on tolerance; equality; mutual respect and respect for the law. A monitoring and evaluation framework has been developed to assess the impact of good relations (including race relations) policies. The framework includes data on attacks on symbolic premises which include churches and chapels, GAA/AOH/Orange Halls and schools.

Efficiency Review Panel

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it will commit to the early establishment of an efficiency review panel with the widest possible remit. (AQO 2/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The establishment of the Efficiency Review Panel to examine efficiency and value for money of aspects of the Strand One institutions is an important issue which needs to be carefully considered.

We have given a commitment to consult with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on our proposals for the establishment, remit and work programme of the Panel before bringing proposals to the Assembly for approval.

Historic Crimes Investigation

Mr David Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to its answer to AQW 86/08, if it will list the times and dates of any interviews that have taken place between Ministers, officials and policy advisers and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with reference to any historic crime investigation, since the First Minister and deputy First Minister affirmed the Pledge of Office on 8 May 2007. (AQW 246/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: No such interviews have taken place.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she will take in relation to her department's policy not to cull new-born or young calves born to cows that have been culled from a herd because they tested positive for bovine tuberculosis. (AQW 32/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): A recent DARD Veterinary Epidemiology Unit report showed no evidence that the progeny of dams infected with tuberculosis are at a significantly higher risk of becoming infected with Tuberculosis than other cohort calves, unless there are specific risk factors in the herd.

However, if in the opinion of the Veterinary Officer the circumstances pertaining to the herd which has suffered a tuberculosis breakdown are such that the offspring should be classed as a disease risk, they will be removed, culled and compensation paid.

The Department has no legislative powers to pay compensation for the removal of calves for welfare reasons, so these animals must usually remain the responsibility of the herd keeper.

Beef Marketing

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will undertake to have locally-produced beef marketed as 'Irish beef'; and if she will give her assessment of Northern Ireland's attachment to the United Kingdom in relation to beef marketing. (AQW 34/08)

Ms Gildernew: I believe it is in the best interests of the North's beef industry to determine how best to position its products in the markets they serve and I will continue to support industry in this respect in order to achieve the best returns possible.

An International Image Group consisting of experienced representatives from export businesses in the North was established by my Department and DETI to oversee research into the image of the North's food and drink in international markets.

The research found that 'Northern Ireland' was underplayed and unknown but had potential for development. It also suggested that the North may be best served by being marketed as part of the island of Ireland in international markets. However, to gain optimum advantage of its unique position, the Image Group felt that the North's agri-food industry should utilise all options at its disposal, and, depending on the market and customer, market itself as NI, island of Ireland or UK.

Ultimately however, labelling will be determined by two areas: Legislation and the marketplace.

You will be aware that the EU beef labelling Regulations require the name of the member state or third country (i.e. country outside the EU), where the animal was born, raised and slaughtered, to be recorded on the label. Because of this requirement, all beef from the North is labelled as UK beef and, as this information is compulsory, I have no latitude to deviate from these requirements. However, these Regulations also contain a voluntary scheme which provides scope to have other claims about beef, approved for use on the label. Claims in relation to the region in which the animal was born/reared etc. require approval under this part of the beef labelling rules. This scheme has proved very worthwhile for local processors in marketing beef and more than 50 claims are currently approved.

The Food Strategy Implementation Partnership, currently under the chairmanship of Dan Flinter, past CEO of Enterprise Ireland, have recommended that NI should have a cohesive Food Development entity to represent all food sectors in NI. If this recommendation was implemented (it is currently being considered), then NI would have a single voice that could interact with An Bord Bia on joint development in international markets.

We are fortunate in that products from the North of Ireland are sold in a wide range of markets and, as such, branding is tailored for specific markets in a manner that optimises the benefit of the North's multiple identity.

Biofuels

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she has introduced to promote the growth of crops for use as

biofuels; and if she proposes to introduce any additional measures in the near future. (AQW 53/08)

Ms Gildernew: Currently, the growth of crops for use as biofuels, is promoted by DARD under the EU Aid for Energy Crops Scheme. Aid of €45 per hectare is payable for all crops used for the production of energy products, with the exception of those grown on set-aside land. Crops eligible under the Scheme, which may be used in the production of biofuels, include oilseed rape, sugar beet and hemp.

The scheme, although modest in terms of its rate of payment, does represent an additional incentive and income stream for those growers contemplating renewable energy crops. There have been a small number of applicants in relation to growing crops specifically for production of biodiesel.

However the farm-gate price for cereals will make the growing of these crops a greater attraction to the arable sector than the growing of energy crops.

There are no plans to introduce additional measures to support the growth of crops for use as biofuels in the near future.

However, College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) are continuing to raise awareness of renewable technologies and efficiencies to the land based sector by way of continued training and technology transfer.

Tree Coverage

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of tree coverage across Northern Ireland; and to outline how this compares with the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 97/08)

Ms Gildernew: The North of Ireland contributes 86,000 Ha which represents 6.3% of the total surface area. Tree cover for Britain is 2,743,000 Ha which represents 12.0% of the surface area of Britain. This comprises 1,337,000 ha in Scotland (17.1% of surface area of Scotland); 1,121,000 ha in England (8.6% of surface area of England); and 285,000 ha in Wales (13.7% of surface area of Wales).

Proposed Staff Reductions

Mr Trevor Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will advise what financial savings will be made in relation to the proposed staff reductions in each of her department's three Rural Development Offices in Ballymena, Newry and Omagh, to make way for a centralised Rural Development Payments Unit in Dundonald House; and if she will

detail the proposed staffing numbers, grades and costs of this new unit. (AQW 149/08)

Ms Gildernew: Firstly there will be no savings made “to make way for” a centralised Rural Development Payments Unit in Dundonald House.

Financial savings made in relation to the proposed staff reductions in the three Rural Development Offices are:

Omagh Office	£250k
Ballymena Office	£406k
Newry Office	£242k

Number	Grade	Cost
1	Staff Officer	£37k
2	EOI	£67k
2.6	EOII	£70k
4.	AO	£98k
9.6		£272k

It is worth noting that the unit has been running since January 2007.

The Department would not be opposed to the dispersal of Civil Service posts and this is something we may look at in the future.

Rural Development Payments Unit

Mr Trevor Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will detail the consultation that took place with rural stakeholders prior to the decision to establish a new centralised Rural Development Payments Unit in Dundonald House, with particular reference to those stakeholders who will be most affected by the new arrangements, e.g. funding beneficiaries. (AQW 157/08)

Ms Gildernew: Staff were made aware and there has been consultation with the Trade Union NIPSA. Other than this there was no requirement to consult with stakeholders because the decision has no relation to any central policy on decentralisation by government; no jobs are being lost, nor are there any policy changes involved.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Indigenous Artists and Public Procurement

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any strategies and actions

taken by his department to ensure that indigenous artists are able to tender to provide works of art via public procurement, with particular emphasis on the hospital sector. (AQW 48/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Arts Council’s guidance on the commissioning of new artwork for the public realm, including integrated art commissions in healthcare environments, is that an open competition process should be adopted. This guidance is articulated in the Arts Council’s ‘Public Art Handbook’. Competitions are advertised in the main all-Ireland arts journals, websites and e-bulletins. These publications are well known by indigenous practising artists as the main sources for learning about commissioning opportunities.

The Arts Council also financially supports Visual Artists Ireland to perform the role of a support vehicle to enable indigenous artists to develop their practices and keep informed about new opportunities.

Procurement of art works for the hospital sector is a matter for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However I am advised that current procedures for the commissioning of artwork for integration into health projects are implemented by the Health and Social Care Trusts in whose areas the project is located.

The Health and Social Services Trusts take advice from the Health Estates Agency, the Centre for Procurement Expertise for capital projects in the Health and Social Services sector.

The process involves public advertisement seeking expressions of interest from artists. Advertisements are usually placed in an arts journal with a wide distribution as recommended by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

Creative Media Sector

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will outline his department’s strategies to promote partnership working within the creative media sector in Northern Ireland. (AQW 117/08)

Mr Poots: My Department leads on the over-arching strategy for Creativity and the Creative Industries and chairs an Inter-departmental Creativity Group in partnership with the Departments of Education, Employment & Learning, Enterprise, Trade & Investment and Invest NI.

A Creative Industries Working Group, comprising representatives from government Departments, Invest NI, Belfast City Council, NESTA and the University of Ulster was set up to enable the industry, government and academia to work in partnership to produce an

action based plan to develop and support the creative industries in Northern Ireland. This work is in progress.

My Department is working closely with Invest NI, which is developing a strategy for the growth of the digital content sector in Northern Ireland, which will include the development of networks, partnerships and clusters.

My Department is also supporting work by DETI, Invest NI and the Special EU Programmes Body to develop a creative industries support programme, in which partnerships and creative media will feature.

Creative Media Sector

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will outline his department's strategies to promote partnership working between the creative media sector in Northern Ireland and the creative industry in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. (AQW 120/08)

Mr Poots: My Department maintains contact with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport on its Creative Economy Programme, which aims to make the UK the world's leading creative hub.

We are in liaison with the Scottish Executive and Scottish Arts Council on their respective strategies for the creative industries and have met officials from the Dundalk Institute which is working in partnership with the University of Ulster on a project to develop a 'digital corridor' for Ireland's eastern seaboard.

My Department is also supporting work by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Invest NI and the Special EU Programmes Body to develop a creative industries support programme, involving creative businesses in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Western Scotland.

IFA Income

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail Irish Football Association's income from the sale of shirts and other merchandise, for each of the last three years. (AQW 150/08)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) does not retain information on the Irish Football Association's income from the sale of shirts and other merchandise. This is a matter for the Irish Football Association.

Shortfall in National Lottery Funding: Remedial Measures

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what remedial measures are being taken to address the shortfall in funding caused by the National Lottery's decision to transfer £42 million of funding from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics. (AQW 197/08)

Mr Poots: Policy and legislation in respect of the National Lottery is a reserved matter with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as the lead Department in Whitehall.

I have not made an assessment of potential job losses or projects that are at risk in the community, arts and sport sectors due to the National Lottery's decision to transfer £42million of funding from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is making bids for funding, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, to support the development of sport and the arts in Northern Ireland. These bids will seek to take account of reductions of funding resulting from prioritisation of lottery spending on the London Olympics.

The Olympics will also provide modest funding opportunities for cultural and arts projects associated with the Cultural Olympiad. I would be keen to see arts organisations make the most of these opportunities when they arise.

In relation to community groups the Big Lottery Fund has made a public commitment that, providing forecasts of Lottery income are maintained, current funding programmes to community groups will not be materially affected by the diversion of funds to the Olympics. The Fund advises that its undertaking to provide 60-70% of its funding to the voluntary and community sector will be unaffected.

DCMS has recently confirmed that an agreement has been reached with the Mayor of London under which DCMS should, in time, be able to refund the £675m additional contribution to the Lottery Distributors throughout the UK. It is hoped that this will come from the proceeds of Olympic Park land sales post-2012.

Shortfall in National Lottery Funding: Job Losses

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment he has made of potential job losses in the community, arts and sport sectors, due to the National Lottery's decision to transfer £42 million of funding from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics. (AQW 198/08)

Mr Poots: Policy and legislation in respect of the National Lottery is a reserved matter with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as the lead Department in Whitehall.

I have not made an assessment of potential job losses or projects that are at risk in the community, arts and sport sectors due to the National Lottery's decision to transfer £42million of funding from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics.

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Shortfall in National Lottery Funding: Projects at Risk

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment he has made of projects that are at risk in the community, arts and sport sectors due to the National Lottery's decision to transfer £42 million of funding from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics. (AQW 199/08)

Mr Poots: Policy and legislation in respect of the National Lottery is a reserved matter with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as the lead Department in Whitehall.

I have not made an assessment of potential job losses or projects that are at risk in the community, arts and sport sectors due to the National Lottery's decision to transfer £42million of funding from Northern Ireland to the London Olympics.

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DCMS has recently confirmed that an agreement has been reached with the Mayor of London under which DCMS should, in time, be able to refund the £675m additional contribution to the Lottery Distributors throughout the UK. It is hoped that this will come from the proceeds of Olympic Park land sales post-2012.

World Pipe Band Championships

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answers to AQW 1262/07 and 1264/07, if he would provide an update on efforts by his department to bring the World Pipe Band Championships to Northern Ireland. (AQW 206/08)

Mr Poots: I met with representatives of the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association on 25th July to discuss the opportunities for hosting the World Pipe Band Championships in Northern Ireland.

Following this, officials are liaising with representatives of the Northern Ireland Events Company, Ulster Scots Agency and Arts Council of Northern Ireland to take this forward.

Irish Football Association Salaries

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total salaries of the Irish Football Association's Chief Executives and Directors, for each of the last three years. (AQW 297/08)

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL) does not retain information on the total salaries of the Irish Football Association's Chief

Executives and Directors for each of the last three years. This is a matter for the Irish Football Association.

EDUCATION

All-Island Centre of Excellence for Children with Autism

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail whether a business plan was in place when her predecessor announced, in April 2002, the decision to establish an all-island centre of excellence for children with autism at Middletown; and if she will place a copy of this business plan in the Assembly Library. (AQW 7/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): An Economic Appraisal for a Centre of Excellence for Autism Disorder at Middletown was approved in September 2001 and in place when an announcement was made in April 2002. Copies of this appraisal were placed in the Assembly Library in August 2005.

St Joseph's Adolescent Centre, Middletown

Mr John McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail whether a new or updated business plan was in place in June 2004, when the former St. Joseph's Adolescent Centre in Middletown was purchased by a holding company funded by her department; and if she will place a copy of the business plan in the Assembly Library. (AQW 10/08)

Ms Ruane: The Economic Appraisal, which was in place for the Middletown Centre for Autism in June 2004 when the Holding Company purchased the former St. Joseph's Adolescent Centre, was that approved in September 2001. A revised Economic Appraisal was completed and approved in July 2006. This updated Economic Appraisal was placed in the Assembly Library on 12 February 2007.

Bain Report: ELB Expenditure

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the expenditure of each Education and Library Board in relation to the implementation of the Bain Report. (AQW 11/08)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Report sets out 61 recommendations covering a wide range of education issues, including funding, strategic planning of the schools

estate, and sharing and collaboration. Some of the recommendations require further consideration and detailed work and consultation and it should be possible to progress others as part of the Department's and education authorities' existing responsibilities. It is too early at this stage to identify savings and expenditures associated directly with implementation of the Report.

Bain Report: School Closures

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools that have been closed, to date, as a direct result of the recommendations of the Bain Report. (AQW 12/08)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Report was published in December 2006. Since then development proposals have been approved to close nine primary schools, two post-primary schools and one special school. The relevant school authorities had commenced work on each of these proposals in advance of the publication of the report.

Bain Report: Savings

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the savings made as a result of implementation of the recommendations of the Bain Report. (AQW 13/08)

Ms Ruane: The Bain Report sets out 61 recommendations covering a wide range of education issues, including funding, strategic planning of the schools estate, and sharing and collaboration. Some of the recommendations require further consideration and detailed work and consultation and it should be possible to progress others as part of the Department's and education authorities' existing responsibilities. It is too early at this stage to identify savings and expenditures associated directly with implementation of the Report.

School Closures

Mr George Savage asked the Minister of Education to list the schools earmarked to close in the current financial year. (AQW 14/08)

Ms Ruane: The following closures have been approved for the current financial year:

Controlled
Mount Gilbert Community College closed 31 August 2007.
English PS, Dungannon and Tullymacarett PS, Dromore closed 31 August 2007.
Ballyduff PS, Newtownabbey closed 31 August 2007.

Controlled
Dungiven PS closed 31 August 2007.
Groomsport PS, Charley Memorial PS, Drumbo PS, Hillhall PS and Lambeg PS closed 31 August 2007.
Crossgar PS and Drumaghlin PS closed to form a new school on the Crossgar PS site at 1/09/2007

Maintained
St Mary's PS, Ballygowan and St Joseph's High School, Plumbridge closed 31 August 2007.
All Saints PS, St Joseph's PS, St Louis' PS and St Mary's PS, Ballymena closed to form 2 new schools at 1/09/2007
St Joseph's PS, Poyntzpass and St James' PS, Tandragee closed to form a new school on the St Joseph's site at 1/09/2007.
Irish Medium Unit at St Patrick's Primary School Gortin, closed 31 August 2007.

Special Schools
Lindsay Hospital School, Forster Green Hospital, Belfast closed 31 August 2007.
Beechgrove, Dunfane and Loughan Special Schools, Ballymena closed to form a new school at 1/09/2007 using existing accommodation pending the building of a new school.

Nursery Schools
Ballycastle Nursery School closed to be replaced by a nursery unit at Ballycastle Primary School at 1/09/2007.

In addition, a development proposal for the amalgamation of St Joseph's PS, Ahoghill and St Patrick's PS, Aughercloney was approved.

Single Education System

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education what estimate she has made of the cost to the public purse of maintaining different education systems; and of the amount that could be saved by having a single education system for the whole of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17/08)

Ms Ruane: Information is not available on the estimated costs of maintaining different education systems. The diversity of the education system reflects long established traditions and the principle of parental choice. The Review of Public Administration in education will introduce a common administrative structure for all schools here, but it will not introduce a single education system. Government will continue to support a diverse range of schools giving parents and young people a real choice in the type of education available to best meet their needs.

