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Assembly

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(Hansard)

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| | Mr Ian Paisley Jnr |

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 5 November 2007

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 15 October 2007, the Assembly debated a motion concerning the process for the creation of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. During that debate, a DUP Member made a contribution during which she named at least 12 individuals. At the time, I raised a point of order with the Deputy Speaker to seek a ruling as to whether it was in order for those comments to be made. The Deputy Speaker said that that was in order because Assembly Members enjoy limited privilege.

I ask that that matter be given further consideration. In my view, and in the view of many people and organisations in the human-rights community, it was not in order for those comments to be made, and it is a breach of the limited privilege that Members enjoy to make such comments in respect of people who have no opportunity to reply. Mr Deputy Speaker, I urge you and your colleagues to consider this matter further.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The issues of the authority and protection of the House in respect of defamation have been raised with the Speaker, who has received correspondence on this matter. The Speaker will make a further statement at a later date.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Speaker to be called on to return to a matter on which he has already decided?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is a separate issue, Dr Paisley. The Speaker will return to the matter because of the correspondence that he has received from a number of different quarters. The Speaker will make a further statement.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

October Monitoring Outcome

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on public expenditure in 2007-08 following the October monitoring round.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): With permission, I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Executive on public spending in 2007-08, following the conclusion of the October monitoring round. As Members will be aware, the monitoring process exists to help the Executive to make the most of the resources at their disposal.

A key element of that is the identification, by Departments, of resources allocated in previous budgets, which, for a variety of reasons, will not be spent in this financial year.

The normal approach in the monitoring process is to reallocate such sums to pressure points identified by Departments. It is not surprising that such flexibility and pressures emerge during the course of a financial year, in view of the fact that budgets are determined a considerable period in advance of the actual spend being incurred, and when a range of forecasts and assumptions have underpinned the position. In addition, unforeseen issues emerge; for instance, the recent incidents of flooding, which, I am sure that Members will agree, could not have been anticipated by those setting budgets for the current financial year.

In my view, this approach to in-year monitoring is the sensible and pragmatic way to deal with the uncertainty that is inherent when setting budgets. However, as Members will be aware, following my statement on the June monitoring round, our position in this financial year is different given that we have inherited it from our direct rule predecessors.

The key issue is that the direct rule team adopted an aggressive approach to overcommitting budgets, which meant that allocations in the budget process were higher than would otherwise have been the case. However, the corollary of that is a significant reduction in the level of in-year flexibility, and, as Members will be aware, the Executive were unable to make any additional allocations to Departments in the June monitoring round, notwithstanding that Departments had identified around £11 million in reduced requirements.

I have to report to the Assembly that that inherited overcommitment position pervades the in-year financial position. However, as a consequence of the steps that we took in the June monitoring round, and through our ongoing work with Departments, the Executive are in a position to make some reallocations to Departments. I will say a little more about those shortly.

Reduced requirements declared by Departments in this monitoring round amount to £60.2 million for current expenditure and £42.6 million for capital investment. That level of reduced expenditure by Departments is in keeping with the levels that would be expected at this time of the year, and will go some way towards reversing the relatively low levels declared by Departments in the June monitoring round.

Many of the reduced requirements declared by Departments have arisen through a combination of a service, or function, requiring less than its existing provision, changing price assumptions, or from delays in implementing policies. However, the most notable of the reduced requirements are the £14.5 million of capital previously set aside as funding for the integrated development fund, against which no further projects have been identified, and the £15.1 million of current expenditure, which was allocated originally to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) in the current financial year in relation to a planned Government intervention to reduce electricity costs for businesses. That application was withdrawn because of difficulties encountered with the European Commission around the original proposal's state-aid implications.

A £14.5 million current expenditure easement on the second major roads PFI scheme has arisen because of a change in accounting treatment. Details of all the reduced requirements declared by Departments are set out in table 1 of my statement, which is available to Members.

Against those declarations, Departments have submitted current expenditure bids amounting to £92.2 million and capital investment bids amounting to £171.6 million. Focusing on current expenditure, despite more than £60 million of reduced requirements being declared by Departments, my analysis is that, given the ongoing need to manage the inherited overcommitment position, there is scope for only £23 million of allocations to Departments. For capital expenditure, the position is different, in that in addition to the £42.6 million reduced requirements identified by Departments, there has been a range of issues where early slippage identified by Departments has resulted in further scope for allocations at this time.

In total, there is capacity to make additional capital allocations of £71.3 million. Details of the additional allocations agreed by the Executive are set out in table 2 to my statement, which is available to Members. I do not propose to explain each item in detail. However, I shall outline some of the more significant items.

For current expenditure and capital investment, the largest allocations are to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for water and sewerage services. Additional amounts have been allocated for current expenditure and capital investment of £11.7 million and £32 million respectively. Those amounts are to

meet the agreed costs of Northern Ireland Water, which were unable to be funded in previous budget-setting exercises. That additional allocation highlights the ongoing strain that the funding of water and sewerage services from public expenditure causes for other Government services. Had those services been fully self-financed at this time, those amounts would have been available to the Executive for reinvestment in front-line public services to meet the needs of the community.

Other current expenditure allocations amount to: some £2.8 million to the Department of Education (DE) to underpin the issue of home-to-school transport; and £1.5 million to the Department of the Environment (DOE) in respect of the Executive's response to the recent flooding. That money will be paid in the form of relief to district councils. Other notable current expenditure items relate to internal costs: £2.3 million to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for the additional costs associated with the restoration of devolution; and £3.2 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for the costs associated with the ongoing extensive Civil Service-wide reform programme.

The Executive have agreed an additional capital investment allocation of some £20.4 million to the Department for Social Development for social housing. That allocation underpins the comments that I made when I launched the draft Budget about the importance of that issue and the need to find sufficient funds, where available, for that necessary and important public service.

Other significant capital allocations are: £10.7 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel, which is linked to the Civil Service reform programme; and £8 million to the Department for Regional Development for the purchase of land in connection with two separate road schemes. Although that land is not needed for immediate use, the opportunity has now arisen to purchase it. Given the ongoing significant inflation associated with the purchase of land, the Executive have concluded that it makes sense to make use of this opportunity and purchase the land at this time rather than at a future time when the land may have been developed and exposed to a further period of significant inflationary growth and, therefore, a higher cost to the Executive.

There will be a further opportunity to review the in-year position in December. That may provide further scope to consider any remaining pressures that Departments still face. However, I stress that that is subject to all Departments undertaking a thorough review of their in-year requirements, with the early identification of all slippages or potential underspends for current expenditure and capital investment. This necessary and fundamental requirement of the in-year monitoring process will allow us to make the best use

of the resources at our disposal and maximise the level of spend on public services in a time of constrained public expenditure.

I highlight the difficulties that the inherited overcommitment position is causing us. However, in looking to the future, I highlight the position set out in my recent draft Budget statement, where I have initiated a phased reduction of the overcommitment position over the next three years. I am confident that that position, aligned with our ongoing work to improve the level and quality of financial management across all Departments, will pay dividends in better departmental financial performances at all levels. I commend the October monitoring position to the Assembly.

12.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement; it demonstrates the ongoing process whereby the Assembly is inserting itself more and more in relation to the management of its available resources. I commend the statement as very clear evidence of that.

In his statement on the June monitoring round, the Minister expressed concern that only £11 million had been declared in reduced requirements at that time, against a previous pattern of much higher figures — of the order of £30 million or £40 million. At that time, the Minister emphasised the need for Departments to declare all reductions in September. Subsequently, the September monitoring round was delayed. Is the Minister now content that all available reduced requirements have been declared?

In that same statement in June, the Minister said that last year's underspend on priority funding packages would be reallocated this time. Will the Minister comment further on that reallocation?

Mr P Robinson: We did put off making any announcements in June because there were not sufficient funds to allocate and because of the overcommitments with which we were faced. We also put off the September monitoring round for those reasons, to allow more funds to accumulate. The Member asks specifically whether I am content that all Departments have declared all underspends — the honest answer is that I am not. I believe that there is still more money to be declared, and the fact that we will come round in December to more money's being declared indicates that there is a tendency within Departments to leave it as late as possible, in case they might be able to spend those resources. However, from the point of view of "Northern Ireland plc", the earlier those declarations are made, the better and more valuable the spend can be.

It is an important point, and the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee can be very helpful.

His Committee will have a role in looking not just at the amounts declared in-year, but also the out-turn in May, and will be able to judge how carefully each Department has been monitoring its spend and ask the necessary questions of those Departments — including DFP — if there is any significant underspend at the end of the year.

The Member also asked about the programme funds. Obviously, I can only reallocate money when Departments announce that they are not using it. There are two such elements in the reduced requirements: £1.4 million from the centre in respect of unallocated science and skills money, and reduced skills and science funding under DETI. Some Departments, therefore, have offered up money from the Executive programme funds. I suspect that there may be more in the December or later monitoring rounds.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for making this statement. Given that this monitoring round would usually have occurred in September, can the Minister advise Members of the timescale for the two remaining monitoring rounds? In particular, when will we have a more accurate picture of the potential underspend of the Departments and the likely requirements for end-year flexibility?

Also, given that the Minister's room for manoeuvre has clearly been limited by the level of overcommitment set by the direct rule Administration, can he give us some indication of what level of overcommitment he is planning for over the next three years?

Mr P Robinson: I did put off the September monitoring round until October, but I am planning that the two further monitoring rounds in the financial year should take place at their normal times — December and February. I hope that Departments will look seriously at their expenditure and offer up any funds that they do not believe can be used within the financial year. Again, that is a point that was raised by the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee.

Mr Storey also referred to end-year flexibility. I assume that he means automatic end-year flexibility for Departments, as was previously the case. I must point out that end-year flexibility is no longer automatic; we have to bid for end-year flexibility with the Treasury. Therefore, Departments should not assume that there will be automatic end-year flexibility, which will require more and better planning by each Department in that area of activity. As Members will know, in the draft Budget, I used end-year flexibility because there was an agreement with the Treasury, and that is already underpinning spend within the financial year. It is important that Departments do not rely on end-year flexibility, except in some very special circumstances in which it has to be so. End-year flexibility is no longer automatic.

The Member will be aware that the direct rule Administration left us with an overcommitment of £160 million in the year, which I thought was excessively high. In the three-year draft Budget, I sought to taper off that level of overcommitment. It will be reduced to £100 million in the first financial year, £80 million in the second and £60 million in the third. Members will see that under the draft Budget plan, there will a considerable reduction. It is necessary to do it in that way because Departments will have in-year pressures that cannot be predicted.

If there is not that degree of flexibility in the funding arrangements, we would be in trouble if there were a pandemic, for example, and we did not have the funds to give to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to deal with it. The flooding was another instance where we were able to free up money. It is an important part of the fiscal process that there is that flexibility, and that is why it is being reduced in the way that I have suggested.