Unoccupied Desks: Estimated Savings

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail the estimated annual savings associated with reducing the number of unoccupied desks in (i) controlled schools; (ii) maintained schools; (iii) integrated schools; and (iv) Irish language schools, by having one system of education in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 22/08)

Ms Ruane: The information is not available. Given the complexity of factors which impact upon enrolments at schools, and the varying costs of surplus places which can be unique to each school, the overall costs and savings would be difficult to quantify. The Review of Public Administration in education will introduce a common administrative structure for all schools here, but it will not introduce a single education system. Following the Bain Report, the improved planning of the schools' estate will help to address the issue of surplus capacity.

Unoccupied Desks: Estimated Costs

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail the estimated cost of unoccupied desks in (i) controlled schools; (ii) maintained schools; (iii) integrated schools; and (iv) Irish language schools, in each of the next five years.

(AQW 23/08)

Ms Ruane: The information is not available. Given the complexity of factors which impact upon enrolments at schools, and the varying costs of surplus places which can be unique to each school, the overall costs and savings would be difficult to quantify. The Review of Public Administration in education will introduce a common administrative structure for all schools here, but it will not introduce a single education system. Following the Bain Report, the improved planning of the schools' estate will help to address the issue of surplus capacity.

Academic Selection and Public Opinion

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail the process that will be used to determine how much weight to give to public opinion when determining how pupils transfer from primary to secondary education.

(AQW 25/08)

Ms Ruane: I am continuing the search for a way forward on the issue of new arrangements for transfer from primary to post-primary education. I am not in favour of applying weights to different viewpoints, as I believe that the focus should be on the strength

of arguments put forward and the interests of the children affected.

School Meals Contracts

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to detail, for each of the last three years, the tendering process for the school meals contracts for catering equipment, including all companies that have tendered for the work; the total budget within the tenders; and the successful contractors, in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area. (AQW 27/08)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is not readily available in the requested format.

Light and heavy school meals catering equipment is purchased from five-Board negotiated contracts. The Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) administers the contracts for heavy equipment and the North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) is responsible for light equipment.

The contracts are advertised in the European Journal and the local press. The tenders are assessed by an Inter-Board panel of representatives from the Purchasing and Catering Managers and ratified by the relevant Board.

Since 2004 the following companies were involved in the tendering process:

Light Catering Equipment (Various Items)	
Accepted	Non-Accepted
A J Stuart & Co Ltd, Belfast	CEE, Ballymena
Caterfreeze Products, Castlederg	EJ Hilditch, Belfast
Cater-Quip Ltd, Belfast	Eurolec, Dundalk
Chefs & Cooks, Newcastle	David R Swann, Ballymena
Frazerton Ltd, Cullybackey, Ballymena	Incorporatewear, Birmingham
Galgorm Hygiene, Ballymena	Harfield, Stockport
Hygiene Plus Ltd, Mallusk, Newtownabbey	ECC, Belfast
McNeill Hotelware Ltd, Belfast	
P Nugent & Sons Ltd, Lurgan	
S.O.S. Group, Belfast	
T McLaughlin Ltd, Armagh	

Estimated expenditure in the NEELB area – £95,000

Heavy Catering Equipment	
Accepted	Non-Accepted
Anchor Data Systems (NI) Ltd, Belfast	A J Stuart & Co Ltd, Belfast
Avery Berkel Ltd, Mallusk	Anchor Data Systems (NI) Ltd, Belfast
Catering Equipment Engineers Ltd, Antrim	Associated Metal (Stainless) Ltd, Glasgow
Cater-Quip Ltd, Belfast	Bunzl McLaughlin, Armagh
FF Foods Engineering Ltd, Portadown	Burlodge Ltd, Surbiton
McKenna Catering, Ballymena	Catering Connections Limited, Alfreton
Northern Ireland Food Equipment, Hillsborough	Catering Equipment Engineers Ltd, Antrim
O'Kane Foodservice, Lisburn	Cater-Quip Ltd, Belfast
P & P Business Equipment (NI) Ltd, Belfast	Ce-Tech (Catering Equipment
Regent Business Equipment, Newtownards	Technical Services), Ballymena
Retail Systems Technology Ltd, Eglinton	Commercial Kitchen Services, Strabane
Stephens Catering Equipment Co Ltd, Ballymena	D H Business Services, Comber
The Galgorm Group, T/A McKenna Catering, Ballymena	DMC Catering Equipment Limited, Ballymena
W & G Sissons Ltd, Chesterfield	E.C.C (NI) Ltd, Belfast
	Falcon Foodservice Equipment, Stirling
	F F Food Engineering Ltd, Portadown
	Food Service Equipment Ltd, Belfast
	Harry Dunlop Refrigeration Europe, Ballymena
	H.R Holfeld (Belfast) Limited, Lisburn
	Johnsons Catering Equipment, Mapperley
	Masser Hammond, Dublin
	Massey Catering Equipment, Moira
	McKenna Catering, Ballymena
	McLaughlin, Armagh
	Meiko UK Limited, Slough
	Metcalfe Catering Equipment Ltd, Blaenau Ffestiniog

Heavy Catering Equipment	
Accepted	Non-Accepted
	Northern Ireland Food Equipment, Hillsborough
	Northern Servequip Ltd, Lisburn
	P Nugent & Sons Ltd T/A Nugents, Lurgan
	Refrigeration Service, Lisburn
	Regent Business Equipment, Newtownards
	Retail Systems Technology Ltd, Eglinton
	Selecta UK Ltd, Belfast
	Stephens Catering Equipment Co Ltd, Ballymena
	Taurus Canopies & Fabrication, Belfast
	The Galgorm Group T/A McKenna Catering, Ballymena
	Viscount Catering Ltd, Ecclesfield

Information relating to expenditure on heavy equipment contracts in the NEELB could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the cause of the delay to progress on the construction of the approved primary school at Carrick, Warrenpoint; and what action she will take to have the project started. (AQW 41/08)

Ms Ruane: I understand that after initial delays, planning for a new school for Carrick Primary School is now well advanced. Final sketch plans and costs were approved by the Department. A submission from the School Trustees setting out the contract document information and costs is now awaited. Once it is received and considered, and all the necessary statutory approvals have been granted, it is anticipated that tenders for the scheme could be sought in the autumn.

Free School Meals

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) primary; and (ii) secondary school children who have been entitled to free school meals, in each of the last five years. (AQW 60/08)

Ms Ruane: Details on the number of school children entitled to free school meals plus the number taking school meals over the last five years are as follows:

ENTITLEMENT TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS

	Primary	Post-Primary
2002/03	35,672	31,818
2003/04	34,500	30,839
2004/05	32,805	30,399
2005/06	31,558	28,714
2006/07	30,130	27,320

UPTAKE OF SCHOOL MEALS

	Primary	Post-Primary
2002/03	82,996	84,798
2003/04	81,780	84,455
2004/05	80,184	83,558
2005/06	74,295	82,064
2006/07	73,090	80,357

School Meals

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who have taken school meals in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools, in each of the last five years. (AQW 61/08)

Ms Ruane: Details on the number of school children entitled to free school meals plus the number taking school meals over the last five years are as follows:

ENTITLEMENT TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS

	Primary	Post-Primary
2002/03	35,672	31,818
2003/04	34,500	30,839
2004/05	32,805	30,399
2005/06	31,558	28,714
2006/07	30,130	27,320

UPTAKE OF SCHOOL MEALS

	Primary	Post-Primary
2002/03	82,996	84,798
2003/04	81,780	84,455
2004/05	80,184	83,558
2005/06	74,295	82,064

	Primary	Post-Primary
2006/07	73,090	80,357

Cost of School Repairs and a Single Education System

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the estimated annual savings that having one education system for the whole of Northern Ireland would have on the cost of repairs to school buildings. (AQW 68/08)

Ms Ruane: Information is not available on the difference it would make to the costs of repairs to buildings if we did not have a multi-sector education system.

Cost of School Repairs

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of repairs to school buildings in Northern Ireland (i) in total; and (ii) broken down by sector, for each of the last five years. (AQW 69/08)

Ms Ruane: The expenditure information available does not distinguish between maintenance and repairs. The total cost of maintenance and repairs, and a break-

down of costs by sector, in each of the last five years is as follows:

EXPENDITURE ON MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS £'000

Sector	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Controlled	£25,095	£22,990	£13,973	£10,708	£11,191
Maintained*	£20,486	£20,541	£11,188	£8,016	£9,058
Grant-Maintained	£391	£586	£546	£642	£598
Integrated Voluntary Grammar Schools	£5,216	£5,187	£4,870	£4,756	£5,872
Total	£51,188	£49,304	£30,577	£24,122	£26,719

* Including Irish Medium

Teachers' Salaries

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of teachers' wages in Northern Ireland, (i) in total; and (ii) broken down by sector, in each of the last five years. (AQW 70/08)

Ms Ruane: The cost of teachers' wages in the North of Ireland, (i) in total; and (ii) broken down by sector, in each of the last five years is detailed in the attached table.

Sector	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
Controlled	290,560,922.06	304,396,923.68	319,054,498.88	346,485,713.57	344,829,938.44
Controlled Integrated	7,127,882.35	8,064,340.18	8,921,327.56	10,052,753.83	10,187,103.46
Grant Maintained	23,568,034.08	25,708,174.31	27,943,316.42	32,008,979.91	33,934,935.27
Maintained	240,034,534.96	248,695,927.09	258,443,314.11	282,141,152.81	281,149,108.42
Other Maintained	2,512,488.84	2,818,389.17	2,840,231.54	3,150,402.61	3,194,483.56
Irish Medium	5,166,021.80	5,758,244.14	6,175,341.03	7,153,525.24	7,490,447.94
Total	568,969,884.09	595,441,998.57	623,378,029.54	680,992,527.97	680,786,017.09

Single Education System: Estimated Savings

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education to detail the estimated saving in relation to expenditure on teachers' wages, by having one education system in Northern Ireland. (AQW 71/08)

Ms Ruane: Information is not available on the estimated costs of maintaining different education systems. The diversity of the education system reflects long established traditions and the principle of parental choice. The Review of Public Administration in education will introduce a common administrative

structure for all schools here, but it will not introduce a single education system. Government will continue to support a diverse range of schools giving parents and young people a real choice in the type of education available to best meet their needs.

Teaching of Theories other than Evolution

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 928/07, under the revised curriculum, to detail the teaching

materials that will be made available to teachers in Northern Ireland wishing to teach scientific theories of origins other than evolution. (AQW 73/08)

Ms Ruane: It is up to schools to decide what teaching resources they wish to use to deliver the curriculum, in accordance with the needs of their pupils and the ethos of the school. A range of organisations produce teaching materials that schools can choose to avail of.

Teaching of Theories other than Evolution

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 928/07, under GCSE science specifications allowing for the explanation of theories other than evolution to explore the development of life on earth, what resource material will be made available to teachers wishing to explore other such scientific explanations with pupils.

(AQW 74/08)

Ms Ruane: It is up to schools to decide what teaching resources they wish to use to deliver the curriculum, in accordance with the needs of their pupils and the ethos of the school. A range of organisations produce teaching materials that schools can choose to avail of.

Teaching of Theories other than Evolution

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 928/07, if she will confirm that pupils who answer examination questions outlining (i) creationist; or (ii) intelligent design explanations for the development of life on earth, will not be marked lower than any pupil who answers giving an evolutionist explanation.

(AQW 75/08)

Ms Ruane: I am not involved in the setting or marking of public examinations. I am informed by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment that public examinations are based on specifications which form the basis for teaching and learning throughout the two years of Key Stage 4. These stem from criteria agreed across the Regulatory Authorities. However, not every area of a specification lends itself equally well to an examination question. Therefore every pupil's examination answers are marked solely in accordance with the awarding body's Mark Scheme for the relevant question.

The Mark Scheme sets out the range of answers and valid alternatives that pupils have to include in their answer to gain marks for it. The number of marks a pupil receives for any answer will therefore depend on how well their answer matches the Mark Scheme.

Teaching of Theories other than Evolution

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 928/07, what training will be given to teachers to help them to explore scientific explanations for the development of life on earth, other than evolution.

(AQW 76/08)

Ms Ruane: Teachers are currently involved in a phased programme of training to support the introduction of the revised curriculum. Any in-service training for teachers follows the requirements of the statutory curriculum and GCSE specifications which do not include any specific reference to alternative explanations of the origins of life. The Education and Library Boards have not received requests from any school or teacher for support on this issue.

Complaints of Child Sexual Abuse by Teachers

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of complaints of child sexual abuse by teachers that have been made in each education sector, for each year for which there are records; and to detail the number of teachers in each sector against whom these allegations were made.

(AQW 77/08)

Ms Ruane: The Department does not collect this information from schools.

Where a complaint is made about a member of staff and is pursued either as a formal referral to the investigating agencies or under the school's disciplinary procedures, a short summary must be entered by the Principal on a Record of Child Abuse Complaints. The summary must include:

- The date and brief details of the nature of the complaints;
- By whom and against whom the complaint is made;
- If the complaint was formally referred, to whom it was referred and the date of referral; and
- If the complaint was dealt with under the school's disciplinary procedure.

The school's Record of Child Abuse Complaints must be made available to the Board of Governors termly but at least annually. The Education and Training Inspectorate will ask to see the Record during inspections.

The Department only becomes involved if the employer decides to make a referral to us following disciplinary action or when the Department is notified that the individual has been convicted of a specified offence, not necessarily of a sexual nature. The Depart-

ment will then consider whether or not to include the name on its list of persons unsuitable to teach or work with children.

Academic Selection

Mr Basil McCrea asked the Minister of Education what methods she is considering in relation to the transfer arrangements between primary and post-primary schools for the academic year 2009/10; and to indicate when she expects to make an announcement on her final decision. (AQW 84/08)

Ms Ruane: The current transfer arrangements will still apply for the 2009/10 cohort. For transfer from 2010/11 onwards I intend bringing forward proposals that are capable of attracting widespread support. The ways in which this might be achieved are currently under consideration. I am not prepared to be rushed into making a decision unless it is the right decision for the children affected.

Local Business Needs

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Education what priority she has given to ensuring that Northern Ireland's education system meets the needs of local businesses. (AQW 91/08)

Ms Ruane: The revised curriculum focuses on developing the skills young people need for life and work in the 21st century. Employability, incorporating Entrepreneurship, is also an important part of the revised post-primary curriculum.

In addition, the Entitlement Framework will guarantee all pupils access to a greater range of vocational courses, equipping them with the professional and technical skills that business and industry needs. Pupils will be able to access courses appropriate to their individual needs, interests and aspirations, providing a wider choice at age 14 and an even wider choice at age 16.

To support pupils in making their choices and decisions about their futures, we are working to develop high quality careers education, information advice and guidance.

All of this will be set within a broader strategic framework for 14-19 provision, on which DE and DEL are currently engaged, ensuring that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to take their place in an increasingly global workforce.

Educational Welfare Officers

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of Education if she will explain why educational welfare officers with social work qualifications are not paid the same salary as social workers in the health service. (AQW 95/08)

Ms Ruane: This is an employer matter.

The Education and Libraries Boards, as the employers, have advised that the grading of Education Welfare Officers is largely determined by a national and agreed process of Job Evaluation. This process takes account of a range of factors relating to the job including supervisory responsibility, creativity, contacts, decision making, knowledge and skills (including qualification), and work context and is regarded as much fairer than a determination solely based on qualification.

Staff employed in the Health and Social Services are engaged under different terms and conditions of service from staff in the Education and Library boards, Councils and other NJC employers - (a full list of these employers is contained in the Redundancy Payments (Continuity of Employment in Local Government, etc) (Modification) Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 - and salaries and gradings are agreed through an entirely different negotiating machinery as indeed is the case for teachers.

Children Attending Grammar Schools in North Down

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children attending a grammar school in the North Down constituency, who were living outside the constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQW 111/08)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

YEAR CHILDREN ATTENDING A GRAMMAR SCHOOL IN NORTH DOWN WHO LIVED OUTSIDE NORTH DOWN CONSTITUENCY

2002/03	484
2003/04	459*
2004/05	546
2005/06	550
2006/07	560

Note: * Postcoded data for Bangor Grammar were not available for 2003/04.

Free Transport Expenditure

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the expenditure on providing free transport for grammar school students who resided in the North Down constituency, but attended school outside the constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 112/08)

Ms Ruane: The South-Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed that the following expenditure was incurred transporting Grammar School pupils out of the North-Down constituency:

Year	Expenditure
2003/04	£228,160
2004/05	£249,944
2005/06	£258,416
2006/07	£277,760

* This information is not available prior to 2003/04

Children Attending Grammar Schools outside North Down

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children living in the North Down constituency, who attended a grammar school outside the constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 113/08)

Ms Ruane: The information requested is as follows:

YEAR CHILDREN FROM NORTH DOWN ATTENDING A GRAMMAR SCHOOL OUTSIDE NORTH DOWN CONSTITUENCY

Year	Expenditure
2002/03	1,316
2003/04	1,251
2004/05	1,209
2005/06	1,161
2006/07	1,142

Bus Passes in the Crumlin/Glenavy Area

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of bus passes that were issued to school children in the postcode district of BT29 4XX (Crumlin/Glenavy area) for the forthcoming academic year of 2007/2008; and to detail the total amount that this cost.

(AQW 116/08)

Ms Ruane: The North-Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed that it has not received

any applications for home to school transport assistance for 2007/08 from families residing in the postcode district of BT29 4XX. As such, no expenditure has been incurred in this area.

Expenditure on Business Education

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's expenditure on business education; and to provide a breakdown of the funding received by the various providers.

(AQW 129/08)

Ms Ruane: It is not possible to provide a breakdown of all expenditure on business education as many schools, particularly in the post-primary sector, will use funding from their delegated budgets to support business education. However, my department does hold a specific business education budget and I can advise that, in 2006-07, expenditure from that budget totalled £826,000.

That expenditure represents allocations made in support of a range of business education interventions, including those delivered by external organisations, as follows:

Charter Work Experience	£118,000
Foyle School and Employer Connections	£100,000
Business Education Partnerships	£88,000
Consultancy Study	£20,000
Sentinus	£400,000
CCEA Employability Pilots	£100,000
Total	£826,000

Business Strategy Unit

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline the work that will be done by the Business Strategy Unit in the future; and to detail how this will link with employability and careers education in the curriculum.

(AQW 130/08)

Ms Ruane: The Business Education Strategy Unit will continue to be involved in identifying, implementing and evaluating policy approaches designed to ensure better co-ordination between education and the world of work. It will also be involved in work to ensure a coherent approach to the delivery of the curriculum to young people, especially in the 14-19 age groups, and to ensure that young people leave school equipped with the literacy, numeracy and ICT skills that employers need and ready to play their full part in the local economy.

The unit is already working closely with its colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning to develop a new strategy for Careers Education, Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) designed to support pupils in making their choices and decisions about their futures. That strategy will reflect the direction of the revised curriculum and will be designed to develop effective career decision makers, leading to increased participation in education, training and employment. It will also ensure that business-related issues such as employability and work related learning are central themes.

Careers Education

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail how her department will work with the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that there is a coherent strategy for careers education. (AQW 131/08)

Ms Ruane: My Department already works very closely with the Department for Employment and Learning on a wide range of issues. Our joint work to develop a new strategy for Careers Education, Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) is a good example of this.

The overall aim of the proposed CEIAG strategy is to develop young people as effective career decision makers leading to increased participation in education, training and employment.

The joint DE/DEL Strategy will issue for consultation in early October – the Education Committee will receive advance copies for information and will be consulted again once responses have been received and analysed by both DE/DEL.

All of this will be set within a broader strategic framework for 14-19 provision, on which DE and DEL are currently engaged, with the aim of ensuring that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to take their place in an increasingly global workforce.

Teaching of Theories other than Evolution

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 928/07, if she will confirm that, under the revised curriculum, teachers wishing to do so may teach theories of origins other than evolution as credible scientific explanations in science class. (AQW 135/08)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education does not tell teachers how to teach. The revised curriculum sets out the statutory minimum to be covered and the learning outcomes to be focused on. It provides

greater flexibility for teachers to tailor provision for their pupils and greater opportunities for creationist views to be explored, particularly in the context of the exploration of other beliefs and viewpoints. Pupils and parents can inform how the delivery of the curriculum in their school accommodates that exploration through the Board of Governors.

Teaching of Theories other than Evolution

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 928/07, if, under the revised curriculum, (i) pupils may request on behalf of themselves; and (ii) parents may request on behalf of their children, that they are taught theories of origin other than evolution as credible scientific explanations in science classes. (AQW 136/08)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education does not tell teachers how to teach. The revised curriculum sets out the statutory minimum to be covered and the learning outcomes to be focused on. It provides greater flexibility for teachers to tailor provision for their pupils and greater opportunities for creationist views to be explored, particularly in the context of the exploration of other beliefs and viewpoints. Pupils and parents can inform how the delivery of the curriculum in their school accommodates that exploration through the Board of Governors.

Hygienic Drinking Water

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to issuing guidance to individual schools and local education authorities on the availability of hygienic drinking water facilities for pupils. (AQW 161/08)

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education's New Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and Other Food in Schools which issued to all grant-aided schools in June 2007 state that pupils should have easy access at all times to free, fresh drinking water. In addition, the Department ensures that fresh water dispensers are located in appropriate circulating areas within a school. Also, as drinking water is no longer permitted in school toilets, water fountains located in these areas are removed.

Newborn Hearing Screening Programme

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister of Education if she will give an update on her department's input into the development of an inter-departmental strategy on early years support services for deaf

children identified through the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme, introduced in 2005.

(AQW 171/08)

Ms Ruane: Under the auspices of the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme (NHSP) Steering Group, the Department of Education (DE) commissioned an audit of existing provision in relation to the impact of the NHSP on Educational Services for the Hearing Impaired. The key findings of the DE Audit, which was completed in March 2006, indicate that existing Education and Library Boards Hearing Impaired Services can cope with an increased demand. DE has asked the education and library boards to continue to keep the resources required for the impact of the NHSP under review.

Co-operation with DCAL

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Education, in light of her recent announcement that the Irish Football Association and the Gaelic Athletic Association are to receive funding for sports coaching in schools, if she will make a statement on co-operation between her department and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in this regard.

(AQW 177/08)

Ms Ruane: My Ministerial colleague Edwin Poots and I both know from work within our departments the positive impact a healthy lifestyle can have for young people in many areas, such as their mental health, and their development across the curriculum. It is this curricular benefit which provided the starting point for my sports programme, which will take place within school hours to support the PE curriculum, and tie-in to other curricular areas. Clearly there are wider links which will grow over time and this is why I wrote to Edwin Poots at an early stage about the programme.

Both the curriculum sports programme and the draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation recognise the importance of physical literacy skills, especially when developed at a young age. There are exciting opportunities within the Departments of Education and Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a real difference to young people's lives through sports, and I look forward to seeing the benefits on the ground coming through from the work of both departments.

Transfer Test Appeals

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of grammar schools that have indicated to her that they will break away from the main education system rather than accept the ending of academic selection.

(AQW 219/08)

Ms Ruane: I have received no direct communication indicating the number of grammar schools that are considering independent arrangements if agreement can not be reached on new admissions arrangements for the transfer of children from primary to post-primary education from September 2010 onwards.

Academic Selection

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister of Education how many appeals of transfer test results there have been in each of the past five years; and how many of these resulted in legal action.

(AQW 221/08)

Ms Ruane: The number of requests for a re-mark of Transfer Test grades for each of the last five years is recorded in the table below, along with the number of occasions that a grade has been revised upwards. Downward revisions are not permitted. There are no legal actions to report in relation to these figures.

Year	Pupils Sitting The Transfer Test	Requests for a Re-Mark	Up-Grades
2006/07	14,944	1,157	3
2005/06	15,255	1,144	2
2004/05	15,373	1,095	0
2003/04	15,716	1,007	3
2002/03	16,537	1,352	2

Literacy and Numeracy Levels

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail her strategy for ensuring that no child leaves primary school with levels of literacy and numeracy that fall below her own targets.

(AQO 9/08)

Ms Ruane: I am determined to improve standards of literacy and numeracy. It is important for me that all children leave school with the appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy. It is the essential basis of their future lives as citizens and as contributors to social and economic progress.

From this September the revised curriculum is being introduced in our schools. I think this is an exciting development, bringing in a more flexible curriculum which is right for our young people and which has literacy and numeracy at its very core. Schools should understand the focus on these skills and use the methods available to them to focus on raising standards in these areas. The revised curriculum provides the opportunity for teachers to focus on skills development as well as on knowledge and understanding.

I intend bringing forward a range of measures in the coming months designed to support schools in bringing about improved outcomes for children. These include a revised school improvement policy; a revised literacy and numeracy strategy; and a targeted intervention programme focused initially on raising achievement levels in low attaining schools in Belfast and Derry.

In addition, the policy proposals emerging from the review of special educational needs and inclusion will be issued for public consultation early next year. They too are intended to support, and be an integral part of, our work to raise standards and to ensure that every child reaches his or her full potential.

In relation to literacy and numeracy targets the targets for 2007 were achieved in 2006. Our targets for 2008 are for 80% of primary school children to be at the expected level in English and 83% in Maths. Targets beyond 2008 and the strategy for achieving them will be set out in the revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Dickson Plan

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Education if she will make a statement on the Craigavon-based Dickson Plan for education. (AQO 85/08)

Ms Ruane: I note that the arrangements currently operating in the Craigavon-based Dickson Plan are well established. Research into the impact of the Dickson Plan published in 1998 produced inconclusive findings.

Bullying in Schools

Mr Raymond McCartney asked the Minister of Education what steps have been taken to tackle the problem of bullying in schools. (AQO 101/08)

Ms Ruane: Bullying behaviour has no place in our schools and I mean bullying in all its forms – pupil on pupil, staff on staff, pupil on staff and staff on pupil. Its presence is not conducive to a positive learning environment and must be tackled.

In tackling the pupil on pupil aspect of bullying the following specific steps have been taken:-

- All schools are required by law to have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The detail of the policy is a matter for each school to determine, in consultation with pupils and parents.
- The Department has issued guidance to schools on developing measures to address bullying. Racist, homophobic and sectarian bullying has been

specifically identified as forms of behaviour to be tackled.

- The effectiveness of a school's anti-bullying measures is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections of pastoral care arrangements. The Inspectorate seeks the views of parents and pupils on how effectively school staff deal with bullying as part of these inspections.
- The Department published the research report on "The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland" in June. The findings show little change in the level of bullying behaviour reported by pupils compared to an earlier study completed in 2002. Regardless, the research confirms that although the problem of bullying appears no worse, the problem still remains, and must be tackled.
- Following this report, the Department will be carrying out a survey of schools' anti-bullying policies drawing on the expertise and experience of the local Anti-Bullying Forum and NICCY. The results will be published and used to inform future action.
- The elimination of bullying behaviour from all schools is a long term aspiration and requires a sustained programme of co-operative working across all statutory and voluntary agencies to support schools. This is facilitated through the local Anti-bullying Forum. The Forum has also established formal links with similar bodies in the South, England, Wales and Scotland.
- The Education and Library Boards have established an Inter-Board Group, which is developing a common approach to tackle bullying in schools. Each Board has a designated officer who works with schools to tackle bullying through assisting in the development of whole school policies and supporting individual pupils who have been victims of bullying.
- The Department funds Childline NI to provide a dedicated anti-bullying telephone helpline for pupils and young people.
- The independent schools' counselling service is now available in all grant aided post-primary schools allowing pupils to speak to a trained counsellor about their concerns or fears around bullying.

Substitute Teachers

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made in reducing the number of teachers on the substitute teachers' roll, who have not yet been in full-time employment in teaching. (AQO 17/08)

Ms Ruane: It is important to note that the substitute teachers' register includes not only young teachers but

teachers of all ages who wish to be employed on a substitute teacher basis, together with teachers who no longer wish to be full-time members of the teaching profession. Figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June 2007 show that 240 job seeker allowance claimants specified teaching as the occupation sought, of which 72 were under age 30.

The Department recognises the impact which demography is having, and will have, on the number of teachers that we need here. We need to get the balance right between having a ready supply of appropriately qualified teachers and ensuring that, as with any career choice, young people have a realistic understanding of the factors affecting teacher recruitment levels. As part of that process, we have also reviewed and reduced approved intake numbers to the initial teacher education institutions by over 20% in the past three years. I will be keeping under review the number of initial teacher education places needed in future years to make sure that, in future, there is a better balance between supply and demand.

Teachers are highly qualified professionals and, as such, have skills that would prepare them for other jobs in related areas. For example, my sports and languages programmes for primary schools offer another means for newly qualified teachers to gain experience of working in a school.

It should also be recognised that teachers trained here have the opportunity to apply for teaching posts in the South of Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, where they are highly regarded.

The recruitment of teachers is the responsibility of teachers' employers. However, the Department has issued guidance to employers advising them that preference should be given to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment. Schools have also been advised that they should recruit to vacancies on a permanent rather than a temporary basis unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature. Furthermore, the capping of the levels of the central reimbursement of the costs of substitute cover also provides an incentive to employ newly qualified teachers.

Primary School Sports Coaches

Mr Francie Brolly asked the Minister of Education what the response has been to the scheme, developed in conjunction with the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Football Association, for the provision of forty new posts for primary school sports coaches.
(AQO 93/08)

Ms Ruane: The response to this programme for sports coaches in primary schools has been very

positive as people can see the real benefits this can have for our young people.

As you know both the GAA and IFA will be recruiting 20 coaches each to work with teachers in schools. There was a very good response to the GAA recruitment advert recently, and the IFA is also close to placing recruitment adverts. Schools are starting to ask how they get involved.

This programme provides an opportunity for pupils, including our youngest, to develop their physical literacy skills and supports development across the curriculum. It also supports teachers in developing their skills and confidence in delivering the PE curriculum.

Low Educational Attainment

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to address low educational attainment in Protestant inner-city areas of Belfast, and large re-location estate areas in towns surrounding Belfast.
(AQO 30/08)

Ms Ruane: I am determined that we will tackle under-achievement wherever it occurs, and in doing so am anxious that the debate on poverty and disadvantage does not become sectarianised. Our efforts must be targeted on the basis of objective need.

I shall therefore be bringing forward in the coming months a range of measures designed to support schools in bringing about improved outcomes for children. These will include a new school improvement policy; a new literacy and numeracy strategy; and a targeted intervention programme focused initially on raising achievement levels in low attaining schools in Belfast and Derry. I shall wish to consider rolling this out to other areas as evidence of success emerges.

In addition, the policy proposals emerging from the review of special educational needs and inclusion will be issued for public consultation early next year. They too are intended to support, and be an integral part of, our work to raise standards and to ensure that every child reaches his or her full potential.

Sustained Education Encouraging Diversity

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Education what proposals exist to train teachers in the resources available from the Sustained Education Encouraging Diversity programme.
(AQO 62/08)

Ms Ruane: The Department is currently carrying out a 'Review to Identify Teacher and Youth Worker Training Needs for Delivery of Community Relations in Schools.' During this review all resources which are

currently available will be considered and, on completion of the Review, the Department will be in a better position to determine future proposals.

However, currently schools can determine what resources they feel are appropriate for their teachers to utilise in addressing community relations.

North/South Ministerial Council: Education Sectoral Meeting

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Education if the issues of educational psychology and school transport services will be on the agenda of the next education sectoral meeting of the North South Ministerial Council. (AQO 94/08)

Ms Ruane: The next educational sectoral meeting of the North South Ministerial Council is expected to take place in November 2007 and, while an agenda has yet to be agreed between the two Departments, we expect a wide ranging discussion of issues of mutual interest. The agenda will be advised to the Executive and the Assembly in due course.

Academic Selection

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Education to indicate what progress has been made on a replacement selection procedure for the 11+; and in what academic year the replacement will be operational. (AQO 29/08)

Ms Ruane: I am aware of the need to put in place suitable transfer arrangements in time for the cohort transferring from primary to post-primary education in 2010. As members are aware I am not in favour of selection on the basis of ability. I am conscious, however, of the need to engage with those who hold opposing views to determine new post-primary admissions arrangements for this cohort. I would stress that I am not prepared to be rushed into making a decision. The priority must be to make the right decision for the children affected, within a broader view of the shape and nature of post-primary education.

Cross-Border Enrolment

Ms Martina Anderson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to take a regional cross-border view of the issue of pupil enrolment, whereby children can apply to enrol for the most suitable primary or post-primary school for them in their vicinity, even if it lies within another jurisdiction. (AQO 100/08)

Ms Ruane: I personally consider that children should be able to attend their nearest suitable school, be that in the North or South of Ireland. That would be very much in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. There are obviously legal considerations, however, which have to be taken into account. The Department is currently subject to a Judicial Review which may include a consideration of this matter. I will reflect on any legal judgement and determine my response in due course.

Grammar Schools and Exam Results

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Education to acknowledge the major contribution of grammar schools in putting Northern Ireland at the top of the United Kingdom's examinations results tables year after year; and what steps she is taking to identify, safeguard and extend the good educational practices in grammar schools that lie behind these results. (AQO 31/08)

Ms Ruane: I readily acknowledge good teaching practice at any school, and the good results that have been produced by all types of school. There is no doubt that grammar schools have played their part by producing good results for the children they admit. I am determined to ensure that, over time, all schools are capable of delivering a good standard of education for their pupils, and increased levels of collaboration in support of the Entitlement Framework will add to the opportunities for the sharing of good practice.

Special Schools: Integrated Status

Mr Alban Maginness asked the Minister of Education if she will introduce a change in legislation to allow special schools, who may wish to do so, to transform to integrated status. (AQO 55/08)

Ms Ruane: There are specific reasons why the legislation prohibits Special Schools from attaining Integrated status. The current intake criteria to Special Schools are based on the special educational needs of each individual child. Integrated schools can include community background as an intake criterion in order to have a reasonable mix of children from each community background. This would mean that, if they were to be developed, Integrated Special Schools would allow some children to be admitted, or not, based on their religion rather than their educational needs.

Economic Benefit of Education

Mr Paul Maskey asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment of the role of education in delivering a strong economy. (AQO 98/08)

Ms Ruane: Education is fundamental to delivering a strong economy and investment in education and skills is vital to achieving economic growth through higher rates of productivity and increased competitiveness. The importance of education to the economy is reflected in the education reforms which represent a fundamental refocusing of the work of schools in support of the economy.