Mr Beggs: The monitoring statement shows no significant new money. I see that the figure for the Chancellor's Budget for 2007 is -£0.6 million. Is that further admission by the Minister of Finance and Personnel of his failure to receive any significant funding package, in particular, the £1 billion package that was promised?

Mr P Robinson: The Member seems to have a fixation on that issue — he talks of nothing else. Given that he talks about it as often as he does, one would expect him to get his facts right. If he wants to compare the package that was negotiated at St Andrews, he needs something to compare it with. The trouble is that the Ulster Unionist Party got nothing by way of a package to compare it with. The outcome of this package was a very significant change in the way that the reinvestment and reform initiative was handled, which allowed us in the draft Budget to be able to propose a freeze on the regional rate, whereas his party's proposals would have resulted in a 19% increase in the regional rate. The public will have a different view of the benefit of the package, which allowed us to use £70 million to stave off the cost of water charging in this financial year. Another £30 million will be used for innovation funding.

The Member will also be aware that we have succeeded not only in getting the end-year flexibility allowances that were made by the Chancellor, but in securing a substantial increase in those end-year flexibility figures to allow us to use it, front-loaded, for the next financial year. On top of that, we now have access to asset sales. In the draft Budget, I was able to identify over £1 billion of asset sales that we will benefit from directly as part of that package. I could go on, but I do not want to further embarrass the Member.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his substantial statement. We probably all share rather contradictory points of view about that issue. On balance, we prefer that programmes operate as planned and that there does not have to be a release of funds. However, a release of funds gives flexibility to reallocations, and that is welcome.

I am sure that all sides of the House will welcome the social housing allocation of £20.4 million. Furthermore, I welcome the £10.7 million for reform of the Civil Service. Perhaps that will not attract as much public attention; however, it is a spend-to-save issue, since the benefits to the public, with regard to the quality of service of Government and the eventual gains in efficiency, are substantial.

In light of his earlier comments that end-year flexibility is by no means automatic, can the Minister give the Members confidence that the capital reallocation of £71.3 million at this stage of the year will be spent in the current financial year?

Mr P Robinson: In an ideal world, we could operate as planned; however, there is no such thing as an ideal world. Programmes will always run late; legal issues will arise, causing problems and delays; and pressure will be applied to the Executive to find funds that are not otherwise available. In-year monitoring is, therefore, required. It is not new money; it is a reallocation of resources, but in a way that ensures that the Executive use up all of their money. As the Member said, there is no automatic ability to carry money forward to the next financial year; it goes back to the clutches of the Treasury, and is released according to Treasury — not Assembly — programmes. It is, therefore, important that we get as close as possible to spending all our resource and capital in the financial year and in the best possible way.

I welcome the Member's comments on the funding allocated to housing, which should allow the building of approximately 200 new homes. I suspect that if he were to ask his colleague the Minister for Social Development the question that he asked me, she would say that she would make a very good fist of spending all the £20 million on housing in the financial year. He is, however, right — money not spent becomes an underspend under end-year flexibility, and we then have to bid to get our own money back. Far better that we spend it initially. I hope, therefore, that all the Committees will examine the funding available to their Departments, and try their best to ensure that Departments use that funding within the set time.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his statement. In his first answer to Mr McLaughlin's question, he expressed some doubt as to whether all underspends had been declared. The capital figures show that the only two significant departmental sums relate to DETI

and the Department for Social Development (DSD). DSD's figure concerns house sales, and I am sure that all of us welcome the fact that three times as much money has been put back into social housing as has been released from house sales.

However, in general, it is clear that the capital sums are different from the out-turn at the end of the last financial year, when there were significant capital underspends in some Departments. That has been the historic position over several years. Could the Minister, therefore, give us an assurance that he will ensure that the projected rounds in December and afterwards will be rather more accurate than, perhaps, are the figures today?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome Mr Ford's comments; we are on the same page about the matter. I can reallocate money only as it is given up by Departments. Having benefited considerably, as a one-time spending Minister, from the largesse of the leader of the SDLP in that respect, I know that spending Departments hold on to money for as long as they can. No Department wants to give up its allocation of money until there is absolute certainty that it cannot be spent — that is a natural human instinct. Departments must appraise more realistically what they can do.

The Member is correct; the significant sums left unspent at the end of a financial year could be allocated to functions for which Ministers are crying out for resources.

12.30 pm

It is important that we allocate those funds, and it is the Committees' job to do so. I will allocate from my end by continuing to pressure Ministers; however, Committees also have a role to play in that they will want to ensure that the money that is allocated to their Departments is spent by those Departments in the period in which it was given.

Therefore, allocation is a job for the whole Assembly and not simply for the Finance Minister. Essentially, however, each Minister will make the final decisions for his or her Department. There must be an honest appraisal of the funds, particularly as we near the December monitoring round — even the February monitoring round makes it difficult to spend that money if it is reallocated. December is the last occasion on which a reasonable stab can be made at allocating money, particularly for capital expenditure, and on which Departments can be expected to use it usefully. I therefore hope that each Department and, indeed, each Committee, takes on board the Member's message.

Mr Weir: Like other Members, I welcome the statement. Has an assessment been made of the likely amount that will be made available in the December monitoring round? Does the Minister have any views

about what the level of overcommitment should be following that allocation?

Mr P Robinson: Taking the Member's second question first, at the beginning of the financial year, the overcommitment was £160 million. Using my best judgement, I have deemed that the £90 million overspend at this point is sufficient for us to be able to allocate some funds to deal with the pressures that various Departments face, while being able to make up the remaining £90 million over the two further monitoring rounds. It would be normal for approximately £50 million to £70 million to have been given up in December. However, there is no guarantee that that is always the case — I base that judgement on past experiences. I suspect that we might want to hold back £20 million or £30 million of those funds to reduce further the overspend at that period. Who knows? I do not want the figures to be quoted back to me in December, but perhaps Departments will identify £50 million to £70 million and perhaps around £30 million will be allocated.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too thank the Minister for his statement. The Committee for Finance and Personnel was briefed on DFP's planned submission to the October monitoring round. Will the Minister comment on the outcome of DFP's bids and how that will affect his own Department's priorities?

Mr P Robinson: Members will see from the two tables that were attached to the statement that the DFP bids relate to the reform programme. Those are not unique to DFP; they cover the entire Civil Service. Therefore, each Department will benefit. DFP did not have all its bids met, but no Department ever does. It is an important element of the Executive's programme to proceed with reform in the Civil Service. It is therefore vital that we meet those bids that in turn, will help each Department to meet the reform programme and to secure greater efficiency in the Civil Service.

Mr Hamilton: Although sizeable reduced requirements have been identified, an overcommitment obviously remains. Will the Minister explain to the House why the new level of about £90 million that he has revealed from the October monitoring round is deemed appropriate at this stage in the financial year?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones. Someone has his or her phone switched on, and it is causing interference with the sound.

Mr P Robinson: At the end of the day, this is a matter of judgement, and my view — which the Executive endorsed — was that £90 million was a sufficient amount at this time. The only basis upon which the judgement was made was past experience. Certain amounts had been offered in the December and February monitoring rounds, and if we keep to the

averages of those rounds in this financial year, we should be able to pull back that £90 million.

Of course, we could have used the additional £23 million to reduce further the degree of over-commitment. However, Departments were experiencing serious pressures, so, in the knowledge that we could deal with the overcommitment position in the final two monitoring rounds, we felt it necessary to relieve some of those pressures.

Mr Kennedy: Given that there is concern in many quarters about the overall cost of government to the Northern Ireland taxpayer, can the Minister provide a more detailed breakdown of the additional £2.3 million that was awarded to OFMDFM for costs associated with the restoration of devolution? Can he confirm whether additional staff will be employed in that Department as a result of its receiving that additional money?

Mr P Robinson: I am glad that OFMDFM has been able to hold its staffing level or reduce it from the level that was experienced under the previous Executive. Staffing levels must be taken very seriously, not only in OFMDFM but in every Department. OFMDFM's considerable functions go beyond the functions of its ministerial private office; for example, it is responsible for economic policy and equality. Therefore, OFMDFM must carry out functions over and above those that it carries out on behalf of the Executive as a whole, the principal one of which is undertaken by its central freedom of information team. OFMDFM carries out functions that have no equivalent in the Prime Minister's Office or in the Department of the Taoiseach, both of which have a very set role. OFMDFM carries out departmental functions that its equivalents do not.

The additional £2.3 million is being used to build up private offices as a result of devolution. Private-office staff will be a charge set against OFMDFM, although I think that those staff will have come from other parts of the Civil Service.

The Member will note that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister gave back moneys over the course of the monitoring round, so the additional funding equates to a net increase of over £1 million.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for making a statement on behalf of the Executive. I sympathise with his having to use money to curb overcommitment — money that would otherwise have been available for significant reallocation. That remedial curb is necessary, for all the reasons that the Minister has outlined.

I correct the Minister on the reference that he made to the 19% rate increase. If he checks back, he will find that the direct rule Administration's justification for that increase had nothing to do with the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) but was for the purpose of

making it easy for incoming Ministers to proceed on water charges without there being a significant rates increase.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment understands the reasons behind some reductions. However, as Chairperson of that Committee, I ask the Minister whether he can offer some assurance that the significant reductions in selective financial assistance, land acquisition, the renewable energy budget and skills and science funding should not be read as underperformance on the part of Invest NI.

Mr P Robinson: The Member makes a good point. In many cases, it is unavoidable that those reductions occur. I do not blame any Minister for that. I far prefer that Ministers say that, for one reason or another, funds will not be used in a financial year because they can be better used. Each of the Departments has been making bids for funds to be used in different ways. It is one thing for a Department to deal with a large over-commitment when it has growth in its spend, but if it has a tight financial framework to adhere to and a large overcommitment, it is in a very difficult position indeed.

As far as the Member's apology about the 19% rate increase is concerned, I would be more convinced about that were it not for the fact that the direct rule Administration had increased the regional rate by 62% in the past five years and 37% in the past three years. That seems to have been a necessary trend, because they could not borrow from the RRI unless they kept ahead of increases in Great Britain, which were considerable over those years.

Mr McQuillan: How many claims for flood relief have been approved, and how was the figure of £1.5 million determined?

Mr P Robinson: Flood relief was an area in which the people of Northern Ireland saw the benefit of devolution. The Assembly was able to respond immediately to a crisis in the community and alleviate the hardship caused by flooding of approximately 1,160 people. The Department of the Environment was allocated £1.5 million, of which roughly £300,000 will go to district councils for implementation of the scheme.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the statement by the Minister, particularly concerning two points. Given previous delays in building social housing — which housing associations have blamed on planning delays, tendering, land acquisition and so on — is the Minister convinced that the £20.4 million in additional funding made available at this late stage can be spent by the end of the financial year?

Schools may be thrown into chaos again in two weeks because of the classroom assistants' dispute. Has the Minister of Education made any application for additional funding in this monitoring round to resolve that?

Mr P Robinson: How is it that the most awkward questions come from one's own colleagues?