The importance of the role of education has been recognised within the draft Regional Economic Strategy, where skills are identified as one of the four key drivers of productivity.

Priory College, Holywood

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Education to report on the proposed new capital build for Priory College, Holywood. (AQO 76/08)

Ms Ruane: The capital scheme for Priory College is one of six schemes that were put on hold following the review of capital projects, by the previous administration. These schemes are still being assessed by the Department and the position will be confirmed as soon as possible.

Additional Finances

Mr Sammy Wilson asked the Minister of Education what estimate she has made of the additional finances required by her department, in each of the next three years. (AQO 53/08)

Ms Ruane: Additional finances required by the Department of Education in each of the next three years are estimated to be £401 million, £580 million and £682 million in each year respectively. The additional amounts sought will be considered by the Executive in the forthcoming Budget 2007 exercise.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

NI Students: Applications to UK Universities

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of

the latest published Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) figures on Northern Ireland student applications to universities in the United Kingdom. (AQW 2/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department has examined the figures published by UCAS on 19 July 2007 which showed a 5.5% fall in the number of NI domiciled students applying to UK institutions between 2006 and 2007. This however needs to be set in the context of a decline in the school leaving age population. The latest estimates show that the number of 18 year olds in NI declined by 5.4 % over the last year.

Further provisional figures published by UCAS on 29 August 2007 show that there has been a 0.4% increase in the number of NI domiciled students accepted to UK institutions over the same period. My Department will continue to monitor UCAS figures as further information becomes available.

Higher Education Funding

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, following the restoration of devolution, what consideration he has given to conducting a fully independent review into higher education funding in Northern Ireland. (AQW 15/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department works closely with the other UK funding bodies in an ongoing process of review and development of all aspects of higher education funding strategy, ensuring parity, where possible and appropriate, for institutions and students alike.

An independent review of the current student finance arrangements is planned to commence in 2008/09. This will inform the future shape of student finance arrangements in Northern Ireland and will be premised on the need to ensure we maintain world class institutions and secure equitable access to higher education for all who are able to benefit.

NI Students: Applications to UK Institutions

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the figures published by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) on 19 July 2007, regarding applications by Northern Ireland domiciled students to institutions in the United Kingdom; and what consideration he has given to making changes to the funding package for students, based on the current level of applications. (AQW 16/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has examined the figures published by UCAS on 19 July 2007 which showed a 5.5% fall in the number of NI domiciled students applying to UK institutions between 2006 and 2007. This however needs to be set in the context of a decline in the school leaving age population. The latest estimates show that the number of 18 year olds in NI declined by 5.4 % over the last year.

Further provisional figures published on 29 August 2007, show that there has been a 0.4% increase in the number of NI domiciled students accepted to UK institutions over the same period. My Department will continue to monitor UCAS figures as further information becomes available.

A review of variable fees and student support arrangements is planned to commence in Academic Year 2008/2009. The review will take account of participation in higher education since the introduction of variable fees.

Further Education Enrolment

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people who have been enrolled on courses in each of the Further Education Colleges; and to list the courses that have not met full enrolment capacity. (AQW 78/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The table below provides the requested data for part 1 of the question for the period 2003/04 to 2005/06, the latest year for which data is currently available. The Department does not hold information pertaining to the courses that have not met full enrolment capacity.

STUDENTS ENROLLED AT THE NORTHERN IRELAND FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES, 2003/04 – 2005/06

Academic Year	2003/04	
Student Type	Vocational (Assessed provision)	Non-vocational (Non assessed provision)
Armagh College	2,876	1,302
Belfast Institute	19,810	9,137
Castlereagh College	4,361	2,390
Causeway Institute	2,992	1,575
East Antrim Institute	5,729	2,821
East Down Institute	4,891	2,493
East Tyrone College	3,369	5,844
Fermanagh College	7,305	2,489
Limavady College	2,704	1,558
Lisburn Institute	3,939	460

Academic Year	2003/04	
Student Type	Vocational (Assessed provision)	Non-vocational (Non assessed provision)
Newry & Kilkeel Institute	7,319	3,844
North Down & Ards Institute	7,831	3,058
North East Institute	5,744	2,769
North West Institute	12,997	3,576
Omagh College	3,628	1,771
Upper Bann Institute	6,308	4,381
Total	101,803	49,468

Academic Year	2004/05	
Student Type	Vocational (Assessed provision)	Non-vocational (Non assessed provision)
Armagh College	3,494	1,556
Belfast Institute	20,902	8,050
Castlereagh College	4,556	2,739
Causeway Institute	3,665	1,991
East Antrim Institute	5,625	3,569
East Down Institute	4,684	2,034
East Tyrone College	3,782	6,276
Fermanagh College	6,634	3,189
Limavady College	3,193	1,599
Lisburn Institute	4,045	1,184
Newry & Kilkeel Institute	7,757	3,976
North Down & Ards Institute	8,604	2,464
North East Institute	6,337	3,196
North West Institute	12,319	3,362
Omagh College	4,643	1,635
Upper Bann Institute	6,737	4,365
Total	106,977	51,188

Academic Year	2005/06	
Student Type	Vocational (Assessed provision)	Non-vocational (Non assessed provision)
Armagh College	3,379	1,247
Belfast Institute	22,478	9,853
Castlereagh College	4,695	3,010
Causeway Institute	3,884	2,155

Academic Year	2005/06	
Student Type	Vocational (Assessed provision)	Non-vocational (Non assessed provision)
East Antrim Institute	5,007	3,064
East Down Institute	4,102	1,826
East Tyrone College	3,126	6,414
Fermanagh College	4,817	2,280
Limavady College	3,322	1,537
Lisburn Institute	3,459	714
Newry & Kilkeel Institute	7,647	4,608
North Down & Ards Institute	7,775	2,387
North East Institute	6,617	2,526
North West Institute	12,217	3,803
Omagh College	5,398	2,347
Upper Bann Institute	6,327	3,459
Total	104,250	51,230

Merger of Further Education Colleges

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the financial cost of merging the Further Education Colleges into six bodies; and what financial savings have been achieved through the merger strategy. (AQW 79/08)

Sir Reg Empey: While the colleges have merged formally from 1 August 2007, the restructuring process has only been completed at senior management levels. The wider re-organisation of the colleges will be implemented during the course of the current academic year. Therefore, a complete analysis of the financial cost and savings is not yet available.

It is anticipated that the costs associated with the college mergers, many of which will be one-off costs - for example IT and other restructuring costs, will be offset by efficiency savings in subsequent years.

Over 65s in Further Education

Mr Robin Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of people over the age of 65 who have enrolled on courses in each of the Further Education Colleges. (AQW 80/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The tables below detail the requested data for the period 2003/04 to 2005/06, the latest year for which data is currently available.

STUDENTS AGED 65 AND OVER IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND FE COLLEGES 2003/04

College Reference	Vocational (assessed provision) Students	Non Vocational (Non assessed provision) Students	Total
Armagh College	37	97	134
Belfast Institute	656	2,518	3,174
Castlereagh College	100	618	718
Causeway Institute	77	284	361
East Antrim Institute	66	567	633
East Down Institute	184	437	621
East Tyrone College	34	983	1,017
Fermanagh College	84	246	330
Limavady College	21	278	299
Lisburn Institute	53	59	112
Newry & Kilkeel Institute	63	206	269
North Down & Ards Institute	288	411	699
North East Institute	86	180	266
North West Institute	149	265	414
Omagh College	22	83	105
Upper Bann Institute	166	1,076	1,242
Total	2,086	8,308	10,394

STUDENTS AGED 65 AND OVER IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND FE COLLEGES 2004/05

College Reference	Vocational (assessed provision) Students	Non Vocational (Non assessed provision) Students	Total
Armagh College	59	133	192
Belfast Institute	698	2,170	2,868
Castlereagh College	136	674	810
Causeway Institute	167	329	496
East Antrim Institute	91	691	782

College Reference	Vocational (assessed provision) Students	Non Vocational (Non assessed provision) Students	Total
East Down Institute	120	435	555
East Tyrone College	52	913	965
Fermanagh College	97	227	324
Limavady College	25	200	225
Lisburn Institute	100	132	232
Newry & Kilkeel Institute	91	253	344
North Down & Ards Institute	589	247	836
North East Institute	104	165	269
North West Institute	210	317	527
Omagh College	61	93	154
Upper Bann Institute	189	1,123	1,312
Total	2,789	8,102	10,891

**STUDENTS AGED 65 AND OVER IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND
FE COLLEGES 2005/06**

College Reference	Vocational (assessed provision) Students	Non Vocational (Non assessed provision) Students	Total
Armagh College	43	202	245
Belfast Institute	564	2,063	2,627
Castlereagh College	133	681	814
Causeway Institute	208	400	608
East Antrim Institute	61	636	697
East Down Institute	76	431	507
East Tyrone College	28	985	1,013
Fermanagh College	71	191	262
Limavady College	32	205	237
Lisburn Institute	45	52	97
Newry & Kilkeel Institute	53	410	463
North Down & Ards Institute	455	183	638
North East Institute	88	203	291
North West Institute	261	367	628

College Reference	Vocational (assessed provision) Students	Non Vocational (Non assessed provision) Students	Total
Omagh College	67	154	221
Upper Bann Institute	225	879	1,104
Total	2,410	8,042	10,452

**Further Education Means
Business Strategy: Equality Proofing**

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail whether or not his department's new 'Further Education Means Business Strategy' has been equality proofed. (AQW 168/08)

Sir Reg Empey: 'Further Education Means Business', which set out the high level strategic direction for the Further Education Sector, was the subject of a major public consultation exercise in March 2004. The consultation period closed in August 2004, and the response to the strategy proposals was, broadly, very positive.

The Strategy is now being implemented through a programme of twelve separate, but inter-related, projects. As part of the overall Programme Management approach being adopted, further consultation, and equality proofing in line with the Department's Equality Scheme, is carried out on these individual projects if and when appropriate.

Disablement Advisory Service

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline whether or not internal changes within the advice-giving structures at Jobs and Benefits Offices, and, in particular, the restructuring of the Disablement Advisory Service, have been subject to an equality impact assessment or consultation with disability organisations; and, if so, to list the organisations consulted and the outcome of the assessment of impact upon disabled people.

(AQW 170/08)

Sir Reg Empey: It is the responsibility of each Further Education College to determine whether it wishes to offer a particular course. In line with the implementation of FE Means Business and the Skills Strategy, my Department is reviewing the curriculum offered by colleges to ensure an increasing emphasis on provision that meets the skills and qualification needs of employers and the economy. However, the

policy will also facilitate wider community education provision programmes.

Further Education provision is generally accessible to those with disabilities whilst colleges will also continue to offer provision for those with learning difficulties. Proposals for a revised FE curriculum will be issued for public consultation later this year.

Further Education Means Business Strategy: Disabled People

Mrs Michelle O'Neill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to ongoing concerns regarding the future of community education in light of his department's 'Further Education Means Business' strategy, what provision will be available for community education programmes (non-accredited) accessible to disabled people. (AQW 172/08)

Sir Reg Empey: It is the responsibility of each Further Education College to determine whether it wishes to offer a particular course. In line with the implementation of FE Means Business and the Skills Strategy, my Department is reviewing the curriculum offered by colleges to ensure an increasing emphasis on provision that meets the skills and qualification needs of employers and the economy. However, the policy will also facilitate wider community education provision programmes.

Further Education provision is generally accessible to those with disabilities whilst colleges will also continue to offer provision for those with learning difficulties. Proposals for a revised FE curriculum will be issued for public consultation later this year.

University Enrolment outside Northern Ireland

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of Employment and Learning to detail the number of A-level students in Northern Ireland, who have accepted university places outside Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years. (AQW 189/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The number of Northern Ireland domiciled first year students enrolled on Higher Education (HE) courses at Great Britain (GB) HE institutions whose highest qualification on entry to HE included an A level is provided in the table below. Figures for the 2006/07 academic year will not be available until early 2008.

Academic Year	Total
2001/02	2,960

Academic Year	Total
2002/03	3,060
2003/04	3,220
2004/05	3,550
2005/06	3,730

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest 5.

University Enrolments: Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds that are attending university; and (b) the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who leave university during their courses. (AQW 216/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department classifies Higher Education (HE) students who come from socio-economic classification (SEC) groups 5-7 as being from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- In 2005/06, there were 5,975 enrolments on HE courses at Northern Ireland institutions whose SEC background was in groups 5-7.
- Non-continuation data are available for students enrolled on full-time undergraduate courses only. For 2005/06 there were 1880 full time undergraduate entrants from SEC Groups 5-7. Of these, 235 were no longer in HE in 2005/06.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Note: Figures are rounded to nearest 5.

Students from the Republic of Ireland

Mr Paul Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of students from the Republic of Ireland that are attending university in Northern Ireland; and (b) the number of students from the Republic of Ireland that attended university in Northern Ireland prior to the introduction of tuition fees. (AQW 217/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The latest data shows there were 3,905 students from the Republic of Ireland enrolled on courses at universities in Northern Ireland in the 2005/06 academic year. Data for the 2006/07 academic year (ie the year variable tuition fees were introduced) will not be available until early 2008.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Note: Figure has been rounded to the nearest 5.

Hospitality and Tourism Training

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the present funding, facilities and infrastructure for training in the hospitality and tourism sectors. (AQO 28/08)

Sir Reg Empey: There is a considerable and extensive range of training provision currently available to the tourism and hospitality sector. The greater majority of this provision is administered through the Department for Employment and Learning. The Department considers that the range of training provision continues to meet the needs of the sector.

Educational Guidance Service for Adults

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his plans for celebrating 40 years of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, and for the future involvement of this organisation in relation to literacy and numeracy skills. (AQO 10/08)

Sir Reg Empey: This is an important milestone in the development of the organisation and I congratulate the Educational Guidance Service for Adults on their contribution to introducing adults to learning and developing adult guidance over the last 40 years. I look forward to participating in the conference to celebrate 40 years of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults.

The Educational Guidance Service for Adults is currently under contract with the Department to deliver services in relation to introducing adults to learning and in particular literacy and numeracy skills learning. This contract is due to end at the close of the current financial year. Plans are underway to review the contract specification and complete an open competition for services in line with Departmental and Northern Ireland Civil Service policy.

Apprenticeships: Uptake and Completion Rates

Mr Paul Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what difficulties have been identified in increasing the uptake and completion rates of apprenticeships and similar schemes. (AQO 104/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Young people often consider training as a return to the classroom rather than a route to employment or career. Employers see training as an additional cost or conflicting with busy work schedules. Training for Success will offer individualised training suited to the needs of the young person and the employer. There will also be financial incentives to the trainee, the training organisation and the employer to encourage completion.

Armagh College of Further and Higher Education

Mr Dominic Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on the capital development proposals in respect of the former Armagh College of Further and Higher Education, which was promised a £20 million development two years ago. (AQO 19/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Armagh College submitted an economic appraisal which was cleared as being technically compliant at April 2005. Funding was not available at that time, and since then Armagh has become part of the new Southern Regional College. The new college will now need to review its future accommodation needs across all of its campuses.

Masters Architectural Courses

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the admissions criteria for Masters Degree Architectural Courses at Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster. (AQO 95/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Applicants to the Bachelor of Architecture postgraduate course at Queens must hold a 2:1 Honours degree, have twelve months practical experience and may be called for interview. Applicants to the Masters of Architecture course at the University of Ulster must hold a 2:2 Honours degree, have a professional portfolio and will be interviewed.

Economically Inactive People

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he plans to set a target for reducing the number of economically inactive people, as a proportion of the working-age population, by 2010. (AQO 47/08)

Sir Reg Empey: I have no plans to set such a target. My Department has a target to contribute to increasing the employment rate. Increasingly, we are focusing on assisting those deemed to be furthest from the labour market, including the economically inactive, to move towards and into work.

Skilled Labour Supply

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what steps he is taking to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of skilled labour to meet the needs of the manufacturing sector. (AQO 118/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's Skills Strategy, *Success through Skills*, places a strong emphasis on providing a demand led skills system with employers articulating the volume and level of skilled people they require through mechanisms, such as the 25 Sector Skills Councils. There are five Sector Skills Councils whose 'footprint' includes the manufacturing sector, SEMTA, Proskills, Skillsfast-UK, Cogent and Improve. Sector Skills Councils are contracted to set standards within their industries and as a result have an increasing role in influencing both the development of new qualifications and the curriculum at all levels of post 16 year old training.

Once the demand for skills has been ascertained, my Department works with training providers, Further Education Colleges and universities to ensure that provision is in place to supply a suitably skilled workforce.

In terms of the Manufacturing sector, the Department for Employment and Learning supports training at all entry levels including:

- Training for Success, offers a range of professional and technical training opportunities for those people between 16-24 years of age. Apprenticeships provide people with the opportunity to train as they work in the Manufacturing sector, gaining industry-led qualifications in the skills the sector requires;
- Higher level training and education is offered through our Further Education Colleges and Universities. Much work has been done to ensure that our graduates have qualifications and skills relevant to the needs of the Northern Ireland economy; and
- Management and Leadership provision which aims to promote best practice at middle and senior levels of company management.

Essential Skills Strategy

Mr Ken Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of persons that have received qualifications through schemes operating under the Essential Skills Strategy.

(AQO 22/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Between the commencement of the Essential Skills programme in October 2002 and 31 July 2007, 15,605 learners had gained an Essential Skills qualification in Literacy, and 11,877 learners had gained an Essential Skills qualification in numeracy.

Source: Awarding Bodies Qualifications Data.

Top-up Fees

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given the continuing decrease in student enrolment since the increase in student top-up fees, how he intends to reverse this trend, particularly in light of the skills requirement in the employment market in Northern Ireland. (AQO 82/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Enrolment data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for 2006/7, will not be available until January 2008. This will be the first set of comprehensive data that will show if there has been a decline in enrolments due to the introduction of variable deferred tuition fees in 2006/7. I will be happy to respond fully to the member at that time.

Board of South Eastern Regional College

Mr Jeffrey Donaldson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give a timescale within which he hopes to announce the composition of the Board of the new South Eastern Regional College; and to detail the number of Board members that will come from the city of Lisburn. (AQW 313/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The names of nine governing body members of the South Eastern Regional College, drawn from the business, industry or professional category of governor, were announced in July 2007. This follows the announcement of the chair of the Governing Body in September 2006. Two of these members live in the Lisburn City Council area. I would hope that the remaining categories of governor, including the staff and student members, which are filled through processes of election and nomination, will be filled by the end of the year. It is not possible to say how many of those members will come from Lisburn.

The composition of the college governing bodies is presently under review and formal consultation with interested parties was undertaken earlier this year. I hope to make an announcement on the outcome of that consultation in the near future with a view to putting the matter before the Assembly.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

CO2 Emissions

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the estimated average CO2 emissions (in grams) per KWh useful output, for

(i) home heating oil; (ii) mains electricity; (iii) natural gas; and (iv) wood pellets. (AQW 49/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

(Mr Dodds): The table below represents the average CO₂ emissions in kg per kWh of delivered energy, which is the recognised normal reporting format. Determining grams per kWh of useful output requires the system efficiency to be taken into account. As no verifiable source of system efficiency exists the figures quoted are on the basis of the normal format of kg of CO₂ per kWh of energy delivered.

Energy Source	Estimated Average CO ₂ Emissions kg/kWh delivered	Source of Information
(i) Home Heating Oil	0.258	UK Greenhouse Gas Inventory for 2005
(ii) Mains Electricity	0.43	UK Emissions Trading Scheme
(iii) Natural Gas	0.206	UK Greenhouse Gas Inventory for 2005
(iv) Wood Pellets	0.00936	Wood Fuel Strategy for England, Biomass Energy Centre.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the efficacy of, and requirement for, the strategic and operational coupling of both energy efficiency and renewable energy across a range of sectors, as a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland. (AQW 50/08)

Mr Dodds: DETI energy policy currently promotes both energy efficiency and renewable energy, as a means of not only contributing to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland, but also to enhancing security and diversity of our energy supply. A more competitive and sustainable energy mix is a key goal and as such my Department has recently commissioned a review of the Sustainable Energy market in Northern Ireland. The strategic and operational coupling of energy efficiency and renewable energy across a range of sectors will be examined as part of that process.

Renewable Energy

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, (i) to detail the renewable-source electricity production capacity required to meet Northern Ireland's renewables obligation by 2012; (ii) to give an estimate of the power in GWh that will be generated by wind turbines; and (iii) to give an

estimate of the number of on- and off-shore wind turbines that will be necessary to produce the required amount of electricity. (AQW 51/08)

Mr Dodds: NI's renewable obligation in 2012-2013 will be 6.3%, representing the proportion of sales of electricity that suppliers must account for under the NI Renewables Obligation Order. This is different from our renewables energy target which is that, by 2012, 12% of electricity consumption will be from renewable energy sources, of which 15% will be from non-wind sources.

Estimated electricity consumption in 2012/13 is 9980 GWh, implying 1200 GWh from indigenous renewables to meet the 12% target with 15% from non-wind sources which implies around 29 MW of non-wind capacity. The remaining 85% would require 332 MW of wind capacity. A total of 361MW estimated production capacity would therefore be required to meet the 2012 target.

The number of wind turbines needed to meet this demand depends on the capacity of each turbine, which can be as much as 3MW. Based on an average of 2MW however, this would equate to 166 turbines. These would all be on onshore farms, as there are currently no offshore NI wind farms.

'Energy: A Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland'

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will explain the method used to assess whether Northern Ireland is achieving the goal of 1% reduction in electricity consumption each year from 2007 to 2012, as stated in 'Energy: A Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland', published in June 2004; and if he will indicate whether this year's target will be met. (AQW 118/08)

Mr Dodds: We are collecting electricity savings data from the complete range of energy efficiency programmes supported by Government. From this "bottom-up" approach we will be able to monitor the performance against the reduced consumption target which is 1% of the Northern Ireland electricity demand for 2006/07 adjusted to include an allowance of 1.8% for economic growth.

Further detail on the methodology, which is that favoured by the EU Directive on Energy End-Use Efficiency and Energy Services, is contained in a paper "Delivering Northern Ireland's 1% Energy Efficiency Target" which is available on my Department's web site on the Sustainable Energy page at www.energy.detini.gov.uk

We are currently almost 6 months into the first year of the 5 year period to achieve this target and an

indication of performance will not be available until early 2008. However the scoping work indicates that the 1% target reduction in electricity consumption is achievable given the high level of energy efficiency activity across all sectors in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Electricity

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will undertake to investigate (i) Northern Ireland Electricity's charging of business and industry for mains supply connections; (ii) the reason for the time delay in having a new mains supply connected; and (iii) to detail the comparable cost of supply and timing of delivery in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales.

(AQW 154/08)

Mr Dodds:

- (i) Regulation of Northern Ireland Electricity's ("NIE's") connection charges is a matter for the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation ("NIAUR"). NIE's licence contains an obligation requiring it to issue a statement for connection charges which must first be approved by NIAUR. If a customer has a dispute about the size of the charge quoted by NIE they have the right to refer the case to NIAUR who will carry out an independent assessment.
- (ii) Before a connection can be made by NIE, some or all of the following may be necessary in order to meet the customer's requirements:
 - approval from other landowners for the electricity infrastructure, including formal agreement to wayleaves or easements (which can potentially take several months);
 - planning permission from DoE Planning Service;
 - permission from DRD Roads Service to carry out work on public roadways;
 - NIE design the works (which may require a detailed site survey);
 - construction of the connection (which can take 4-12 weeks, or 4-6 months if specialised items of equipment need to be procured by NIE);

NIE cannot make any new connection live until it has received a connection card filled in by the customer's electrical contractor. New business customers must also have entered into a contract with an electricity supplier before the supply can be made live.

- (iii) While NIE has a straightforward and transparent charging schedule, the information available from distribution companies in the Republic of Ireland

("RoI"), Scotland, England and Wales in relation to the cost of making electricity connections is complex and varied. This does not readily allow like for like comparisons with the position in Northern Ireland. In relation to the time taken to make a connection, the position in Northern Ireland is broadly comparable to that in the Irish Republic, Scotland, England and Wales for the same reasons as are detailed in (ii). NIAUR does not compare the connection costs with Great Britain and the Irish Republic when regulating NIE's connection charges, but does seek to ensure that they are broadly cost reflective.

Household Programme

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of applications received under the Household Programme to install solar, PV, biomass, wind or geothermal energy systems to date; (ii) the number of these applications that have been approved; and (iii) the total amount of grant that has been issued. (AQW 156/08)

Mr Dodds:

- (i) The total number of applications to date to under the household programme, now known as Reconnect, to install solar, PV, biomass, wind and ground source heat pumps (geothermal is not actually supported under Reconnect) is 2,695.
- (ii) The number of applications approved is 2,557 (137 applications were withdrawn and 1 was rejected).
- (iii) The total amount of grant issued to date under Reconnect is £2.77 million.

Household Programme

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of applications that have been received under the Household Programme under the headings (i) solar; (ii) PV; (iii) biomass; (iv) wind; and (v) geothermal. (AQW 158/08)

Mr Dodds: The household programme, now known as Reconnect, was officially opened to applications on 24 July 2006. The numbers of applications to date are as follows:

(i)	Solar:	1,187
(ii)	PV:	56
(iii)	Biomass:	1,012
(iv)	Wind:	176
(v)	Geothermal*:	264
	Total:	2,695

* Geothermal is not actually supported under Reconnect and the number given is for ground source heat pumps.

Invest NI: Overseas trips

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the overseas trips that Invest NI has financed for members of staff in 2004; 2005; 2006; and 2007; the amount that each trip cost; and the reason for each trip. (AQW 166/08)

Mr Dodds: Given the nature of Invest NI's work, there is quite a significant amount of information which has to be processed to fully answer this question. The current systems in Invest NI do not allow for this information to be collated and produced centrally. Therefore, Invest NI has to conduct a large-scale coordination exercise across its Divisions to gather all of the requisite information.

I will write to the member following the conclusion of the coordination exercise to provide him with a full response to his question. I will also place a copy of this final reply in the Assembly Library

Agrifood Industry

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has identified export markets where Northern Ireland's agri-food industry is currently at a competitive disadvantage, compared to that of the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 173/08)

Mr Dodds: There are no specific export markets where I have identified a competitive disadvantage for NI agri-food companies against their Irish Republic counterparts.

Tourism in Craigavon

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on tourism in the Craigavon area. (AQO 70/08)

Mr Dodds: Craigavon received 55,700 visits in 2006. This was 1.8% of visits to Northern Ireland and involved spending of £11.8 million, representing 2.4% of total tourism spend in Northern Ireland. Oxford Island and the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre are the two most visited attractions. Oxford Island received 260,000 visits in 2006 and Lough Neagh Discovery Centre received 66,241 visits. Craigavon has 305 bed spaces which is approximately 1% of the Northern Ireland total.

I will be visiting the area in the near future when I look forward to visiting some of its tourism attractions and discussing opportunities to develop tourism further.

Financial Services Sector

Mr David Burnside asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has for assisting the development of a financial services sector in Northern Ireland. (AQO 27/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI has already developed a strategy to target this sector globally and is actively cultivating relationships at a very senior level with a number of key accounts in Europe and the United States. This is a growing sector with the potential to provide significant new opportunities for Northern Ireland.

During 2007, Northern Ireland has seen strategic investments by two high-profile financial institutions. Citi, one of the world's largest financial corporations, has established a Centre of Excellence in Belfast promoting 716 jobs. This facility includes 117 jobs in capital markets and banking operations as well as 39 jobs in legal and compliance. These jobs attract average salaries of circa £25k, well in excess of Northern Ireland's private sector average. In July 2007, Bank of Ireland Securities Services announced its intention to promote 149 jobs creating its first UK hedge fund administration centre. These jobs will attract average salaries of £35k per annum and is evidence of the sustainable economic growth opportunities provided by the financial services sector.

In addition to offering selective financial assistance, Invest NI is working closely with Department of Employment and Learning and the education sector to develop a supply of suitably qualified people to avail of these employment opportunities.

Key Industries

Ms Anna Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline three key industries in which he believes Northern Ireland can become a world leader over the next decade. (AQO 63/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI's focus is on developing our companies into world leaders within the niche markets in which they operate. At present, Northern Ireland has companies operating with key niche strengths in the advanced manufacturing sectors, such as Seagate and Bombardier, life sciences sector, such as Almac and Norbrook, and the software development sector, such as Meridio and Northbrook. Our companies have also demonstrated growing strengths in the services sector, particularly ICT and financial services. With a continued focus on capability and innovation development, the companies operating within these sectors can further increase their competitiveness and be successful in winning orders against global competitors into the next decade.

Economic Development Indicators

Dr Stephen Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report on the indicators used by his department to assess economic development in Northern Ireland. (AQO 65/08)

Mr Dodds: My Department collects data on a range of indicators to monitor the performance of the NI economy. Areas covered include the labour market, exports, R&D and innovation.

Over the CSR period, as part of its Public Service Agreement, the Department will continue to track performance in the key areas of Productivity; Employment and Tourism.

The Department has also developed - in partnership with the Economic Development Forum - a set of monitoring and forecasting indicators for the Northern Ireland economy. These are aligned to the Economic Vision for Northern Ireland and the latest report was published in October 2006

Invest NI: Advance Sites in West Tyrone

Mr Barry McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to clarify whether advance sites located in West Tyrone, that are under the control of Invest Northern Ireland, may be made available to indigenous companies planning to expand their operations. (AQO 105/08)

Mr Dodds: Property sites owned by Invest NI are sold or leased to its client companies, both locally or externally owned, based on demonstrable immediate need and an approved business case.

A business needs to meet certain criteria on turnover and export capability to qualify as an Invest NI client. Clients generally operate in the fields of manufacturing and tradable services and have a strong export focus.

Invest NI has identified a shortage of available Industrial land in the area and is working with Planning Service to identify suitable land for industrial zoning in the emerging West Tyrone Area Plan. It is also resisting change of use applications in order to protect remaining industrial sites.

Visitors' Centre at the Giant's Causeway

Mr Declan O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to indicate the date for completion of a permanent Visitors' Centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQO 4/08)

Mr Dodds: The Member is aware of Minister Foster's 10 September statement and my statement of the same date. The issues relating to the Giant's Causeway were explored during the Adjournment Debate on 11 September. The completion date for a permanent Visitor's Centre will depend on the resolution of planning and related issues. Much will depend on all key Stakeholders taking a constructive and co-operative approach to the delivery of a facility that does justice to the importance of the Giant's Causeway as a heritage and tourism asset

Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly

Mr John Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW1374/07, if he will engage directly in discussions relating to the future development of Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly, as a centre for economic enterprise, trade and investment. (AQO 11/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI's current landholding in the surrounding areas of Londonderry, Limavady and Coleraine is considered to be sufficient for the medium to long term needs of its clients and prospective clients in the North West. There is also significant private sector industrial landholding in the area.

Invest NI holds over 50 acres in Limavady Council area. 35 acres are already occupied by client companies leaving 15 currently available for lease. Adding the figures for Londonderry and Coleraine, over 170 acres remain available for lease out of a total landholding in the area of almost 550

Manufacturing Sector

Mr Roy Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to boost the manufacturing sector, considering that in 2000 the sector accounted for 16% of the Northern Ireland workforce, whereas today it stands at 12%. (AQO 89/08)

Mr Dodds: Manufacturing continues to play a vital role in the Northern Ireland economy and both DETI and Invest NI continue to actively promote and support the sector. The trend in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the world is for further erosion of employment in the sector but with rising productivity as companies move up the value-added chain, become more knowledge-intensive, higher skilled, develop products for niche markets and compete more on quality and less on price.

Innovation is the key to the future success of the manufacturing sector and Invest NI continues to assist its manufacturing clients to improve their competitiveness and boost export growth through programmes aimed

at capability development. This is demonstrated by the significant resources Invest NI allocates to manufacturing where the majority of its sector teams are focused. Invest NI is also seeking to secure mobile manufacturing investments in Northern Ireland by encouraging clients to invest in HQ activities such as R&D centres and administrative support functions

Potential growth of Tourism Industry

Mr Paul Maskey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give an assessment of the potential growth of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland, and its potential contribution to economic growth. (AQO 106/08)

Mr Dodds: Research based on 2003 figures indicates that tourism contributed some £783 million, or 3.5 per cent of Gross Value Added, and supported more than 28,000 Full Time Equivalent jobs. By establishing Northern Ireland as a world class visitor destination we will further increase tourism's contribution to the economy. We have already had significant success in this regard with out-of state visitor numbers to Northern Ireland increasing by 33.7 per cent during the period 2000-2006, and visitor spend increasing by 48.1 per cent over the same period. My Department has very recently received corresponding figures for 2004 and indicative figures for 2005. These have to be verified before they can be published. I will write to the Member shortly to provide him with this update and place a copy of that letter in the Assembly Library.

Smithsonian Festival: Financial Benefits

Mr Kieran McCarthy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report on the financial benefits to Northern Ireland of his attendance at the Smithsonian Festival in the United States of America, in late June 2007. (AQO 48/08)

Mr Dodds: The trip was to support an Invest NI trade mission, to undertake a series of inward investment engagements, with potential and existing investors, and to speak at the Tourism Ireland event that followed the launch of the Titanic Exhibition in Washington on 26th June. The mission was planned to coincide with the Smithsonian Festival and I was invited to the opening of the Festival. The trip also allowed me the opportunity to meet with the US Administration and other key influencers and business people to discuss the forthcoming US NI investment conference next spring. I am confident that these activities will generate significant financial benefits for Northern Ireland in the fullness of time.

Invest NI and Industrial Development Agency

Mr Seán Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report on the performance of Invest Northern Ireland in comparison to the Industrial Development Agency in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 56/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI is not directly comparable to the Irish Industrial Development Authority, either in terms of functional responsibility or product offering. For example, the IDA focus is solely on foreign direct investment whereas Invest NI's clients comprise both locally and internationally owned companies. Since 2002, Invest NI has performed strongly in the area of foreign direct investment, supporting 164 inward investment projects, leveraging almost £1.1 billion of investment; promoting over 13,200 new jobs and safeguarding almost 10,500 existing jobs.