The Minister for Social Development bid for the additional funds for social housing, and therefore believes that they can be spent in this financial year. We have to assume that the Minister has schemes that are ready to run, where land acquisition has already taken place and planning has already been approved. As the Member knows, if the Minister has to wait for planning permission the financial year will be over. Therefore, I suspect that the schemes identified by the Minister are ready to run.

The Minister of Education has identified a potential pressure in the classroom assistants' dispute, but — as the Member knows — that dispute has not yet been resolved. Consequently, at this stage, the Executive do not know whether the boards can deal with that on their own, whether they will need assistance from the Department, or whether the Department will need assistance from the centre. Those matters can be dealt with in the December monitoring round.

The Member provided me with another good opportunity to highlight the benefits of not over-committing and of having funds available for in-year monitoring. There are funds available to deal with any emergencies that occur; therefore, if the centre is required to deal with that dispute, it too will be dealt with in the December monitoring round.

Mr Burns: I welcome the monitoring round, especially the £20.4 million for new social housing. How much money is going into co-ownership to help young first-time buyers get on the property ladder?

Mr P Robinson: The Minister for Social Development is better suited to answer that question. However, I have found that the main issue in co-ownership is its current level, which is something that the Minister must examine. Undoubtedly, if the Minister does do that, she will come back to me saying that I should fund it because it was my idea. It is of real benefit to the community if people have a stake in their own property. I welcome the Member's remarks about the money for social housing. I indicated in the draft Budget speech that I thought that the Executive would have to revisit that area if they can free more resources through asset sales.

The Minister for Social Development has targets, which were set down in the Semple Report, and she and I will be keen to get close to, if not beyond, those targets as the years develop.

12.45 pm

Mr Ross: Two weeks ago, the Minister set out the draft Budget with departmental allocations. Will he inform the House what percentage of their initial allocations Departments have spent in recent years?

Mr P Robinson: I will not detail the underspends of each Department, because they vary considerably. However, Departments such as the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Health are capable of spending close to their limits. The Department of Health, for instance, can spend its money by allocating funds to trusts, and the Department for Regional Development can spend a lot of its money in areas such as maintenance. Therefore, the underspends of those Departments are low. In the past financial year, 95% of resources were spent and 5% were not. That equates to a considerable resource underspend of approximately £370 million. I make that point because I have read reports in the newspapers of people who would have liked more money for one Department or another. It would be a good start if the Departments would spend the money that they have.

Mr McCarthy: I am particularly interested in what the Minister has just said. I welcome his statement, his determination and his encouragement of his ministerial colleagues to make sure that they properly spend their funding allocations. Will the Minister assure the House that changes as a result of each monitoring round are taken in consultation with the Executive to ensure a strategic — rather than piecemeal — approach to reallocations? Will he outline what steps were taken to ensure that that approach was taken in this monitoring round?

Mr P Robinson: First, my officials talked with officials from the Departments, who attempted to identify projects and programmes that are not moving at the expected speed and from which, therefore, money could come forward. Secondly, they invited bids from each of the Departments, and they looked at the pressures faced by each Department: the more inescapable pressures were, obviously, dealt with first. Finally, my statement went before the Executive, who unanimously endorsed it — and I am one of the Ministers who accepts Executive decisions and works within the Executive's authority.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's statement. There are two issues that I want to raise, the first of which relates to unfinished business. On 25 June — when the Minister outlined his previous quarterly report — there was some tension between his recorded figure for the Department for Employment and Learning and that which the Committee had been given. Subsequently, I asked an Assembly question about that matter and raised it at a Committee meeting. I was advised that an answer was being prepared, but to date no answer has been forthcoming. I remind the Minister that he said:

"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." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p5, col 2*].

To avoid doubt and to reconcile the figures, it would be helpful if the Minister could confirm what the situation in June was as soon as possible.

On 25 October, with regard to end-year flexibility, the Minister said:

“I have also been able to secure the significant front-loading of those resources to enable us to address the costs that Departments will face as we move to restructure and reform the way in which we organise and deliver public services.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p 492, col 2*].

Considering those comments and the new arrangements regarding end-year flexibility, will the introduction of new initiatives, say, by the Health Minister — who was here a moment ago — on access to fertility services in Northern Ireland, which might arise following last week’s debate, be precluded? The Minister says that the end-year flexibility money will be for restructuring and reforming the way in which our public services are organised and delivered.

Mr P Robinson: If an issue that the Member raised at a previous debate has escaped my attention, I will tie a knot in my hanky and ensure that he receives a response that will reconcile — if possible — the figures that he believes do not marry.

By its very nature, end-year flexibility is a one-off expenditure and, therefore, cannot be used for recurrent purposes. That means that, first, we must identify issues that can be dealt with in the financial year in question, and, secondly, those matters cannot be dealt with again in future financial years. Therefore, end-year flexibility is somewhat restricted. However, if Departments worked cleverly, they could identify other areas for consideration and for which a one-off expenditure would be necessary.

There has been a fair bit of controversy about the health budget. I cannot understand the reason for that, given the greater-than-average increase that it received in the draft Budget. However, no Department will ever have enough money: every Department could use more funds if they were available. The Executive must look at the needs of all Departments when they prepare their Budget, and they must be able to allocate resources fairly. That was done in the case of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That Department has been taking a larger chunk of the Budget year on year, so that by the end of the three-year cycle that was referred to in the draft Budget, it will have received up to 48% of all the money that comes to Northern Ireland through the block grant. That is a considerable sum, and it is more than any Health Minister has ever been allocated in the history of Northern Ireland. That means that the percentage of the Northern Ireland Budget that goes to health is greater than ever.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he share my concerns, and those of the wider

community — particularly the construction industry and its sister services — about the failure to deliver the £14.5 million of capital that is in the integrated development fund (IDF)? Will the Minister further break down the cost of those projects? Will he commit to having a review of the delivery mechanisms to see whether they are fit for purpose?

Mr P Robinson: The fund was set up by the Secretary of State and allocations could be made only where projects were submitted for consideration. All the projects that were submitted were dealt with. That being the case, there is not much more that Ministers can do: if projects are not being submitted, that may mean that there is limited use for that kind of funding and the money could be put to better use, which is what we are attempting to do.

I have had several conversations with construction industry representatives, and in recent discussions I have spoken with every element of the construction industry. More than anything, that industry needs a continuity of spend by the Executive, and it is seriously concerned about massive capital underspends. The industry needs a steady flow of funds throughout the years to enable it to manage properly its end of overall business, which is an important function that it carries out for Government. Systems must be developed in order that each Department can judge more accurately when it will spend money. That will ensure that there is no waste and no consequent damage to the construction industry.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister say whether the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety submitted any bids? Is there any specific allocation for the provision of services for those who have mental-health problems and learning disabilities? That is the most under-resourced area of health provision, yet it has the most potential to make a positive impact on all areas of society.

Mr P Robinson: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety submitted two bids: one to accelerate the comprehensive spending review’s efficiency action plan; and another that went under the heading of dealing with pressures in health and social care trusts.

It was judged that the pressures from other Departments were greater. The pressures on DRD went beyond its allocation, which meant that it did not get the full allocation that it sought.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Accelerated Passage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

The Bill will repeal article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. An emergency protection order (EPO) issued by the courts under that legislation gives the applicant — usually a health and social care trust — the power to remove a child to a safe place in the event of an emergency. EPOs are used only in exceptional circumstances, such as when a child is at immediate risk of harm, and are short-term measures allowing investigations to take place and alternative arrangements to be made.

Under current legislation, parents or others may apply to have an EPO discharged; however, the case cannot be heard until three days have elapsed. During recent judicial review proceedings, a judge determined that a three-day delay in conducting such a hearing breached articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights: the right to a fair trial, and the right to respect for private and family life.

Having taken the advice of professionals in the Department and in the voluntary sector, I am satisfied that the removal of article 64(8) would not result in any reduction in the levels of protection available to vulnerable children. Therefore, Members should act swiftly to repeal the offending provision. I am requesting accelerated passage for the Bill because it is essential that our legislation be consistent and compatible with human rights legislation.

In such a case, I consider it preferable that the legislature be given the opportunity to remedy the situation by passing the required Bill. A failure to take prompt action might result in the European Court striking down the offending article.

I recognise the importance of the role played by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Assembly in scrutinising draft legislation, and I regret that these unique circumstances necessitate accelerated passage for this Bill. I hope that the Assembly will accept my assurance that such a procedure is appropriate only in the most exceptional of circumstances.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): On 11 October, the Minister attended a meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

in order to explain his reasons for requesting accelerated passage for the Bill.

As Chairperson of that Committee, I am aware of the significance of the Committee Stage in passing legislation, the importance of examining proposed legislation in detail, and, where appropriate, the ability to summon witnesses and listen to the views of interested parties. However, in exceptional circumstances, it may be necessary to proceed more urgently. In such cases, of course, there is still an opportunity for Members to debate the issues in a plenary sitting.

The Minister explained to the Committee — as he has done today — that, in a recent judicial review, the High Court determined that article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was incompatible with articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This short, two-clause Bill will remove that incompatibility by repealing article 64(8) of the 1995 Order.

Given that High Court decision, I accept the need for urgency, and, in the circumstances, the Committee supports the Minister's request that the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill be granted accelerated passage.

1.00 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The circumstances, as outlined by the Members who have spoken, point to the fact that we can do little else except support the Minister, and I hope that everyone in the House will accept that position and allow the legislation to go forward.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate for their remarks about this important piece of legislation. I welcome their support for the granting of accelerated passage to the Bill, and I am pleased that it can now move to its Second Stage.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill (NIA 6/07) be agreed.

The Bill repeals article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. I have outlined the background to the Bill, but, to recap, an emergency protection order (EPO) is a court order under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 which gives the applicant the power in an emergency situation to remove a child to a safe place. Such orders are used only in exceptional circumstances, when a child is at immediate risk of harm, and are a short-term measure while an investigation takes place or alternative arrangements are made.

Under the current legislation, parents or others can apply to have the order discharged, but the case cannot be heard for three days. However, in recent judicial review proceedings, a judge has determined that delaying the hearing for three days is a breach of articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, interfering with the right to a fair trial and the right to respect for family life. Therefore, the judge is minded to strike down article 64(8).

Having taken the advice of professionals in the Department and the voluntary sector, I am satisfied that removing that article will not result in any reduction in the levels of protection available for vulnerable children. Therefore, the Assembly should act swiftly to repeal the offending provision. The sole purpose and effect of the Bill is to remove article 64(8) of the 1995 Order, which is the element that delays for three days the hearing of an application to discharge an emergency protection order.

The explanatory and financial memorandum states that any financial implications are likely to be minimal, as the amendment merely enables cases to be heard in a shorter time; that a preliminary equality impact assessment has identified no potential adverse impacts on any of the nine equality categories; and that a regulatory impact assessment did not produce any evidence that repealing the offending provision would have an adverse impact on competition, nor that it would incur additional costs for employers or those in the voluntary or community sectors.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): As I said during the debate on accelerated passage for this Bill, the Committee has accepted the Minister's explanation of the need for the legislation to be taken forward urgently. It is based on the outcome of a recent

judicial review in the High Court, which determined that article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was incompatible with articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The legislation centres on the right of a parent to seek legal redress where a child has been removed from his or her care under an emergency protection order. At present, under article 64(8), that cannot happen until 72 hours after the making of the order.

The Minister has assured the Committee that the repeal of that particular article will not affect in any way the power of social services, or the police, to seek an emergency protection order where it is considered necessary. The change will simply mean that a parent or guardian will be able to seek legal redress immediately, rather than having to wait for three days.

I am sure that all Members agree that to remove a child from his or her parents is one of the most traumatic and serious actions that social services, or the police, can take. I am sure that Members also agree that that power should be used only in the most exceptional circumstances, in cases in which there are serious concerns about a child's safety.

I support the Bill, which will give a parent or guardian the right to challenge such an order without having to wait for three days.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My party and I support the Bill's being granted accelerated passage. The legislation is a step in the right direction. Further to what the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has said, I welcome the fact that the Minister attended Committee meetings at the earliest opportunity to explain the purpose of the legislation.

The Bill contains a technical amendment to The Children Order 1995. As I have said, neither I nor my party has any difficulty in supporting the Bill's provisions. The effect of the amendment, which the Committee Chairperson and, indeed, the Minister have already explained, will be to remove the three-day bar on a parent's applying to a court for the discharge of an emergency protection order.

It is appropriate that parents have access to courts for an earlier hearing, particularly as some EPOs may initially have been made without parents being there. The Bill recognises the rights of parents in that regard.

I do not want to sound too negative, but I wish to place on record my disappointment that this Bill is the first piece of legislation that affects children to come before the House. The new safeguarding arrangements for children, which were referred to as part of the consultation that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety participated in last year, should have appeared in a new children's Bill. However,

in saying that, I accept the reasons behind the Minister bringing this Bill to the Assembly, and because of the judgement I agree that there is a need to get this legislation through the Assembly quickly. I welcome and support the Bill.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank those Members who have contributed to the debate for their remarks. The repeal of article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 will remove the incompatibility that exists with articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, pursuant to section 3 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

In response to Ms Ramsey's point, I, too, accept and regret that the first piece of legislation that has been introduced on children's matters is to receive accelerated passage. Both Mrs Robinson and I have expressed that view. However, we are where we are. A court order is pending on which I must act. As I explained to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety last month, that is why I am taking this action.

Once again, I am grateful to those who have contributed to a helpful debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill [NIA 06/07] be agreed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Management of the Fisheries Conservancy Board

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

After the Order Paper was issued, concerns were expressed about the motion's competence. Unamended, it would not give the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure the authority to act. The Members who tabled the motion were alerted to that difficulty and have duly tabled an amendment, which I have selected for debate. If the amendment is made, it will address the motion's competence. If the amendment is not made, I will not put the Question on the motion. On that basis, we shall proceed.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to appoint a commissioner, or senior civil servant, to manage the Fisheries Conservancy Board in an effective manner, until legislation is made to provide for his department to take over the running of the Board.

I also beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "Leisure" and insert

"to assist the Fisheries Conservancy Board in its management, and calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation abolishing the Fisheries Conservancy Board and transferring its responsibility to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as a matter of urgency."

I thank my colleagues from across the three other main parties for their support and co-sponsorship of the motion and the amendment. It is fair to say that had five names been allowed on the Order Paper, the Alliance Party would have joined us in adding one of its Members' names.

The key to the original motion calling for a commissioner or civil servant of senior rank to be appointed to take over management of the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) lay with the decision, under the review of public administration (RPA), for functions of the FCB to transfer into the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Provision for that is included in the draft Public Authorities Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. However, this is unlikely to pass all the legislative stages before the spring of 2008 at the earliest. Therefore, action is unlikely to be taken in the foreseeable future.

The FCB is not properly fulfilling its main role of fisheries protection and is falling short of its other responsibilities. I can report to the Assembly the concerns of the Ulster Angling Federation on a number of fronts.

Those issues have been brought to the notice of all the parties — hence the unity behind the amendment.

Not all the co-sponsors of the amendment are in the Chamber, possibly because business has proceeded so speedily. Perhaps someone could bring the other co-sponsors into the Chamber to help out. It is not my job to serve as Whip for other parties, but they may be listening to the debate. However, I welcome the presence of Pat Ramsey of the SDLP.

The Ulster Angling Federation brought a report to the Department of Culture, Art and Leisure in July 2006, only to be advised that its concerns were unfounded and that everything in the FCB was entirely satisfactory. However, two months later, anglers advised the Department that the number of boat patrols on Lough Neagh stated to have been made by the FCB, had not taken place. The FCB workforce of 15 has been reduced to 10, as one third of the staff are absent on long-term sickness. The board's equipment has not been maintained, and the boat destined to patrol the east coast is not even seaworthy. Perhaps the Minister would consider, as the most appropriate action, an inventory of all the boats held by the FCB, to find out how seaworthy they are and, indeed, where they are. My understanding is that they are not available for use.

For those reasons, and others that I will convey later to the House, the motion was tabled. I appreciate the early notice passed on by the Minister that has necessitated the amendment. The advice was that the motion was not competent since the Minister is unable to make the appointment that it called for.

That necessitated the amendment, which I commend to the House. That amendment is competent and deals with the problem effectively and efficiently. It seeks to address the problems of the FCB. I look forward to hearing from the Minister that he will pursue the Executive on the legislation required to abolish the FCB, thus enabling the transfer of responsibility for its functions to his Department to proceed as an urgent matter. Perhaps he will indicate the urgency with which he views the matter and therefore how soon, after Executive approval, legislation for the transfer of responsibilities from the FCB to the Department can be completed. The sooner that happens, the better. The FCB desperately needs to have its management functions and responsibilities brought into line and improved. That can be achieved if the amendment is agreed and acted upon.

1.15 pm

I understand that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a role to play in introducing the legislation to the House before Christmas. If that is the case, it should give the transfer issue serious consideration and progress it urgently and with the support of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Indeed, it is notable that the proposers of the motion are all members of that Committee.

Given that it appears that the issue will be dealt with in a manner that our angling fraternity will roundly welcome, I give a cautious, but sincere, appreciation to the Minister's apparent need to act urgently and in line with the amendment. My caution is in anticipation of the delivery of any legislation that will abolish the FCB and transfer responsibility to the Department. I will not, at this stage, discuss the serious, unsatisfactory aspects of the functioning of the FCB unless there is a default in processing the amendment, which I do not anticipate. However, it is best to be clear.

In conclusion, it is my pleasure to commend the amendment to the House and seek its full approval.

Mr McCausland: The previous Member to speak identified several shortcomings of the Fisheries Conservancy Board. For example, there are too few bailiffs, almost no prosecutions for illegal fishing, and anglers have no confidence in the current arrangements.

The board will be abolished under the review of public administration, and its functions and staff will, in due course, be transferred to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The appointment of commissioners, which was contemplated at one stage, would require amending legislation. However, legislation has been drafted to abolish the board, and that is the fastest method of dealing with what is currently a very unsatisfactory situation. Provisions to abolish the board are included in the draft public authority reform Bill, which is scheduled for consideration by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We hope that that will be introduced as quickly as possible.

In abolishing the board, it is important that stakeholders — particularly anglers — are included in the process and that their input is heard when the Department takes control. To that end, it would be helpful if a forum were constituted for those who have a particular interest in angling. I encourage the Minister to develop such a proposal. Not only would it be good to have stakeholders involved by keeping them well informed about events, but their expertise, insight and knowledge would improve plans for the future.

Additional support would be required in order to manage the amalgamation of the Fisheries Conservancy Board with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The chief executive officer of the FCB will need additional support to implement the many changes that will be required, and we must support the board to ensure that any such changes will be made effectively and efficiently. Indeed, that has been highlighted in our amendment, to which I am sure the Minister will refer in due course.

The FCB is facing a funding crisis. It was set up to be financially self-sufficient, and to derive its income

through agency work and from the sale of fishing licences. However, the board now faces financial difficulties that have been caused by the loss of agency work that it had undertaken on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). As a result, 11 board staff were made redundant in May 2006. At present, the board can function only with substantial Government funding.

It is clear that the angling community does not have confidence in the board to carry out its remit, which includes bailiff duties and bringing forward prosecutions. It is well known that there have been serious difficulties and shortcomings in the organisation. That must be borne in mind as progress is made. It would be helpful if those internal problems were kept in mind as the FCB's responsibilities are transferred to DCAL. There is little point in transferring the board's existing problems to DCAL. Therefore, there must be a process that ensures that the board is not simply transferred in its current state. There is a need for substantial change and, perhaps, for new personnel to be involved in future work.

I am happy to support the motion, which represents the best way forward. I am sure that DCAL will provide the resources that are required to support the FCB and to bring it properly, effectively and efficiently under the Department's responsibility in order to ensure a good future for angling in Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: I am grateful to Mr McNarry for proposing the motion, to which many parties have signed up. Mr McNarry has raised several points about staffing and about boats that are not seaworthy. I am aware of one such boat.

The serious problems of understaffing and under-resourcing must be dealt with, and I wish to make some arguments in favour of that. Naturally, everyone is concerned about conservation and the condition of rivers. In the light of the Executive's emphasis on the economy, it is worth making strong economic arguments for investment in the conservation of rivers.

The recent job losses in Limavady have highlighted people's vulnerability to sudden economic shock. The long-term answer to that is to build as diverse an indigenous economy as possible. In order to do that, and for the economy to become as self-reliant as possible, every available resource must be harnessed. Clearly, tourism is one industry that can grow in the North. High-value-added tourism, in particular, is attracted by high-quality leisure activities. That is one reason why the Culture Arts and Leisure Committee is so committed to sports, as is the Minister. I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate.

Fishing can contribute hugely to the economy. There is no doubt that anglers and clubs across Northern Ireland have invested hugely in their own stock, which must be protected. However, that is not being protected

at present. In the Republic of Ireland, it is estimated that the angling industry contributes €55 million a year to the economy. The river-fishing industry must be taken seriously. There is no doubt that there would be a good return on such investment.

As MLA for Foyle in Derry, I feel fortunate that the Loughs Agency is responsible for Lough Foyle as well as for Carlingford Lough. That is a highly visible, properly resourced and well-managed organisation and its work brings great benefits to those regions. The fact that it is a cross-border organisation and that it operates under identical legislation North and South means that it can look after complete river systems. The border is totally transparent in the agency's conservation and enforcement work. Indeed, the Loughs Agency has been so successful that the rivers that are under its control are the only ones in Ireland where salmon can be fished because the stocks are so healthy.