Indeed, between April 2003 and January 2007, Northern Ireland, with 2.8% population share, secured 7% of contestable projects into the UK; or 14% if projects locating in SE England are excluded.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Danny Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has undertaken any assessment of the likely impact of a reduction in well-paid public sector jobs, through the Review of Public Administration, on the service and retail sector and, if so, what conclusions he has reached.

(AQO 35/08)

Mr Dodds: The Review of Public Administration is a wide ranging initiative and it will have impacts on most if not all Ministerial portfolios. However, some of its key decisions are under review and final decisions on location associated with RPA reforms have not been taken. I will, of course, be interested to ensure that any final decisions pay due regard to their potential impact on the local economy across all of its sectors. It is clear, however, that the economy needs rebalanced towards greater value added private sector activity and employment. Only by growing the more prosperous and wealth generating private sectors of the economy, can we ensure growth across all sectors including service and retail.

Roaming Charges

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made, and what further steps are planned, on the

issue of eradicating mobile phone roaming charges on the island of Ireland. (AQO 109/08)

Mr Dodds: Last year my Department, working in conjunction with the then Department of Communications Marine and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland and both Regulators, made significant progress in addressing the mobile roaming issue. This work led to the introduction of all-island tariffs and special tariff initiatives for phone users which significantly reduced the scale of the problem.

In August this year the EU capped roaming tariffs across Europe. Whilst welcome for those travelling across Europe it does not fully address the inadvertent roaming issue for those living and using mobile phones close to the border. It is too early to gauge the impact it will have.

My Department will continue to monitor the situation, liaising with the industry and the regulator, were appropriate, and consider the scope for further action.

ENVIRONMENT

Article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment if she intends to make greater use of Article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. (AQW 54/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): The Department currently makes full use of Article 40 agreements, where appropriate, to facilitate, regulate or restrict the use of land.

If, however, there is a choice between imposing planning conditions and entering into a planning agreement, the practice is that the Department will normally opt for conditions.

The Semple review recommended that planning obligations under Article 40 should be used to secure developer contributions to affordable housing. This will be considered as part of a review of PPS 12, since a new policy direction would have to be provided through PPS 12 and new legislation may be required.

Article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail each occasion upon which Article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order

1991 had been used by her department, in each of the last five years. (AQW 56/08)

Mrs Foster: I can confirm that 8 Article 40 Agreements were processed in 2002, 10 in 2003, 7 in 2004, 6 in 2005, 10 in 2006 and 11 to date in 2007. Details of these Agreements are shown in the attached table.

Article 40 Agreements		
2002	Location	Planning Ref
10/01/2002	Carrickbawn Wood, Greenbank Park, Rostrevor	P/2000/0736
10/01/2002	Shore Road, Lower Ballinderry	S/1999/0036
22/03/2002	21 Glenariffe Road, Glenariffe	E/2000/0163
17/05/2002	201 Loughan Road, Coolderry	C/2001/0268
24/05/2002	287 Upper Road, Carrickfergus	V/2000/0169
13/09/2002	Sandybrae Road, Attical, Kilkeel	P/2000/0769
01/10/2002	Landsdown Road, Newtownards	X/1998/0942
11/10/2002	Silverhill House, Enniskillen	L/2001/0344
2003	Location	Planning Ref
10/01/2003	Craigmacagan Td, Rathlin	E/1999/0266
12/01/2003	2 Glendesha Road, Mullaghbawn, Newry	P/1997/0942
27/01/2003	Clady Road, Cushendun	E/2000/0226
20/03/2003	13 Cloughs Road, Clough, Cushendall	E/2002/0117
27/03/2003	Crescent Link, Londonderry	Genova North West Ltd
01/04/2003	Opp. St. Eugene's PS	J/2001/0065
07/05/2003	Whitepark road & Castlenagree road, Bushmills	E/2001/0113
08/05/2003	108 Mill Road, Annalong	P/1998/0335
31/07/2003	Buncrana Rd, Londonderry	A/2001/1224/F
04/12/2003	Green Rd, Coleraine	C/2001/0660
2004	Location	Planning Ref
05/01/2004	Colemans Nurseries, 6 Old Ballyclare Rd, Templepatrick	T/2001/0299
20/02/2004	Clare Park, Clare Rd, Ballycastle	E/1999/0383
26/03/2004	19B Cloughs Rd, Cushendall	E/2002/0380
07/06/2004	58 Largy Rd, Carnlough	F/2002/0389
08/06/2004	26 Carnalbanagh Rd, Glenarm	F/2002/0058
27/08/2004	160 Moss Rd, Ballycopeland, Millisle	X/2001/1406

Article 40 Agreements		
2002	Location	Planning Ref
08/11/2004	120M SE of No.13 Cloughs Road, Cloughs, Cushendall	E/2003/0492
2005	Location	Planning Ref
26/01/2005	69 Portmuck Rd, Islandmagee	F/2002/0203/F
27/07/2005	North Lisburn Feeder Rd	S/2003/0253/O
26/08/2005	110M West of 19B Cloughs Road, Cushendall	E/2003/0295/F
07/12/2005	41 Teeshan Road, Cullybackey	G/2004/0548/F
20/12/2005	To the rear of 80 Whitepark Road, Ballycastle	E/2003/0015/F
22/12/2005	366 Saintfield Road, Castlereagh	Y/1996/0281/O
2006	Location	Planning Ref
20/01/2006	Adj. To Hutchinsons Quay, Portna, Kilrea	H/2003/1112/O
22/02/2006	24 Glen Road, Hillhall, Lisburn	S/2004/0581/F
05/05/2006	185C + 185D Torr Road, Cushendun	E/2003/0513
24/05/2006	20m North of 42 Killycanavan Road, Ardboe, Dungannon.	I/2003/0519
17/06/2006	Brokerstown Village, Lisburn	S/2003/0466/O
06/09/2006	144b Largy Road, Carnlough, Co Antrim	F/2004/0148/F
07/09/2006	8 Harbour Road, Ballintoy	E/2002/0281/F
15/09/2006	Site adjacent to 20 Nicholson's Road, Derryogue, Kilkeel.	P/2000/1122
11/10/2006	40 Corbally Road, Portrush	C/2000/0558/F
22/11/2006	Limekiln Road, Bessbrook	P/1999/0544
2007	Location	Planning Ref
22/02/2007	51 Seacoast Road, Limavady	B/2002/0591/O
26/02/2007	St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast	Z/2004/2961/F
26/04/2007	87-89 Ballinlea Road, Ballycastle.	E/2002/0115/O
26/04/2007	99 Whitepark Rd, Ballintoy	E/2003/0218
26/04/2007	29 Clooney Rd, Tobermore	H/2002/0846
08/05/2007	20 Ballybogey Rd, Ballymoney	D/2001/0152/F
21/05/2007	20b Mountstewart Road, Greyabbey, Newtownards.	X/2006/0492/F
31/05/2007	Sandy Bay Marina, 7A Shore Road, Upper Ballinderry	S/2002/1123/O
20/06/2007	53 Quarterlands Road, Killinchy, Comber.	R/2005/1423/F

Article 40 Agreements		
2002	Location	Planning Ref
31/07/2007	The Castle off Harbour Road, Ballintoy.	E/2004/0055/O
04/09/2007	To the rear of 105 Edenticullo Road, Hillsborough.	S/2004/1136/F

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her department's consideration of, and position on, the introduction of an Environmental Protection Agency. (AQW 64/08)

Mrs Foster: I remain open minded about the recommendations of the Review of Environmental Governance, including whether or not there should be an Environmental Protection Agency.

I will carefully consider my approach to environmental governance. In so doing I will take account of the Review recommendations and of resource considerations, the views of the Environment Committee and of any points which stakeholders wish to make.

I expect to make a public statement on the way forward towards the end of the year, following discussion with my colleagues on the Executive.

Underground Slurry Tanks

Mr Billy Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to advise which government department or body is responsible for setting the criteria governing the construction of underground slurry tanks, and if she is aware of any plans to review these criteria. (AQW 83/08)

Mrs Foster: The criteria governing the construction of underground slurry tanks are set out in The Control of Pollution (Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 (SSAFO). The Regulations were made by the Department of the Environment in exercise of the powers conferred on it by Article 14 of the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. I am in discussion with my officials with regard to the criteria.

Bangor Sportsplex

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment if she will confirm that the land at Bangor Sportsplex, which is being sold by North Down Borough Council, will be subject to the provisions of Planning

Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation. (AQW 87/08)

Mrs Foster: I can confirm that Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation is one of a number of material considerations in the determination of the current application.

High Hedges Legislation

Mr Alex Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if she will give a timescale for the introduction of high hedges legislation. (AQW 96/08)

Mrs Foster: The Department confirmed in 2005, through public consultation, that the nuisance high hedge problem here is on a par with that in England and Wales where legislation is already in place and in operation to address the problem.

I wish to bring forward similar legislation as soon as possible, starting with a policy consultation on the detailed operation of the legislation. However, the timing will be subject to consideration of other competing priorities.

Drink Driving

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her plans for a Christmas and New Year advertising campaign, to reduce the incidences of drink driving on Northern Ireland's roads. (AQW 132/08)

Mrs Foster: It is planned to run an anti drink drive television advertising campaign from 20 November 2007 until 6 January 2008. The campaign will be supported by increased PSNI enforcement. Research undertaken to identify when road safety campaigns are likely to be most effective has indicated that incidences of drink driving increase over the Christmas and New Year period.

The principal message of the television advertising campaign will continue to be "NEVER EVER DRINK AND DRIVE".

Outstanding Planning Enforcement Cases

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning enforcement cases that are presently outstanding in each of the Divisional Planning Offices. (AQW 147/08)

Mrs Foster: The total number of planning enforcement cases that are presently outstanding throughout Planning Service is 5653.

The breakdown of this total for each Divisional Planning Office is shown in the table below.

Divisional Office	Total No. of enforcement cases presently outstanding
Ballymena	460
Belfast	683
Craigavon	1363
Derry/Coleraine	680
Downpatrick	1453
Omagh	536
Headquarters	478
Total	5653

Seals in Northern Ireland

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of seals in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years. (AQW 152/08)

Mrs Foster: The peak monthly count for all seals (including pups) for each of the last three years (2004, 2005 and 2006) is 526, 580 and 636 respectively. The count for the current year is not yet complete.

Seals in Strangford Lough

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of seals in Strangford Lough. (AQW 153/08)

Mrs Foster: The peak monthly count for all seals (including pups) for each of the last three years (2004, 2005 and 2006) in Strangford Lough is 244, 282 and 251 respectively. The count for the current year is not yet complete.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Government Carbon Offset Fund

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether CO2 emissions resulting from Northern Ireland Ministerial and Government Official air travel will be included in the Government Carbon Offset Fund, which is used by the United Kingdom Government. (AQW 5/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Robinson): DFP have been in contact with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA),

which has lead responsibility for the Government Carbon Offsetting Fund (GCOF), to enquire if the Northern Ireland Civil Service could participate in the GCOF.

DEFRA have responded that they have exceeded their carbon credits budget for the current financial year and therefore the GCOF cannot accommodate the NICS, at least in this first reporting year. DFP has asked to be considered for next year's project but in the interim are researching alternative carbon offsetting funds through which the carbon emissions from official NICS air travel can be offset.

It is generally acknowledged that offsetting in itself is not a solution to climate change and the priority should be to reduce carbon emissions. DFP will be pursuing with all departments the ways and means to reduce all official travel, including air travel, looking to alternatives such as video-conferencing and conference calls wherever possible.

Policing and Criminal Justice Budgets

Mr Alex Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he intends to commence discussions with the Northern Ireland Office and HM Treasury to safeguard the policing and criminal justice budgets, in the event of the devolution of justice and policing powers. (AQW 40/08)

Mr Robinson: Discussion on this issue will take place when the devolution of policing and justice is being considered. No discussions have yet taken place on this matter but a satisfactory resolution of this issue will be required before the powers are devolved.

MRSA

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, broken down by each hospital in Northern Ireland, the number of people who died and subsequently had MRSA listed on their death certificate, for each of the last five years. (AQW 231/08)

Mr Robinson: Cause of death statistics are classified by the International Classification of Diseases, the current version of which does not include a specific code for MRSA. However, statistics on deaths where MRSA was a contributing factor can be obtained by identifying deaths registered with specific conditions likely to be linked with MRSA and then checking whether MRSA was actually recorded on the death certificate.

The table attached gives the number of deaths registered in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years, 2002-2006, where MRSA was mentioned on such death certificates. The figures relate to all deaths where MRSA was mentioned on the certificate, regard-

less of whether it was the main cause of death or not. The figures presented are classified by place of death, which need not be the place where an infection was first contracted.

TABLE: NUMBER OF DEATHS REGISTERED RELATED TO MRSA BY PLACE OF DEATH, 2002-2006^P

Place of Death	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 ^P
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust	7	1	4	4	1
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	1	4	7	7	8
Causeway HSS Trust	1	1	0	3	1
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	7	2	5	9	12
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	0	2	2	4	0
Green Park HSS Trust	0	0	0	1	0
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	3	3	1	6	2
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	0	1	0	1	0
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	1	2	4	6	7
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	0	2	5	3	1
Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust	4	1	2	8	9
United Hospitals Group HSS Trust	1	4	4	5	6
Other ^I	1	7	10	12	9
Total	26	30	44	69	56

^I 'Other' place of death includes deaths in Nursing Homes or in the home.

^P Provisional Data.

Hospital-acquired Infections

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people who have died in each of the last five years, where hospital-acquired infections other than MRSA were listed on the death certificate. (AQW 232/08)

Mr Robinson: It is not possible to give reliable figures on the number of deaths involving all hospital-acquired infections as information on whether an infection was acquired in hospital or elsewhere may not be available to the doctor certifying the death.

However, in Northern Ireland statistics on deaths registered where MRSA or Clostridium difficile are mentioned on death certificates are routinely published. The attached table gives the number of deaths where Clostridium difficile was mentioned on the death certificate by registration year from 2002 to 2006.

TABLE: NUMBER OF DEATHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND WITH CLOSTRIDIUM DIFFICILE^{1,2} WAS MENTIONED ON THE DEATH CERTIFICATE, BY REGISTRATION YEAR 2002-2006

Registration Year	Deaths with Clostridium difficile ^{1,2} mentioned on the death certificate
2002	26
2003	34
2004	44
2005	35
2006 ^P	63

¹ ICD code A04.7 and other mentions of Clostridium difficile.

² Included in these figures are 4 deaths where the death certificate mentioned both Clostridium difficile and MRSA.

^P Provisional data.

Subarachnoid Haemorrhage

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, broken down by each hospital in Northern Ireland, the number of people who have died as a result of a subarachnoid haemorrhage, in each of the last five years. (AQW 233/08)

Mr Robinson: The attached table gives the number of deaths registered due to subarachnoid haemorrhage 1 each year between 2002 and 2006^P in Northern Ireland. The figures are broken down by place of death as recorded on the death certificate. Place of death figures may be influenced by the medical/surgical specialties available in each hospital.

TABLE: NUMBER OF REGISTERED DEATHS DUE TO SUBARACHNOID HAEMORRHAGE BY YEAR AND PLACE OF DEATH, 2002-2006^P.

Place of Death	Registration Year				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 ^P
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust	2	3	5	4	2
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	4	8	4	5	1
Causeway HSS Trust	4	0	2	0	3
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	8	5	4	4	3

Down Lisburn HSS Trust	4	0	2	5	1
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	1	4	5	0	3
Newry and Mourne HSS Trust	3	1	2	1	2
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	14	21	14	16	14
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	4	3	1	0	3
Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust	7	7	4	5	5
United Hospitals Group HSS Trust	8	0	5	3	4
Other ²	9	14	15	13	7
Total	68	66	63	56	48

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code I60.

² 'Other' place of death includes deaths in Nursing Homes or in the home.

^P Provisional data.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Bonfire Costs

Mr Daithí McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in relation to call-outs associated with 11 July bonfires, in each of the last four years. (AQW 93/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The costs are shown in the table below:

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007
Cost	£5,122	£10,045	£12,193	£7,860

The Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) calculates the costs on the basis of the number of fire appliance hours expended attending bonfire-related fires. These were 43, 86, 108 and 67 respectively for the years in question.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for treatment in each Accident and

Emergency department in Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years. (AQW 139/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the average time that patients wait for treatment in Accident and Emergency departments is not collected centrally.

A new electronic system is currently being developed which will have the capability to provide this information. It is now estimated that unvalidated data on accident and emergency waiting times should be available from this new system by the end of November 2007.

A target has been set to ensure that 95% of patients are treated and discharged, or admitted to a ward, within four hours of arrival at A&E by March 2008. Progress towards this target is being closely monitored and my Department is supporting Trusts through a programme of reform and modernisation.

Complaints against GPs

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of complaints that were made by patients against GPs; (ii) the number, in total and as a percentage, of these that were upheld, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 141/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information is not available in the format requested. The following represents the number of complaints made by patients against GPs in each of the last five years across HSS Boards.

	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007 ²
Total	588	562	639	707	664
EHSSB	219	236	219	294	267
NHSSB	135	134	160	153	149
SHSSB	74	89	106	120	124
WHSSB	160	103	154*	140*	124*

Source: Information Analysis Branch

* Figures received from WHSSB

Compensation to Patients

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount that was paid out in compensation to patients, broken down by each hospital in Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years. (AQW 142/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is not readily available by hospital, but is available by Legacy Trust and is set out in the table below.