The Minister, with his counterpart in the Republic, must give strong consideration to ensuring that all cross-border rivers are similarly protected by a single cross-border agency that operates under a single piece of legislation. That would make sense from a practical environmental-protection point of view and would pave the way for future changes in the way that the Fisheries Conservancy Board is set up and funded. Perhaps those matters should also be considered. There are specific problems that relate to cross-border rivers that are outside the remit of the Loughs Agency and cannot be resolved properly by two separate organisations that work under different environmental-protection legislation in separate jurisdictions.

There have been problems about the way in which the Fisheries Conservancy Board has operated and been resourced. It is unfair to lay blame on anyone in particular. However, a new management structure and a properly funded organisation must be put in place, and I acknowledge the amendment. Nevertheless, we need a firm commitment from the Minister that the necessary legislation and new structures will be put in place with immediate effect. If there is to be a delay, interim measures must be taken and put in place to ensure that, in the meantime, the waterways are protected.

The timing of the matter is hugely important, given that anglers — many of whom are in the Public Gallery today — are given some comfort by, and respect from, the Department as regards their investment. Given that there is consensus among the parties on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, it is right and fitting that the Minister introduces that legislation immediately. If not, the Minister must appoint a commissioner to manage the asset that is already there, because it is deteriorating and becoming dilapidated.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member agree with me, and bring to the attention of the Minister, that, in addition

to the matter of a new administration and management of fisheries, poaching still poses a great threat to many of Northern Ireland's rivers, especially the River Foyle? Will the Member agree with me that the Minister should liaise with all authorities, including the Police Service, so that poaching is brought to an end? In the past, there has not been enough manpower to tackle the problem.

Mr P Ramsey: I agree with the Member. The Ulster Angling Federation, which represents many fishermen across Northern Ireland, is deeply worried. The proposers of the motion are also worried. Fishing stocks must be protected by properly resourced bailiffs or whoever is responsible for them. At present, sufficient resources are not available; the manpower and boats needed to protect fishing stocks are not there.

I am grateful that David McNarry proposed the motion. It is an issue on which there is unanimity and consensus among members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which I hope will continue.

Mr McCarthy: Much has already been said on this important subject. During the Assembly's first mandate, I was a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that undertook a major inquiry into angling and fishing across Northern Ireland. I am disappointed that we are no further forward on the matter now than we were back then. Angling and fishing are major tourism attractions. During the previous inquiry into the matter, I was amazed to be told that on Saturday afternoons, as many people are fishing and angling in Northern Ireland as are attending FA football matches. That being the case, it is incumbent on the Minister and the Department to ensure that every effort is made to encourage and advance the sport in every way possible. Angling and fishing bring much enjoyment to many people. There should be no excuse for a Department that fails in its duty to promote what is best for the fishing and angling community in Northern Ireland.

In my Strangford constituency, a disused quarry had been used for fishing for many years. People used the facility and enjoyed it. Suddenly, the owner decided that it was no longer to be used for fishing. The quarry was drained, and the fish were lying about all over the place. I raised the matter with the Fisheries Conservancy Board, and I received a reply that almost dismissed what had happened. Although I am not an angler, I know that legislation prohibits the quarry owner's actions. Nevertheless, the Fisheries Conservancy Board was dismissive in its response to my concerns.

As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I have great pleasure in supporting the motion. As a maximum of four names can be included on a list of proposers of a motion, my name is not included.

Mr McNarry did, however, clarify my position. I fully agree with all members of the Committee for

Culture, Arts and Leisure that something must be done, and done soon.

1.30 pm

Mr K Robinson: I support the amendment, and I thank my colleagues for raising what is an important matter.

I represent a largely urban part of the eastern seaboard. Over the years, it has been wonderful to watch the efforts that have been made to bring back to life once-dead rivers. Those efforts have been largely down to anglers, who put their hands in their own pocket, used their expertise and worked alongside the agencies as best they could, often in fairly difficult situations. The jewels in the crown are the River Foyle and other major systems, but it has been a delight to watch the eastern seaboard rivers — those shorter rivers that run into the Irish Sea — come back to life. The Three Mile Water in my constituency is about six miles from Belfast city centre. It now has salmon stocks for the first time in probably 150 to 200 years, and that is thanks to the work of the local angling club in Monkstown and the support that it received from those very overworked, and sometimes undervalued, members of the Fisheries Conservancy Board. Unfortunately, the board was never given the wherewithal to develop properly the role that it was given when it was set up in 1966. It was underfunded, and other Members have mentioned that lack of funding and how we have had to bail the FCB out in the past.

It is important that our rivers are properly bailiffed and policed, because our fishing stock faces many dangers, both natural and human. If we are ever to move our tourist industry forward, fishing must play a central role. Most of the rivers that have been mentioned run through rural areas, so an opportunity exists to develop rural economies. Rivers must be properly stocked and managed, and they must be looked after by people who have a real feel for their angling potential. Those people must be willing to share those rivers with tourists, who will pay good money to stand along the banks and successfully land salmon, trout and any other species of fish in which they are interested. The very best that the House can do is to ensure that a process is in place that allows the Minister to redress urgently a problem that is obviously detrimental to our rivers' angling potential.

I thank my colleagues who have contributed to the debate. They have covered most of the issues, so there is no sense in my regurgitating them. Thanks to everyone who looks after the best interests of angling in Northern Ireland, we at least have something to pass over to the Minister. I hope that he will have the knowledge and expertise at his disposal to allow us to solve this problem, and solve it urgently.

Lord Browne: I represent East Belfast, which Members will agree is not renowned for its inland or salmon fishing. However, I must declare an interest in the subject, because, believe it or not, I am a qualified marine biologist. That said, my knowledge of fisheries conservation is somewhat limited, as I spent three years specialising in the study of the orientation of *Talitrus saltator* and *Orchestia gammarella*. For those who do not understand or speak Latin, those are types of sandhopper. Members will understand that my knowledge is, therefore, somewhat limited.

Having said all that, as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I support the motion as amended. It is imperative that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which is responsible for policy, also be directly responsible for the management of the functions that the Fisheries Conservancy Board currently carries out. Those functions include the conservation and protection of our salmon and inland fisheries.

As we have heard, the Fisheries Conservancy Board carries out a bailiff service for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and it also undertakes agency work for the Department of the Environment. Surely, in the interests of cost and of efficiency and effectiveness, it makes sense for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to have responsibility for strategy and management functions.

The case for those changes is further illustrated by FCB submissions that acknowledge that there are several potential advantages in being managed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in areas such as decision-making, streamlining of decisions and procedural regulation, as well as integration of functions within wider Government networks.

My colleagues on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have already made all the major points on matters of strategy. I ask the House to join me in supporting the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who proposed the motion; I also support the amendment.

It must be acknowledged that the FCB did a reasonable job in very difficult circumstances and would have been able to carry out its duties more efficiently and effectively had it been provided with the necessary financial resources. That is the crux of the argument: essential resources have to be made available to enable us to monitor and safeguard our waterways in a professional manner.

In its response to the further consultation document on the review of public administration, the FCB stated that it had been:

“constrained by factors largely outside its control, particularly the unsatisfactory nature of its funding arrangements, and could be

radically improved by new approaches and adequate additional funding.”

In a written question, Strangford MLA Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the budget currently allocated to the Fisheries Conservancy Board, and whether that budget would be increased. The Minister told Mr Shannon that the Department had budgeted £464,000 for the FCB for 2007-08, which includes payment for bailiffing services. Perhaps he will tell the House what amount of additional funding will be directed to the board upon its incorporation into the Department.

Any new arrangements must have public support, particularly among the angling community. The new arrangements must be truly transparent and provide for the participation of experienced anglers. Those people have influence in their communities and must not be excluded from the decision-making process. It is vital that fishermen and women have a real feeling of ownership of any changes to fisheries development and conservation. There must be no loss or reduction of stakeholder involvement.

Every Member can name several instances of water pollution. A couple of instances affected South Down, including one in July 2006 on the River Shimna near Newcastle in which 1,500 fish died. That incident was thought to have been caused by a discharge of sewage from a Water Service pumping station. Around the same time in County Down, another 1,500 fish died as a result of chemical pollution in the River Lagan at Donaghcloney. That incident happened after £250,000 had been spent on the enhancement of the Lagan at Donaghcloney in an attempt to reintroduce native fish. A five-to-six-year plan was wiped out overnight by the third chemical spillage to hit the river in the past six years.

Incidents of pollution such as those that I have described not only have a devastating impact on fish stocks and the biodiversity of the waterways, but on the tourism industry. Greater transparency and accountability are required, and that can only be delivered by an independent environmental protection agency that scrutinises all Departments. There must be rigorous enforcement of the laws that hold polluters to account. In order to ensure public confidence in the effectiveness of the proposed arrangements to integrate the FCB into the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, it is essential that any new agency must be a powerful advocate for the environment. There must be a real emphasis on preventing damage to the environment, rather than dealing with the aftermath of pollution.

Lord Morrow: I declare an interest as a keen angler. I was delighted to listen to the Lord Browne's knowledgeable comments on the subject. I look forward to talking to him soon, because he can obviously teach me a lot. I welcome the motion.

I am pleased that the motion has gained the support of the four main political groupings in the Assembly. As ever, Mr McCarthy has delivered the support of the Alliance Party, and the DUP appreciates that. Therefore, it seems that the amended motion will have the full support of the House, and I welcome that.

That sends out a clear signal to all those who have an interest in this matter that the present arrangements are not sufficient: they are inadequate and they are not delivering. To put it in a different way, the current arrangements are not fit for purpose. I hope that the House will fully appreciate the advantages and the enormous benefit that angling can bring to the Northern Ireland economy. A large number of people participate in angling. Mr McCarthy drew a parallel with the numbers who participate in other sports, and it is true that angling is the largest participatory recreation in Northern Ireland. I hope that that fact is not lost on the Assembly or on the outside world.

The obvious spin-off that angling brings to the tourist industry is phenomenal — I do not use that word lightly; I use it properly. Northern Ireland has some of the finest rivers for salmon and trout fishing anywhere in Europe. Many tourists come from the rest of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Europe to fish in Northern Ireland waters. Sometimes, that fact is lost on people who do not take such a keen interest in angling as a recreation. I emphasise that point, and I wish to ensure that this issue is dealt with. I am pleased that the Assembly has such a motion before it after such a short time in existence. It is vital that the motion has the full support of the House.

I am delighted that the Minister is in the Chamber, and I have little doubt that he will take a keen interest in what has been said. More importantly, I have no doubt that he will seek to reflect the views that have been articulated in the House. I thank the Minister for his attendance.

Northern Ireland boasts some of the finest destinations for angling enthusiasts. I doubt that anywhere else in Europe has the facilities or the potential for angling that exist in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it must be ensured that angling is overseen by a fit organisation. Sadly, that is not presently the case. The Fisheries Conservancy Board has done what it could, but it has reached its sell-by date and changes are necessary. Those changes must be implemented at the earliest opportunity. If changes are not introduced, angling will be hit hard and the tourist industry will also suffer. Our rivers are among our greatest natural assets, and they must be kept at the forefront of our priorities. In the past, our natural assets have not been adequately protected.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I notice that my time is up, and I am sure that you are about to inform me of that. I

commend the motion to the House and I look forward to its receiving the unanimous support of the House.

Mr P J Bradley: I support the motion, as amended. Last month, I had the privilege of attending a meeting with the Kilkeel Angling Club at the Kilmory Arms Hotel in Kilkeel.

1.45 pm

I thank David McNarry, who was at that meeting, for living up to his promise to bring this issue to the Assembly, and I thank those who endorsed the motion. As Lord Morrow said, the benefit of a cross-party motion is that it makes it easier for the Minister to take on board what is happening and to act accordingly.

Pat Ramsey said almost everything that I wanted to say. I would only change Lough Foyle to Carlingford Lough, because I live on its shores, whereas Pat lives in the Foyle area.

As Members spoke, I thought of Jim Wilson, a former Assembly Member for South Antrim. He talked about fisheries in the House, in the basement, in upstairs Members' rooms of this Building, and even when he was out socially. He has a great interest in fishing, and I am sure that he will appreciate that the motion represents progress.

I have nothing more to say other than that I wish to go on record as supporting the amendment on behalf of those who petitioned me to support their case.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I thank the Members who brought the motion and the amendment to the House, thereby enabling Members to debate the important issue of the management of the Fisheries Conservancy Board.

As has been stated, angling is not just an important recreation; it has a major role to play in the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Many people are employed as a consequence of angling and, with correct handling, opportunities for tourism can be developed.

Many of the factories that caused pollution along the rivers have disappeared. The Nitrates Directive should ensure that there is significantly less pollution of rivers from agricultural sources, and there will be further investment by the Water Service. Therefore, if well managed, the rivers should host many more fish than has been the case for many years. There is a great opportunity to promote tourism and, with proper development, to increase the potential income derived from fisheries.

In considering the motion, my uppermost consideration was the importance of conservation and the protection of salmon in inland fisheries, which is defined in legislation. The Fisheries Conservancy Board is a statutory body that was established by the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. Under the provision of

that Act, the board is responsible for the conservation and protection of the salmon and inland fisheries of Northern Ireland, other than in the areas around Londonderry and Newry, which are the responsibility of the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. Members have referred to its work in those areas.

At this stage, I should point out that the commission employs twice as many people as are employed in inland fisheries across Northern Ireland. That decision was made by previous Administrations and remains in force today. However, perhaps that should be readdressed and a greater commitment of resources to inland waterways and fisheries should perhaps be considered.

FCB also undertakes bailiffing of the public angling estate and, until recently, carried out river monitoring and pollution investigation on behalf of the Department of the Environment. As Members have mentioned, following an investigation by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, it was recommended that the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) brought those functions in-house. Consequently, the FCB lost responsibility to EHS for some of the services that it had previously provided and had to lay off several staff. I understand that EHS is able to deliver the services at a lower cost. Therefore, to one extent, one Department was funding another Department, but it was, nonetheless, all public money. As a consequence, fewer people can carry out the dual role of bailiff and of examiner of water quality.

Statutory membership of the board is set out in schedule 2 to the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. Members are nominated by various organisations and representative bodies, and one member is also a departmental official. The chief executive's post is provided for in the schedule.

The board is to be abolished under the review of public administration, and its functions and staff will be transferred to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Abolition of the board will create opportunities to reorganise the conservation and protection of inland fisheries. The transfer of FCB functions to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will unify fisheries policy and functions and streamline the decision-making and regulatory processes. It will also create an opportunity to rationalise traditional enforcement with modern fishery management practice. The transfer will allow for the integration of expertise and resources in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide for a strategic approach. Plans are well advanced to ensure that functions transfer seamlessly and that work teams are established and briefed at the outset.

FCB resources and expertise will be incorporated into the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure regional operations. Area management will deploy

staff to detect and respond to reports of illegal fishing, and, as appropriate, they will work with partners and stakeholders, including private water bailiffs, fishery owners and the PSNI.

Organisational restructuring has been planned, resource needs have been assessed, and bids have been made to provide for a more integrated and strategic conservation and protection service. Policy and strategy will be reviewed in the light of priorities and emerging best practice in fisheries management to ensure that the service is consistent with public needs.

Abolition of the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the transfer of its functions to my Department can only be achieved by changing the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. Provision for that is included in the draft public authorities reform Bill, which will be taken forward by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Bill has been included in the legislative programme for the 2007-08 Assembly session, and two Executive meetings ago, I stressed the importance of bringing it forward as quickly as possible. I would appreciate it if the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister were to bring the Bill forward in the autumn session, as opposed to the spring session, so that we can deal with the matter more quickly. I trust that today's debate will help to encourage that process.

The timing of the transfer will depend on when the Bill is passed, and I hope that Members will facilitate its passage through the Assembly as quickly as possible to facilitate a timely transfer of the functions of the FCB to my Department.

As regards management of the transition period, Members will be aware of press reports about the FCB. It continues to face serious management issues, and I remain concerned to ensure that the closure and transition to my Department should be carried out smoothly, effectively and efficiently and that any ongoing management issues in the FCB are handled professionally during the transition. A fisheries management group, chaired by a senior civil servant, has been established to oversee the closure and transfer of the FCB's statutory functions to the Department. That group has examined the structures and reporting lines required in the Department and will manage the functions, staff and operations when they are transferred into the Department.

A review of public administration working group has been established within the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and includes financial and legal representatives. The group is meeting with FCB staff regularly to discuss and plan the winding-up process. Preparations are under way to facilitate the transfer of the board's functions, with officials working closely with the board and its staff to identify and undertake

the tasks associated with the winding-up of the board and the transfer of its functions, staff and liabilities.

A consultation forum meets regularly to update FCB staff and trade union representatives on progress on the winding-up and legislative processes. The forum also provides an opportunity for staff to communicate concerns or raise issues for clarification with the Department. Quarterly accountability and monitoring meetings are held to oversee and monitor governance and financial activity, and I have asked my Department to ensure that those meetings happen monthly, with immediate effect. Fisheries Conservancy Board management is also updated at those meetings on progress on closure and transfer matters. The DCAL representative on the FCB also updates board members on an ongoing basis.

I have asked my departmental officials to ensure that conservation of salmon and inland fisheries is afforded a high priority, particularly during the transitional period. Therefore, the Department has, when possible, taken steps to support the operational activities of the board, while remaining sensitive to the legal position whereby the board has responsibility for the statutory functions set out in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. That is particularly important when legal enforcement of the fisheries by-laws is required, such as in cases of pollution or poaching.

The FCB — not the Department — is the only legal entity that can enforce such by-laws. That position cannot change without financial or legal consequences until a Bill to reform public authorities is passed by the Assembly. However, DCAL is assisting FCB staff with bailiff duties, and the Department has also asked the chairperson of the board to prioritise outstanding reinstatement work following pollution incidents and to consider buying in expertise to assist in that work when FCB staff resources are not sufficient.

Senior departmental officials are meeting the chairperson and other board members to explore how the Department can provide further support and assistance to the board during the winding up of the organisation and the transfer of its functions to the Department to ensure that it continues to meet audit, governance and accountability requirements and deliver its statutory functions in respect of the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries.

When the FCB's functions are assumed by the Department, the current board will be disbanded. It will be essential that, in future, stakeholders with an interest in fisheries continue to inform policy. Therefore, I have asked officials to develop proposals for the setting up of a stakeholder consultation forum. That work is at an advanced stage.

Mr Burnside: Transitional periods are always difficult to administer, but will the Minister give a

commitment to the House that he will regularly report the number of pollution incidents that take place during the transition, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland Water? Such incidents are often made public in response to a question to the Minister. The main polluter, as we all know, is Northern Ireland Water.

Mr Poots: The FCB obviously has a role in tackling pollution, as does the Environment and Heritage Service. Ultimately, it is the role of both those bodies to ensure that pollution incidents are minimised and that everyone plays their part in that effort, including industry, agriculture, and, indeed, Northern Ireland Water. As the Member is well aware, under the current legislation on the administration of water, Crown immunity no longer exists, and therefore Northern Ireland Water can be taken to court for pollution incidents. I am encouraged that that is the case because, often, others were taken to court while the Government had immunity, but were the biggest polluter in all sectors.

I return to the measures that we can take to ensure that the transfer of responsibilities from the FCB to the Department is effected smoothly. I asked officials to consider whether we should appoint a commissioner to oversee the board in the lead-up to its abolition. That happened during the summer, and I was advised by departmental solicitors that the Department cannot appoint a commissioner to undertake that work. The Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, under which the FCB was set up, does not provide for the appointment of such a commissioner. That is unlike, for example, the case of the education and library boards, whereby article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 does give such power to the Department.

2.00 pm

The structures and functions of the FCB are defined in legislation, and the Department cannot assume those functions or make permanent appointments to the FCB. There would be financial and legal consequences were the Department to assume such a role. For example, people would not be able to buy licences and could fish illegally without fear of prosecution; income would be reduced; fish stocks may be seriously depleted; and we could be in breach of the EU habitats directive and the EU water framework directive.

Board officers must be appointed by the FCB and approved by the Department. Solicitors have advised that appointments should be made only after a process of advertisement, open recruitment and interviews. Therefore, I have asked representatives of the Department, at their meeting next week with the chairperson and board members, to discuss how additional support could be provided to the chief

executive and the board until the FCB's functions are transferred to the Department.

That work, together with closer oversight and management of the process by a senior official from my Department — the chairperson of the fisheries management group — will ensure that the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries will continue to be of paramount importance.

The Department will continue to work with the chairperson and the chief executive of the FCB to manage the transfer of functions and minimise the impact on the public and on the fishing community during the transitional period.

I shall respond to some of the issues that were raised by Members during the debate. FCB auditors are examining the assets register in order to verify the existence and whereabouts of boats and will examine their condition and seaworthiness. The FCB has 19 fisheries officers, three of whom are on sick leave, and there are 11 active bailiffs.

With respect to the timing of the transfer of functions, the Department will act immediately after the legislation is in place.

I touched on the importance of the angling industry at the outset of my speech. The Department liaises with the Loughs Agency on policies and requirements for bailiffs, taking cognisance of European legislation such as the water framework directive, which requires us to work on an all-Ireland basis in many respects — which we do already. We have carried out surveys and consultations in respect of our report on the socio-economic impact of angling, which we are due to publish in early 2008.

Departmental staff attend tourism events in a number of countries each year to advertise what is available in Northern Ireland. A new website has received hits from all over the world.

The Department is prepared to examine the incident that was mentioned by Mr McCarthy, and I ask him to provide us with the relevant material.

Financing for the FCB was mentioned. In 2006-07, £200,000 was received from the Environment and Heritage Service. That funding is no longer available and has had to be provided by my Department. The total expenditure for 2006-07 was £948,000, and for 2008-09 it will be £1,055,000. Despite the fact that we have lost £200,000 of income from the EHS, we will be able to sustain, and modestly increase above the rate of inflation, the money available to the FCB.