AMOUNTS PAID OUT TO SUCCESSFUL CLAIMANTS IN RESPECT OF CLAIMS FOR COMPENSATION FOR MEDICAL NEGLIGENCE MADE AGAINST EACH OF THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES TRUSTS IN EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS

HSS Trust	2005/06 £000	2004/05 £000	2003/04 £000	2002/03 £000	2001/02 £000
Altnagelvin Hospitals	305	358	214	205	416
Armagh and Dungannon	45	132	144	147	3
Belfast City Hospital	728	548	594	797	1,526
Causeway	364	1,009	414	192	472
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	72	0	0	0	0
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	144	2,546	559	55	520
Down Lisburn	1,652	492	504	155	161
Foyle	0	10	7	3	0
Green Park Healthcare	117	37	112	2	57
Homefirst Community	6	0	0	0	0
Mater Hospital	93	61	179	279	47
Newry & Mourne	116	27	193	332	41
NI Ambulance Service	0	0	0	0	0
North & West Belfast	21	0	46	0	0
Royal Group of Hospitals & Dental Hospital	1,364	733	2,249	1,090	508
South & East Belfast	309	0	667	30	16
Sperrin Lakeland	492	75	36	122	41
Ulster Community & Hospitals	616	279	710	184	194
United Hospitals	1,187	940	115	50	652

The five new Health and Social Care Trusts came into operation on 1 April 2007. Since the information relates to the years 2001/02 – 2005/06, the answer has been given in relation to the nineteen Health and Social Services Trusts which existed prior to that. Information for 2006-07 is not yet available.

Biofuel Health Risks

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the health risks associated with the gases

released when biofuels burn; and if he will make a statement on his assessment, from a carcinogenic perspective, of the combustion gases produced by biofuels and the gases contained in carbon dioxide.
(AQW 169/08)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has not made an assessment of potential health risks associated with emissions from the burning of biofuels.

MRSA

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to detail the number of outbreaks of MRSA, broken down by Health and Social Services Board area; and (ii) to list the exact location of each incidence of MRSA, for each of the last three years.
(AQW 180/08)

Mr McGimpsey:

- (i) Information on the number of outbreaks of MRSA, broken down by Health and Social Services Board area for each of the last three years for which information is available is given in the table below. Due to the complexities involved in defining an MRSA outbreak, MRSA outbreaks are not an appropriate measure to use to monitor the incidence or prevalence of MRSA infection.

Health Board	2004	2005	2006
Eastern	0	0	0
Northern	2	2	1
Southern	0	1	0
Western	0	0	1

Source: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC (NI)).

Notes: Outbreaks can generally be defined as: two or more cases associated in time and/or place or where the observed number of cases exceeds that which would be expected in a specified period and place or other definitions may be used depending on the circumstances.

- (ii) the exact location of each incidence of MRSA are not available centrally but information is available on the number of patient episodes of MRSA bacteraemia reported by year and Trust and where possible by hospital over the last three years. These are detailed in the table below.

Trust	Hospital	Calendar Year		
		2004	2005	2006
Altnagelvin Hospitals	Altnagelvin Area Hospital	22	21	11
	Waterside Hospital (Ward 5)	0	0	0

Trust	Hospital	Calendar Year		
		2004	2005	2006
Belfast City Hospitals	Belfast City	47	39	32
	NICCO (Belvoir Park)		0	0
Causeway	Causeway Hospital	9	10	9
	Dalriada Hospital		0	0
	Robinson Memorial Hospital		0	0
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	Craigavon Area Hospital	22	19	16
	Lurgan Hospital	2	1	3
	South Tyrone Hospital	0	0	0
Down Lisburn	Downe Hospital	14	4	2
	Lagan Valley Hospital	3	3	3
Greenpark	Forster Green Hospital	2	3	5
	Musgrave Park Hospital			
Mater	Mater Infirmorum Hospital	9	23	29
Newry & Mourne	Daisy Hill Hospital	5	3	3
Royal Group of Hospitals	RBHSC	1	1	49
	Royal Jubilee	2	2	
	Royal Victoria Hospital	41	46	
Sperrin Lakeland	Erne Hospital	3	2	3
	Tyrone County Hospital	13	4	6
Ulster Community & Hospitals	Ards Hospital	0	0	0
	Bangor Hospital	0	0	0
	Ulster Hospital	34	25	37
United Hospitals	Antrim Area Hospital	41	37	27
	Braid Valley Hospital			1
	Mid Ulster Hospital			2
	Moyle Hospital			0
	Whiteabbey Hospital			7
Northern Ireland Total		270	243	245

Source: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC (NI)).

Targets have been set for the reduction of healthcare associated infections (HCAIs) including MRSA. The target sets a 10% reduction by 31 March 2009 in

numbers of cases of Staphylococcus aureus bacteraemias (inclusive of both MRSA and MSSA).

MRSA

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of MRSA that have been recorded in each of Northern Ireland's hospitals, in each of the last three years. (AQW 184/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of patient episodes of MRSA bacteraemia reported by year and Trust and where possible by hospital over the last three years are detailed in the table below.

Trust	Hospital	Calendar Year		
		2004	2005	2006
Altnagelvin Hospitals	Altnagelvin Area Hospital	22	21	11
	Waterside Hospital (Ward 5)	0	0	0
Belfast City Hospitals	Belfast City	47	39	32
	NICCO (Belvoir Park)		0	0
Causeway	Causeway Hospital	9	10	9
	Dalriada Hospital		0	0
	Robinson Memorial Hospital		0	0
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	Craigavon Area Hospital	22	19	16
	Lurgan Hospital	2	1	3
	South Tyrone Hospital	0	0	0
Down Lisburn	Downe Hospital	14	4	2
	Lagan Valley Hospital	3	3	3
Greenpark	Forster Green Hospital	2	3	5
	Musgrave Park Hospital			
Mater	Mater Infirmorum Hospital	9	23	29
Newry & Mourne	Daisy Hill Hospital	5	3	3
Royal Group of Hospitals	RBHSC	1	1	49
	Royal Jubilee	2	2	
	Royal Victoria Hospital	41	46	

Trust	Hospital	Calendar Year		
		2004	2005	2006
Sperrin Lakeland	Erne Hospital	3	2	3
	Tyrone County Hospital	13	4	6
Ulster Community & Hospitals	Ards Hospital	0	0	0
	Bangor Hospital	0	0	0
	Ulster Hospital	34	25	37
United Hospitals	Antrim Area Hospital	41	37	27
	Braid Valley Hospital			1
	Mid Ulster Hospital			2
	Moyle Hospital			0
	Whiteabbey Hospital			7
Northern Ireland Total		270	243	245

Source: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC (NI)).

Targets have been set for the reduction of healthcare associated infections (HCAIs) including MRSA. The target sets a 10% reduction by 31 March 2009 in numbers of cases of Staphylococcus aureus bacteraemias (inclusive of both MRSA and MSSA).

Community Care Packages

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people currently awaiting community care packages in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 185/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Information is not available on the number of people awaiting community care packages by areas smaller than Health & Social Services Trust (AQW 186/08). However, information is available on the number of people awaiting community care packages by Health & Social Care Trust, in respect of quarter ending 31 March 2007, the latest date for which such information is available.

At 31 March 2007, 188 people were waiting for community care packages in South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust, of which 137 were waiting in the community and 51 in an acute setting. (AQW 185/08).

Community Care Packages

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people currently awaiting community care packages

in the Comber/Ballygowan/Killinchy area.
(AQW 186/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Information is not available on the number of people awaiting community care packages by areas smaller than Health & Social Services Trust (AQW 186/08). However, information is available on the number of people awaiting community care packages by Health & Social Care Trust, in respect of quarter ending 31 March 2007, the latest date for which such information is available.

At 31 March 2007, 188 people were waiting for community care packages in South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust, of which 137 were waiting in the community and 51 in an acute setting. (AQW 185/08).

Clostridium Difficile

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of clostridium difficile that have been recorded in each hospital in Northern Ireland, in each of the last three years. (AQW 187/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of episodes of clostridium difficile that have been recorded in each hospital in Northern Ireland, in each of the last three years is not available.

The number of episodes of clostridium difficile for patients aged 65 years and over that have been recorded in each Health Trust and where possible by hospital in Northern Ireland, in each of the last two years is available and is presented in the table below.

Trust	Hospital	2005*	2006
Altnagelvin Hospitals	Altnagelvin Area Hospital	72	85
	Waterside Hospital (Ward 5)	2	0
Belfast City Hospitals	Belfast City	158	163
	NICCO (Belvoir Park)	7	4
Causeway	Causeway Hospital	52	50
	Dalriada Hospital	0	0
	Robinson Memorial Hospital	6	1
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	Craigavon Area Hospital	129	87
	Lurgan Hospital	43	20
	South Tyrone Hospital	12	9
Down Lisburn	Downe Hospital	16	17
	Lagan Valley Hospital	37	22

Trust	Hospital	2005*	2006
Greenpark	Forster Green Hospital	0	0
	Musgrave Park Hospital	12	22
Mater	Mater Infirmorum Hospital	32	88
Newry & Mourne	Daisy Hill Hospital	31	18
Royal Group of Hospitals	Royal Victoria Hospital	109	108
Sperrin Lakeland	Erne Hospital	4	17
	Tyrone County Hospital	8	8
Ulster Community & Hospitals	Ards Hospital	0	0
	Bangor Hospital	1	0
	Ulster Hospital	181	213
United Hospitals	Antrim Area Hospital	59	83
	Braid Valley Hospital	0	1
	Mid Ulster Hospital	37	19
	Moyle Hospital	0	0
	Whiteabbey Hospital	24	29
Northern Ireland Total		1032	1064

Source: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC (NI)).

Notes: laboratory testing in Northern Ireland came into line over the course of 2005. 2006 is the first complete calendar year with all laboratories using the same methods

Targets have been set for the reduction of healthcare associated infections (HCAIs) including Clostridium difficile. The target sets a 20% reduction by 31 March 2009 in numbers of cases of Clostridium difficile in all patients.

Performance of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 101/07, if he will make a statement on his department's fortnightly monitoring of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's performance.
(AQW 193/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is required to respond to an average of 65% of life threatening (Category A) calls within eight minutes in 2007/08, improving to 70% from March 2008.

My Department meets fortnightly with NIAS to monitor progress towards the achievement of these targets, and to review the measures being put in place by NIAS to ensure they are achieved.

Since the commencement of these meetings in May 2007, performance has improved from 55% of Category A calls responded to within eight minutes to 61.8% for the month of August 2007.

I believe this focused performance management by both my Department and NIAS will ensure the continued improvement in performance and achievement of the targets.

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service: Benchmarking

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 101/07, what improvements the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has shown since it was benchmarked against Staffordshire Ambulance Service. (AQW 194/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I refer to my answer to AQW 193/08 which details the recent improvement in the performance of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS).

Since the benchmarking exercise, NIAS has worked with my Department in a number of initiatives to improve its performance such as tactical deployment, additional deployment locations, better 999 call prioritisation and the modernisation of communications and control technology.

Injuries Received in Hospital

Mr Mervyn Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) males; and (ii) females, were treated in each hospital in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years, for injuries received while they were in (a) an out-patient clinic; (b) Accident and Emergency; (c) a male general ward; (d) a female general ward; (e) a mixed general ward; (f) a male mental health ward; (g) a female mental health ward; and (h) a mixed mental health ward. (AQW 209/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Information on the number of patients who were treated in hospital for an injury received whilst in an out-patient clinic, Accident & Emergency Department, general ward or mental health ward, in each of the last five years is not available.

Treatment of Severe Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will consider providing, on the NHS, the use of the drug natalizumab

(Tysabri) for the treatment of severe relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis. (AQW 226/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Additional funding of £24 million has been allocated in 2006-07 and 2007-08 for specialist hospital drugs. It is for Health and Social Services Boards, as commissioners of services, to prioritise how funding is used, taking into account local circumstances, the strategic objectives established for the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector and demands and pressures generally for access to a wide range of new effective drug therapies.

On 22 August 2007, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) published guidance recommending natalizumab as a treatment option for people with rapidly evolving severe relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. All guidance published by NICE from 1 July 2006 is reviewed locally for its applicability to Northern Ireland and my Department is in the process of considering the guidance on natalizumab. The Department expects to issue advice on the status of the guidance in Northern Ireland, and its implementation, later this year.

Satellite Radiation Unit for the North-West

Mr Brian Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will meet with Co-operating for Cancer Care North West to discuss the establishment of a cross-border satellite radiation unit for the North West. (AQW 235/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Unfortunately due to demands on my diary it will not be possible for me to meet with Co-operating for Cancer Care North West (CCCNW). However, Noelle Duddy Spokesperson for CCC (NW) has written to me on the issue of cross border radiation services and I am aware of her views.

I believe that the possibilities for cross border cooperation and collaboration on health issues which have the potential to deliver real benefits for patients in both jurisdictions should be explored.

My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Children, is currently assessing the potential for further collaboration and co-operation to improve the health of the population and the provision of health services for people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Also I intend to meet with the Minister for Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland, Mary Harney, in the near future and I expect that cross border cooperation across a range of health issues, including radiotherapy, will feature strongly in those discussions.

Proposed Health Village in Banbridge

Mr John O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the delay in completing the proposed health village on the site of the former Banbridge Hospital, taking into account assurances provided to Banbridge District Council by senior health service officials in 2004 that this scheme was ranked as the most significant for the then Craigavon and Banbridge Trust area; and how he will intervene to bring this project to an early completion.

(AQW 238/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The Banbridge community health village has been under ongoing development since 2004. The final element, a new Health and Care Centre and Learning Disability Day Centre, on this site is included in Phase 1A of the Southern Health and Care Trust's Primary and Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) Programme and has been recommended by the Trust as high priority within the PCCI Programme. The project business case is currently being assessed by the Department and it is expected this will be completed by December 2007, thus enabling decisions on approval to be then taken. This would then allow the project to progress to the procurement stage. This will, of course, be subject to the availability of the requisite capital and revenue resources that remain to be confirmed in the current Comprehensive Spending Review and associated review of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Expenditure by HSS Boards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total amount spent by each of the Health and Social Services Boards, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 258/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested is set out in the tables below.

TOTAL AMOUNTS SPENT BY EACH OF THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARDS IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE FINANCIAL YEARS

Health & Social Services Board	2006/07 £000	2005/06 £000	2004/05 £000
Northern Board (Revenue expenditure)	790,307	727,617	681,528
Northern Board (Capital expenditure)	941	1,139	614
Total	791,248	728,756	682,142

Health & Social Services Board	2006/07 £000	2005/06 £000	2004/05 £000
Southern Board (Revenue expenditure)	595,925	554,556	517,642
Southern Board (Capital expenditure)	1,029	906	495
Total	596,954	555,462	518,137

Health & Social Services Board	2006/07 £000	2005/06 £000	2004/05 £000
Eastern Board (Revenue expenditure)	1,379,493	1,300,051	1,224,609
Eastern Board (Capital expenditure)	1,955	2,010	1,318
Total	1,381,448	1,302,061	1,225,927

Health & Social Services Board	2006/07 £000	2005/06 £000	2004/05 £000
Western Board (Revenue expenditure)	561,217	513,089	480,697
Western Board (Capital expenditure)	924	938	632
Total	562,141	514,027	481,329

The figures above are taken from the 'Total Revenue Expenditure' line and the 'Total Capital Expenditure' line from each Board's annual accounts.

Spending on Artwork

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the highest expenditure on a single piece of art by each Health and Social Services Board, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 259/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The information requested in relation to the healthcare sector is not held centrally. The review, which I announced on 24 August 2007, will look at the pattern of spending on artwork in healthcare facilities. In particular, I have asked that clear guidance is produced on how resources should be found for works of art.

Disability Access to Government Buildings

Mr David Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on disability access to buildings for which his department is responsible.

(AQW 329/08)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department does not have responsibility for any Government buildings.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Roads Service's Moratorium on Expenditure

Mr Patsy McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the extent and duration of the Roads Service's moratorium on expenditure, broken down by divisional office. (AQW 89/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that there is currently a £36million pressure on its capital budget and that a contingency plan, which includes the delay of some capital schemes, is in place pending the outcome of the October Public Expenditure Monitoring Round.

As capital expenditure is managed centrally by Roads Service Headquarters, it is not possible to provide a breakdown by Divisional Office.

A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the start date for commencement of the construction of the A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor. (AQW 101/08)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the tendering process is progressing satisfactorily with tenders returned on 13 September 2007. Subject to the successful conclusion of tendering procedures it is anticipated that the contract will be awarded during November 2007 and that construction work will commence shortly thereafter.

Derry/Londonderry to Belfast Commute

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an estimate of the number of people commuting from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast by road, on a daily basis. (AQW 106/08)

Mr Murphy: In relation to questions AQW 106/08 and AQW 110/08, my Department does not hold information on the number of commuters (i.e. drivers and passengers) travelling daily by car from Derry to Belfast. I can advise, however, that Translink has estimated the numbers of persons travelling by bus/train during the morning peak period at 450 and 218 respectively.