I thank Members for raising this issue, on which the House is at one. We recognise the need to manage problems and provide a better service that is in the best interests of the angling and wider Northern Ireland community.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to give the winding-up speech on the motion and the amendment, because I come from an area where angling is very important. I would like to mention the Lough Neagh eel fishermen who have been very unhappy with the service that they have received from the FCB over the years.

I have already given a long presentation to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on that issue, so I will not go into details. The Lough Neagh Eel Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd issues licences, for which fishermen are glad to pay because, fundamentally, they own the co-operative. They receive the service that they want, including the patrolling of the lough. The Fisheries Conservancy Board should be patrolling the lough but is not doing so sufficiently or efficiently.

I want to refer to points that Members made during the debate. I thank David McNarry for moving the motion. Mr McCausland spoke about abolishing the board but also keeping stakeholders in touch with everything that the Assembly is doing so that a body is created that is efficient and that will stand the test of time in all areas of responsibility. He said that the board is in crisis; it has lost staff and has financial difficulties, which is a sign of inefficiency. Morale is low and, as Mr Morrow, said, the organisation is reaching its sell-by date. My understanding is that it does not have the confidence of the fishing community.

Mr Ramsey spoke from a position of strength on Lough Foyle, which is not dependent on the FCB. He pointed out the importance of tourism. It was only when I attended a tourism conference a few years ago that I realised, for the first time, what a huge sport angling is and how important it is to the economy. I have not been involved in angling, although I live beside the River Roe, which is one of the best fishing rivers in the North. The economic argument is powerful, and Mr Ramsey pointed out that angling is worth €55 million to the Republic. I do not have figures for what it is worth here, but angling attracts huge interest from all over the world, not least because we are lucky to have rivers that are not only looked after well but are, as far as is humanly possible, free from pollution. Mr Ramsey also mentioned the importance of cross-border co-operation. Our rivers do not stop at the border, and it is vital to have co-operation right round the island for the measures that are required to maintain this great sport and industry.

Kieran McCarthy also spoke about the importance of angling here and how it must be encouraged by having the best possible body to promote and protect the fishing environment.

Ken Robinson complimented the fishermen on the eastern seaboard. Members may talk about boards,

statutory agencies and so forth, but sports such as fishing and angling depend on the hard work of local fishing communities, fishing councils and fishermen, who patrol the rivers as they fish. We should have a vote of thanks for such fishermen, particularly those in Ken Robinson's area, who have brought the rivers back to full use. For the first time in many years, salmon have returned.

Wallace Browne took an academic line on fishing; he is obviously a man of some erudition. He reiterated the importance of fishing and gave his full support to the motion and Members' contributions. He mentioned the need for an overseeing dispensation to replace the FCB, which he described as having reached its sell-by date. That seems to be the general consensus.

Willie Clarke emphasised the need for the proper resourcing of whatever body comes into being after the abolition of the FCB. He also mentioned pollution prevention; what generally happens with pollution is a damage-limitation exercise after the event. However, it is not difficult to prevent pollution, and we could examine areas where pollution might happen — along farm ways or near factories and huge outlets from housing estates. Many sources of pollution can be monitored carefully — and they should be. Pollution should become a part of history. I agree with Willie Clarke that pollution prevention must be a priority for the new body.

P J Bradley supported Members' contributions, based on his local information. The Minister summed up Members' contributions and gave us great hope that the transfer from the FCB to the new body will be quick and efficient, since much of the preparatory work has already been done. Like other Members, I support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to assist the Fisheries Conservancy Board in its management, and calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation abolishing the Fisheries Conservancy Board and transferring its responsibility to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as a matter of urgency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is Question Time for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety at 2.30 pm. Members may wish to take their ease until then.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Service Efficiency Targets

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the efficiency targets he has set for the Health Service over the next three years. (AQO 625/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My Department is finalising challenging efficiencies amounting to £343 million by 2010-11 as part of the Executive Committee's agreed approach to the comprehensive spending review. That builds on efficiencies of £146 million that have already been achieved. Those efficiencies 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 officials are working closely with Health Service professionals to develop detailed plans for the delivery of those efficiencies. Until I am assured that they are real efficiencies, and not simply cuts by another name, I will not support specific efficiency targets for the Health Service.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister confirm that in attempting to achieve the 3% efficiency targets, as he has just outlined, patients will still come first, and that no cuts will occur at the expense of doctors, nurses and those in the front line of healthcare?

Mr McGimpsey: Patients will always come first; that is why we have a Health Service. The efficiency targets are very challenging for the Health Service — some £340 million over three years, in addition to the £146 million that has already been achieved, which equates to 3% in efficiencies and 5% in areas of administration. Those are very stiff targets to meet, but I am confident that we can meet them where productivity, procurement, pharmaceuticals and administrative pay and related savings are concerned, although it will be difficult and challenging.

As the Health Service evolves and changes direction, there will be a change in emphasis for jobs. For example, care in the community and looking after patients at home requires a different type of support and personnel

from what is required in the acute setting, so there are going to be changes. However, the main concern is always about improving the service for patients.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister assure the House that there will not be any loss of front-line Health Service jobs due to the efficiency savings?

Mr McGimpsey: I refer the Member to the last part of my answer, where I said that I will not support the efficiencies until I am assured that they are not cuts by another name. I am not in the business of making cuts. I am in the business of making efficiencies and making the Health Service work to its absolute optimum in improved productivity, better buying and efficient prescribing, in order to support patients. Patient care comes first.

Mr Easton: In light of the efficiency savings that the Minister has outlined, will he tell the House when he will reach a decision on the review of artwork that he announced, and the possible savings of around £12 million that could go into front-line services?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not recognise the figure of £12 million, but I did order a review, because under direct rule up to 1% of the bill for new capital programmes could be spent on artwork. Artwork is a very broad term; with newbuilds, it could mean softening the environment within what are very functional buildings and structures — it is not about buying pieces of art to hang on the wall.

I will come back to the House with the findings of the review, which I ordered so that I could understand the situation better. The findings should be available in a reasonably short time.

Clostridium Difficile

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what specific action he is taking to tackle the high levels of clostridium difficile at the Ulster Hospital. (AQO 621/08)

Mr McGimpsey: On 11 September 2007, I announced that, for the first time, targets to reduce two particular healthcare-associated infections were being implemented in health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland. I am seeking a 20% reduction by March 2009 of cases of clostridium difficile in hospital patients who are aged 65 and over.

A comprehensive infection-reduction plan for 2007-08 has been produced for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and is being rolled out at the Ulster Hospital. The infection prevention and control team there has an active programme, which includes monitoring closely all episodes of clostridium difficile that occur. That action plan also includes a review of antibiotic guidelines to ensure that the prudent antimicrobial

prescription of new data that relate to clostridium difficile in the Ulster Hospital during the second and third quarters of 2007 undergo analysis. Indeed, there are clear indications that the rate has reduced.

Mr Hamilton: As the Minister will know, this issue causes great concern throughout our community. I welcome the targets that he has set to reduce the occurrences of so-called superbugs. Will he assure me that the method of recording episodes of clostridium difficile is standardised in all hospitals in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes; it is important that the collection and sharing of data is standardised throughout all the trusts so that we can monitor what is happening and that we are comparing like for like. The Member's point is very important, and I take it on board.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he is more aware than I am of the difficulty in creating real accountability in the NHS. Therefore, can he tell the House who is directly accountable for the quality of cleaning in the Ulster Hospital? Can he also advise how inspections will be monitored and recorded to ensure that improvements occur?

Mr McGimpsey: I understand that cleanliness is a concern. The Ulster Hospital has its own infection-reduction plan that includes a programme that monitors ward cleanliness; monitoring all multi-antibiotic-resistant bacteria; a medical consultant microbiologist to provide medical leadership; the introduction of the trust-wide hand-hygiene campaign; and an active auditing of hand-hygiene practice.

The Changing the Culture strategy, which applies throughout Northern Ireland, is another important element of the programme. It provides for an audit of environmental-cleanliness standards in hospitals. Therefore, an implementation group is working to deliver the strategy and share good practice. Cleaning standards in hospitals are important, and they cause great concern. As Dr McDonnell is aware, people have a right to expect not to become ill as a result of a visit to hospital. Therefore, we all need to take the matter seriously.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for meeting with me recently to discuss infections at the Craigavon Area Hospital. Does he agree that our hospitals are general thoroughfares where visitors meet and greet people, and, if so, will he consider reviewing visiting hours to ensure that every effort is made to crack down on the spread of infections?

Mr McGimpsey: The report from the second audit of environmental-cleanliness standards will be an important next step in considering areas in which we can ensure that improvements are made. One such area is regulating visiting and the movement of the public in hospitals, which are often like public thoroughfares.

A return to some of the old standards regarding visiting hours and ensuring that only those with business in the wards should be there is an important function that must be looked at, and I will certainly do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No 3 has been withdrawn.

Reduced Health Budget

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the impact that a reduced budget for his Department will have, in relation to front-line services and patients. (AQO 629/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I have not agreed the Budget: I have agreed a draft Budget as a basis for general consultation with the Assembly and the public. Over the comprehensive spending review period, the draft Budget will provide an increase of only 1.1% per annum in real terms for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That represents an increase of £455 million, although the health budget will increase to over £4.2 billion by 2010-11. Considering that I have unavoidable pressures and existing commitments of some £700 million for that year, a significant element of my efficiency savings of £343 million will have to be reinvested to meet those ongoing pressures. That leaves a mere £16 million to invest in new service developments next year. By comparison, the Department of Health in England has seen a larger rise of 3.7%.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. The answer to the question of whether this is a draft or an adopted Budget is one that the House awaits with great eagerness, and I await the resolution — in eight weeks' time — that there is inadequate funding in all Departments.

Does the Minister agree that our Health Service needs more investment, and does he share my disbelief at recent statements from Members who have claimed that the draft Budget is good for health? Is it not the case that there would be more money available to invest in our Health Service if other Members had kept their promises on the delivery of economic packages as a precondition to entering Government?

[Interruption.]

Stop your yapping — you have been caught on.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is he allowed to get away with that?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take her seat. Points of order will not be taken during Question Time. I am happy to take points of order after Question Time.

Mr McGimpsey: It is clear — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As Members have discussed in the House on several occasions, our need for mental-health provision is 25% greater than in England and our children's health receives 30% less funding than it does in England. There is a gap of over £300 million between our health budget and that of England's, and that is not disputed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Over the next three years, that gap will approximately double to somewhere around £600 million. Therefore, one can see the difference between Northern Ireland and England's health provision. We are all part of the kingdom and citizens of the same country, but a second-tier Health Service is being created in Northern Ireland, and people in Northern Ireland are worse off with regard to health provision.