In relation to question AQW 107/08, the most recent journey time information available for the A6/M2

Derry to Belfast route during the morning peak period is as follows:

Mode of Transport	Average Time
Car	1 Hour 40 Minutes
Bus	2 Hours

Derry/Londonderry to Belfast Commute

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to give typical journey times for people commuting by road between Derry/Londonderry and Belfast, where the traveller works normal office hours. (AQW 107/08)

Mr Murphy: In relation to questions AQW 106/08 and AQW 110/08, my Department does not hold information on the number of commuters (i.e. drivers and passengers) travelling daily by car from Derry to Belfast. I can advise, however, that Translink has estimated the numbers of persons travelling by bus/train during the morning peak period at 450 and 218 respectively.

In relation to question AQW 107/08, the most recent journey time information available for the A6/M2 Derry to Belfast route during the morning peak period is as follows:

Mode of Transport	Average Time
Car	1 Hour 40 Minutes
Bus	2 Hours

Derry/Londonderry to Belfast Commute

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an estimate of the number of people who commute from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast, on a daily basis. (AQW 110/08)

Mr Murphy: In relation to questions AQW 106/08 and AQW 110/08, my Department does not hold information on the number of commuters (i.e. drivers and passengers) travelling daily by car from Derry to Belfast. I can advise, however, that Translink has estimated the numbers of persons travelling by bus/train during the morning peak period at 450 and 218 respectively.

In relation to question AQW 107/08, the most recent journey time information available for the A6/M2 Derry to Belfast route during the morning peak period is as follows:

Mode of Transport	Average Time
Car	1 Hour 40 Minutes
Bus	2 Hours

Derry/Londonderry to Letterkenny Rail Link

Mr Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to the feasibility of establishing a cross-border rail link between Derry/Londonderry and Letterkenny; and to the availability of additional funding from the European Union, to allow such a project to take place.

(AQW 127/08)

Mr Murphy: There are no plans to establish a cross border rail link between Derry and Letterkenny and consequently no application for additional funding from the European Union has been made to allow such a project to take place.

I would of course be happy to consider any feasibility study on such a line but would stress that my immediate priority is to secure the appropriate level of funding for rail services in the North.

Former Ministry of Defence Sites

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will indicate whether or not his department will adopt the water, sewerage and road infrastructure on former Ministry of Defence sites, to ensure that these sites remain viable for development.

(AQW 134/08)

Mr Murphy: Following the introduction of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order, 2006, the Department for Regional Development does not have the power to adopt the water and sewerage infrastructure. This is now a matter for Northern Ireland Water.

In relation to the road infrastructure, my Department's Roads service advises that sites can be considered for adoption under Article 9 of the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 as amended, where:

- The majority of landowners or occupiers so request it;
- The roads or streets are first brought up to adoption standard, normally at the expense of the landowners or occupiers; and

- The Department is of the opinion that the street should become a public road.

Double-Cut Trimming Programme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to reintroduce a double-cut trimming programme on rural roads; and if he will make a statement on the current single-cut policy.

(AQW 143/08)

Mr Murphy: Firstly I should explain that the objective of my Department's Roads Service, in cutting grass on its lands, is to prevent overgrowth onto carriageways and footway surfaces and the obstruction of sightlines and traffic signs. Grass cutting operations are therefore carried out for road safety reasons and not for cosmetic or amenity purposes. This was confirmed following a review of grass cutting policy, undertaken in 2002, following a request by the former Assembly's DRD Committee.

The present policy provides for two cuts per year in rural areas and five cuts in urban areas. The area to be cut is one swathe width (1.2m), with the complete area required for sightlines to be cut as necessary. This maintains the balance between road safety and environmental protection.

I am sure you will appreciate that there are many demands on the Roads Service budget, and that any additional amount spent on grass cutting and verge maintenance, could result in the reduction of funding on other essential areas, many of which are related to road safety measures. At present Roads Service has no plans to increase the width of grass cutting.

Pedestrian Crossing in Dundrum

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider the provision of a pedestrian crossing at Main Street, Dundrum, Co. Down.

(AQW 165/08)

Mr Murphy: An assessment for the provision of a pedestrian crossing facility in Dundrum village was carried out by my Department's Roads Service in February 2007. It was concluded that the criteria for the provision of such a crossing were not met at that time. I would refer the Member to my answer to his earlier Question on the criteria for the provision of pedestrian crossings (AQW 59/07), for further information.

Roads Service will, however, carry out a further survey before the end of September 2007, to determine if there has been any change in vehicle flows or pedestrian activity.

I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager to write to you when the results of the additional assessment are known.

Accident Rate on the Mountstewart Road, Newtownards

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to address the continuing accident rate on the Mountstewart Road, Newtownards, taking into account the assurances given that work would be done. (AQW 167/08)

Mr Murphy: While I am aware that there is some evidence of collisions occurring on the Mountstewart Road, particularly at a specific bend close to house number 24, not all of these collisions are being reported to the PSNI. Consequently, it is difficult for my Department's Roads Service to determine the cause of the problem.

However, work has recently been carried out to enhance the signage at the bend in an effort to increase drivers' awareness.

It is also Roads Service's intention to carry out improvements works at this location. However, I should point out that financial pressures are such that it is necessary to prioritise work on the trunk road network. I can assure you that Roads Service remains committed to this scheme and it is intended that it will proceed whenever finance becomes available.

Pedestrian Crossings in Newcastle, County Down

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider the provision of pedestrian crossings at Dundrum Road, Castlewellan Road, and Shimna Road in Newcastle, Co. Down. (AQW 174/08)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the Dundrum Road in Newcastle meets the criteria for the provision of a pedestrian crossing. Subject to the availability of finance and pending the identification of a suitable location, Roads Service intends to provide such a facility in the 2008/09 financial year.

Both the Castlewellan Road and the Shimna Road in Newcastle have been assessed for the provision of a pedestrian crossing, but neither currently meets the necessary criteria. However, I understand that the Tesco store in Newcastle will be relocating on the Castlewellan Road and once this happens, Roads Service will re-assess the situation.

Dual Carriageway between Randalstown and Castledawson

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the benefits of having a dual carriageway between Randalstown and Castledawson, as opposed to a single lane highway. (AQW 175/08)

Mr Murphy: The current single lane carriageway on the A6 between Randalstown and Castledawson, which forms part of the North Western Corridor linking Belfast to Derry, has numerous junctions and many private and agricultural entrances, contributing to conflicting traffic manoeuvres. This type of single lane carriageway can provide few overtaking opportunities, thus increasing the platooning effect of traffic being held up behind slow moving vehicles, resulting in driver frustration.

A dual carriageway between Randalstown and Castledawson (as opposed to single lane carriageway) will have the following benefits:

- Increased capacity to reduce the serious congestion presently experienced by drivers on this route;
- Improvement in road safety by reducing the number of junctions and eliminating all right turning and crossing traffic ;
- The separation of some strategic traffic from more local traffic, which will continue to use the existing A6; and
- Improvement and increased reliability of journey times for users of this route.

The proposed new dual carriageway will deliver improved road safety for both strategic and local road users and will facilitate further expansion of local industry.

Upgrade of the A6 between Randalstown and Castledawson

Mr Thomas Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of the project to create a dual carriageway (upgrade of the A6) between Randalstown and Castledawson; and to give the estimated completion date of this scheme. (AQW 176/08)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Roads Service have advised that the project to dual the A6 between Randalstown and Castledawson is currently estimated to cost £69.5million at 2005 prices. However, now that greater development work on the scheme has been carried out, this estimate is under review and will take account of the level of detail now known, together with inflation in construction and lands prices.

Commencement of this scheme will be dependent on the outcome of the Public Inquiry, due to be held in November 2007 and the availability of finance, with construction taking two to three years.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to convene meetings with farming organisations, district councils and other interested parties to discuss planning policy for sustainable development in the countryside, in light of Mr Justice Gillen's decision on Planning Policy Statement 14. (AQW 178/08)

Mr Murphy: The 5 July meeting of the Executive Committee agreed to undertake a review of rural planning policy. The review is being taken forward by an Inter-Departmental Group of Ministers. As a first step meetings with key stakeholders were held on 29 and 30 August which included representatives of Ulster Farmers Union, Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association, Young Farmers Clubs, and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association as well as other key interest groups. I will consider plans for further meetings after the conclusion of current Judicial Review proceedings.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which he will make a statement to the Assembly on Mr Justice Gillen's decision on Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside. (AQW 179/08)

Mr Murphy: The recent Judgement by the Courts of the Judicial Review of PPS14 found that DRD did not have the statutory authority to make draft PPS14. The Court did however give both parties one week (from 7 September) to consider if they wish to provide evidence on the issue of remedies before finalising the judgement. The Court heard this evidence on Friday 14 September when the Department were afforded a further week within which to gather additional evidence. A further hearing is scheduled for 27 September when Mr Justice Gillen will make his final decision.

Winter Gritting in Leitrim, County Down

Mr Willie Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider including the village of Leitrim, Co. Down in the winter gritting schedule. (AQW 181/08)

Mr Murphy: The hamlet of Leitrim lies on the C323, close to Castlewellan. My Department's Roads

Service will arrange for a traffic survey to be carried out to ascertain whether this route meets the criteria for inclusion in the schedule for routine salting.

This will be undertaken at the earliest opportunity and I will write to you when the results of the assessment are known.

A37 Limavady to Coleraine Road

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the current position in regard to the construction of the crawler lane on the A37 Limavady to Coleraine Road. (AQW 188/08)

Mr Murphy: The Gortcorbies Climbing Lane scheme on the A37 Limavady to Coleraine Road, is included in a programme of widened single carriageways to improve overtaking on parts of the Regional Strategic Transport Network, where traffic flows do not justify the construction of dual carriageways.

Detailed design of this scheme is well advanced. However, construction cannot start until environmental concerns about the disposal of the substantial volume of surplus material arising from the scheme have been resolved and funding is available.

Portadown to Belfast Rail Fares

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of all rail fares between Portadown and Belfast, in each of the last three years. (AQW 195/08)

Mr Murphy: The cost of rail travel between Portadown and Belfast over the last three years is set out in the table below.

	Single Fare(£)	% Change from Previous Year	Return Fare(£)	% Change from Previous Year
April 2005	£5.50		£9.80	
April 2006	£6.00	+9.1%	£11.00	+12.2%
April 2007	£5.90	-1.7%	£10.00	-9.1%

	Weekly Fare(£)	% Change from Previous Year	Monthly Fare(£)	% Change from Previous Year
April 2005	£36.00		£128.00	
April 2006	£41.00	+13.9%	£145.00	+13.3%
April 2007	£41.00	0%	£145.00	0%

Fares are expressed in actual terms. Allowing for the effects of inflation, the decision to hold some fares

constant and to reduce others in 2007 has actually resulted in real fares decreases larger than the percentages shown.

Major Road Schemes and Completion Dates

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQO 226/07, what measures have been put in place to decrease the number of major road schemes that exceed their expected completion date. (AQW 202/08)

Mr Murphy: Firstly, in relation to AQW 202/08, the table below details the amount of time that each of the subject schemes listed exceeded their original expected completion dates. The table also provides a brief explanation as to the cause of the overrun in each of the schemes.

Scheme	Explanation For Delay	Overrun
A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill	Archaeological finds, unforeseen ground conditions and delays in utility service diversions.	8 months
A5 Omagh Throughpass - Stage 3	Contractual Difficulties	5 months
Foyle Bridge, Derry – Strengthening/ painting/ resurfacing	A shortage in high quality steel caused delays in procuring raw materials for strengthening works, which were completed in December 2004. This had a subsequent effect on painting, which could not commence until strengthening was complete, and which was suspended over the winter period to ensure optimal conditions for application. To minimise traffic delays resurfacing was confined to the July/August period and as strengthening was not complete by July 2004 this work was postponed until July/ August 2005.	10 months
A1 Underpass at Hillsborough Road junction, Dromore	An authorised contract extension of 4 weeks was granted to accommodate additional works comprising extra street lighting and installation of a safety fence.	5 weeks
Bann River Bridge, Portadown - strengthening	Additional works comprising extra street lighting and flood lighting to the structure, plus work to adjoining pleasure gardens. Note: 3 lanes over the bridge, which replicated the layout prior to the scheme, were opened to traffic a week before the original contract completion date at the end of November 05 (with the fourth lane opened mid January 06)	7 weeks

Scheme	Explanation For Delay	Overrun
A8 Belfast to Larne Road - dual carriageway from Doagh Road to Hillhead Road	BT + NIE Utility works and adverse weather conditions led to an authorised contract extension of 12 weeks.	3 months
M1 Blacks Road to Stockmans Lane	Investigation and repair of an embankment slip and the enhancement of temporary traffic management arrangements were authorised through a contract extension of 4 weeks.	4 weeks

In relation to AQW 203/08 Roads Service officials continue to set deliberately challenging targets so that road users will derive maximum benefit from major road schemes as soon as possible.

In order to encourage early completion of the works, various activities are carried out in advance of the main contract to avoid overrun of programme timescales.

These include:

- detailed site investigation works carried out by competent geotechnical consultants;
- examination of records from the Department of the Environment's Environment & Heritage Service to investigate any known areas that may be of archaeological interest;
- advanced archaeological investigation contracts have been procured to resolve foreseen archaeological issues where considered necessary;
- Utility Authorities are trawled and existing services charted, with any alterations agreed and programmed into the works;
- procurement processes and guidelines are in place to ensure the selection of appropriately skilled Contractors and use of the most appropriate procurement methods; and
- risk management regimes to mitigate against other unforeseen events.

That said there are legitimate contractual reasons why schemes exceed their original expected completion dates, and which may be permissible under the terms of the contracts. For example, unforeseen ground conditions; adverse weather conditions; archaeological discoveries; and additional works which have accrued additional benefits to road users.

Major Road Schemes and Completion Dates

Mr Stephen Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQO 226/07, to detail the amount of time by which each of the major road schemes (i) A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill; (ii) A5 Omagh Thoroughpass - Stage 3;

(iii) strengthening of the Foyle Bridge; (iv) A1 underpass at Hillsborough Road junction, Dromore; (v) strengthening of the Bann River Bridge, Portadown; (vi) A8 Belfast to Larne Road - dual carriageway from Doagh Road to Hillhead Road; and (vii) M1 Blacks Road to Stockmans Lane, have exceeded their expected date of completion. (AQW 203/08)

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That said there are legitimate contractual reasons why schemes exceed their original expected completion dates, and which may be permissible under the terms of the contracts. For example, unforeseen ground conditions; adverse weather conditions; archaeological discoveries; and additional works which have accrued additional benefits to road users.

Lead Water Supply Pipes

Mr George Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the funding that will be made available for the removal of all lead water supply pipes to domestic residences. (AQW 205/08)

Mr Murphy: It is recognised that some properties built before 1970 may be connected to the public water mains by a lead service pipe. The part of the service pipe from the customer's tap to the property boundary, which is known as the supply pipe, is the responsibility of the customer while responsibility for the part of the

pipe from the property boundary to the water main, which is known as the communication pipe, rests with Northern Ireland Water. Under its current policy, Northern Ireland Water will, at the request of a customer, replace the communication pipe free of charge provided that the customer replaces the supply pipe.

In each of the last 3 years Northern Ireland Water, and its predecessor DRD Water Service, has replaced approximately 1,000 lead communication pipes at a cost of £500,000 per year. It is expected that a similar amount will be spent in the current financial year.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Houses Sold by the NIHE in Ards

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development if she will identify all land and houses sold by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Ards area, and the prices received from such sales, in the last three years. (AQW 102/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

Completed House Sales – 1 April 2004 – 31 March 2007	
Total number of completed house sales	261
Total discounted sales value	£10.5m

Completed Flat sales – 1 April 2004 – 31 March 2007	
Total number of completed flat sales	31
Total discounted sales value	£743,000

Sales of Vacant properties – 1 April 2004 – 31 March 2007	
Total number of sales of vacant properties	10
Total sales value (no discount)	£1,681,000

Land sales – 1 April 2004 – 31 March 2007	
6 plots of land were sold at a cost of £573,000	

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Waiting List: Saintfield

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list, who have identified Saintfield as one of their areas of choice. (AQW 103/08)

Ms Ritchie: Ninety six applicants have indicated Saintfield as a 1st or 2nd preference area for housing. Sixty of these have more than 30 points and are therefore considered to be housing stress.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Waiting List: Comber

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list, who have identified Comber as one of their areas of choice. (AQW 104/08)

Ms Ritchie: Two hundred and eighty five applicants have indicated Comber as a 1st or 2nd preference area for housing. One hundred and eighty three of these have more than 30 points and are therefore considered to be in housing stress.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Waiting List: Comber

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list who have identified Comber as one of their areas of choice, and who currently reside in Comber. (AQW 105/08)

Ms Ritchie: NIHE records show that, at 31 March 2007, a total of 139 applicants (82 of which are in housing stress) with an address of origin in Comber, had Comber as one of their areas of choice.

Properties Owned by the NIHE in Comber

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties currently owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Comber area. (AQW 138/08)

Ms Ritchie: In Comber the Northern Ireland Housing Executive owns 438 dwellings, 757 former NIHE properties having been sold to sitting tenants.

Properties Owned by the NIHE in Saintfield

Mr Simon Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties that are currently owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Saintfield area. (AQW 140/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive currently owns 111 dwellings in Saintfield, 206 former NIHE properties having been sold to sitting tenants.

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