Mr Gallagher: As a member of the Health Committee, I welcome the Minister's robust resistance to taking any cuts in the health budget. As the Minister knows, the Committee has been receiving submissions on suicide and self-harm. Considering those submissions and the weekend's tragic events, will the Minister inform the House if the allocation to mental health — particularly to resources aimed at tackling suicide and self-harm — for this financial year will remain intact?

Mr McGimpsey: As Members are aware, the key document on mental health and learning disabilities is the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) and its findings. Although there is a roll-out period of between 10 and 15 years for the implementation of its recommendations, it is important that we get started.

Mental health and learning disability was my number one bid in the review, after inescapables and conditions that prove fatal. For example, I bid for £17 million for mental health in year one, and the proposed allocation is for £4 million; I bid for £29 million in year two, and the proposed allocation is for £7 million; and I bid for £48 million in year three, and the proposed allocation is for £18 million — a considerable gap.

2.45 pm

There are major gaps, and I could mention other areas that Members have written to me about. As regards mental health and learning disability, the most graphic example is in the area of suicide and self-harm. One can see how difficult it will be to begin any kind of meaningful roll-out of the Bamford recommendations, and I find that difficult to accept. The Member is right: I do argue my case as far as the budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is concerned.

Mr Ross: I have listened to what the Minister has said. However, we all know that the Minister did agree to the draft Budget at the Executive meeting.

Nonetheless, does he accept that if, as he well knows, the increasing costs of providing services means that the public purse will not be able to meet public expectation — even with allocations as high as 48% of the block grant — then it is up to him and his Department to introduce radical reforms to promote efficiency and offer incentives to service providers. His inaction thus far is failing the people of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ross: Perhaps the Minister will tell the House what cuts he would like to see in other areas?

Mr McGimpsey: Clearly, Mr Ross did not listen to what I said. I said in the first part — *[Interruption.]*

Shouting at me from a sedentary position says more about Mr Ross, and his argument, than it does about me and mine.

I will repeat what I said. I have not agreed the Budget. I have agreed a draft Budget as the basis for general consultation with the Assembly and the general public. Why would I be looking to have a consultation if the Budget were settled?

Funding and the public purse are related to need, and what that need is assessed to be. As I pointed out in my answer to the first question, we have contributed efficiencies worth £143 million so far, and further efficiencies worth £348 million will be contributed in the next three-year period. Those are major efficiencies. The issue is not about sectors or employees being resistant to radical change — far from it; it is about getting the most efficient service that we can, because that is what is best for patients and patient care.

We deal with need, and health is one of those areas in which need is assessed, and ways are then found to address that need. It is not about cutting a slice of the cake for health provision and hoping that it will be enough. If need is not met and catered for properly, lives will be harmed or even lost.

New Health Structures

5. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will provide clarification in relation to the formation of new health structures, in order to address the concerns of health and social services board employees who are uncertain about their future employment. (AQO 619/08)

Mr McGimpsey: My key priority is that structural reforms should deliver better outcomes for the citizens of Northern Ireland. I inherited proposals that I had no part in drawing up, and I want to make my own decisions on the way forward. I wrote to all health and social care staff on 8 October to let them know in detail what

is happening with the change process and to outline my ambitions for the health and social care system.

I also wrote to the chairpersons of all boards and trusts to plan the way ahead and to ensure that work continues as normal. My letters made it clear that it was very unlikely that there would be any further changes to structures before April 2009 given the legislative and practical considerations involved. I also confirmed that the current trust structures — the five social care trusts and the Ambulance Service — will remain largely as they are.

Mrs I Robinson: Given all that has been said thus far, I must take anything that the Minister says with a large pinch of salt. I have no desire — *[Interruption.]*

I will ask my question. The Minister allowed other Members to speak — so he can just sit there. I do not wish to make a political football out of mental-health issues; however, every Executive Minister signed off on the draft Budget. The Minister is sitting there and is misleading this House — all Ministers signed off. Other Executive Ministers are not crying out like the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The reason for that is because he does not have the bottle to take the necessary decisions that might help the Health Service —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs I Robinson: I will ask my question. When will the Minister reduce the number of health boards from four to one and allow local commissioning groups to do what they are entitled to do? The Minister has changed those groups' positions without consulting them. What will he do about the local commissioning groups?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McGimpsey: I take issue with Mrs Robinson for accusing me of misleading the House. I repeat — for the third time: I agreed to the draft Budget as a basis for consultation with the Assembly. There is no agreement on the Budget — nor would there be. Living in denial is an unfortunate position in which to be.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister agreed and signed off on the draft Budget.

Mr McGimpsey: I did not. I agreed as a basis for consultation.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Allow him to answer.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I realise that Members can become excitable about these matters. I will explain what is happening with the review of public administration, because that is, purportedly, what the Member's question was about. The 19 trusts have been reduced to six. Of those, 18 hospital trusts and the Ambulance Service were reduced to five plus one. They will largely stay as they are.

Further to that, there are several management functions in the Health Service that must be examined: performance management is a key factor in making efficiencies; financial management —

Mrs I Robinson: What about the boards?

Mr McGimpsey: Mrs Robinson, I am coming to the boards. Try to show a little patience — calmly, calmly, calmly. *[Laughter.]* Financial management is another key management process by which we live within our means and ensure the maximum possible return on investment. Commissioning is the process by which services are planned and resourced to ensure that the needs of the population are met and value for money is achieved.

I have added two further management functions that were not previously in the plans devised by Peter Hain and his direct rule Ministers. Under direct rule, there was a one-day-a-week Minister, and elected representatives were not allowed on the boards or to be involved in any Health Service structures. I am considering democratisation, which would give locally elected representatives a voice in the planning and delivery of services in the health and social care system.

Another key function of Health Service management that must be considered is the potential for the implementation and delivery of health services at a local level. In other words, transferring powers from the Department to local government, which would help to take account of existing health inequalities and the fact that the more disadvantaged the area in which a person lives, the more likely he or she is to have a shorter life and to suffer from greater rates of morbidity and mortality, and which could consider action zones and healthy city initiatives. That is where we are.

Currently, the main management function of the four boards is that of commissioning. In addition, the shadow commissioning organisations are in place. Under direct rule, seven local commissioning groups were proposed to correspond with the seven proposed councils. Most Members understand that there are unlikely to be seven such councils and that the number of local commissioning groups will also change.

The boards, about which Mrs Robinson was shouting at me from a sedentary position, are undergoing staff reductions, and, until the new structures are in place, their commissioning role will continue to function.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister realise that his announcement that the restructuring process will continue until 2009 has caused many staff who work

for the health and social services boards huge levels of stress and anxiety? More inequality and inequity exists, so will he clarify, for once and for all, what is happening with Agenda for Change? Can the Minister confirm that health and social services boards' staff have been given enough support? Sinn Féin believes that they have not.

Mr McGimpsey: As far as Agenda for Change is concerned, matching will be completed by the end of this year, and the new wage structures will be in place by March 2008. The process has been under way from long before I arrived on the scene. I inherited a direct rule plan that had been drawn up for a direct rule situation. The situation has changed, and it is important that the Assembly and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety work collectively to determine the best way forward. Most of the staff changes, which affect the trusts, where the bulk of staff works, have already been made, and those will not alter much. I am concerned about efficiencies rather than about any suggestion that we will alter the structures.

Mr P Ramsey: Given all our concerns about continued improvement in health, and the clearly unmet needs in the Department, did the Minister not err over the potential savings that could have been made by retaining the boards?

Mr McGimpsey: The potential saving by April 2009 was £1 million. Although the Department will not make that saving, it has offset funds to cover it. Therefore, as they stand, the plans are cost-neutral.

The boards' commissioning function will be taken over by local commissioning groups. However, it is unlikely that there will still be seven groups, as there are unlikely to be seven councils, so we must examine how the groups will tie in and what functions they will assume.

Fewer than 1,000 people work for the boards, and I understand their position. However, they comprise a small proportion of the total number of Health Service employees, and I do not want to rush the restructuring — I want to get it right. Restructuring has the potential to create real efficiencies, because the Department is examining performance management, commissioning, financial management, democratisation, and potential for implementation and delivery at local levels, all of which are functions, as opposed to structures, of management.

I mentioned April 2009, but I hope to announce the proposed decision in the House long before that. April 2009 is the date that we are looking at for the introduction of legislation.

Home Start

6. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to continue

the provision of funding, through the Children and Young People's Fund, for Home Start schemes in Armagh and Dungannon, in light of the fact that this funding will end in six months. (AQO 611/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I know about the real and lasting differences that locally based Home Start schemes are making to the lives of families with young children, and I want to be able to continue to support that important work. However, until the Budget is finalised, funding for individual projects cannot be determined. I recognise that projects need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I assure those involved that that confirmation will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Mr Molloy: Does the Minister agree that mainstream funding of such projects would be better than the stop-start funding that they currently receive? Given the high number of migrant-worker families in Armagh and Dungannon, does he agree that the need is greater there?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree completely with Mr Molloy's point about stop-start funding. The matter falls under the remit of the children's fund, which the first Northern Ireland Executive created in 2001. The children's fund is an Executive programme fund that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has delivered.

3.00 pm

The proposal under the draft Budget is that from March 2008, the children's fund will disappear. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will therefore have to absorb that funding itself at a cost of £5.9 million per annum. In the present harsh financial climate, the offer for my Department under the draft Budget is £3.8 million for year one, £2 million for year two and £2.1 million for year three. That is a major deficit as far as the children's fund is concerned.

Therefore — and I know that this is no comfort — it is not just the main projects that will suffer if the draft Budget goes through. Armagh and Dungannon, Ards, Comber and —

Mr Speaker: I have to interrupt. Unfortunately time is up for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Mortality Hotspots

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to target road mortality hotspots in Northern Ireland; and what plans he has to deal with these areas in a co-ordinated way. (AQO 719/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I ask for Members' indulgence. It is a wide-ranging question; therefore my answer will be longer than normal.

I assure Members that my Department's Roads Service and I give a high priority to road safety and that we are fully committed to making a significant contribution towards achieving the casualty reduction targets set out in the Northern Ireland road safety strategy.

Roads Service receives information from the PSNI on all collisions in which someone has been injured. The locations of all those collisions are monitored, and any location with a history of four or more collisions — known as a "collision cluster" — in a three-year period is investigated to determine whether appropriate engineering measures could be introduced to mitigate against further collisions at those sites. Generally speaking, fatal collisions tend not to cluster together.

Each year, Roads Service implements programmes of collision remedial schemes across the North. Considerable success has been demonstrated with that approach, with a reduction of over 50% of target collisions at treated sites. The most recent assessment has shown that Roads Service has achieved an overall reduction of 68% of target collisions at treated sites over three years following the completion of the collision remedial schemes implemented during the 2003-04 financial year.

As the collision remedial programme has progressed, the majority of the collision-cluster sites have been treated, which has resulted in collisions being more dispersed on the road network and occurring in a more random fashion. In that instance, the length of road can be considered for what is known as "route treatment", which involves the assessment of entire lengths of roads to determine what measures are necessary to improve their overall safety records.

In July 2007, I had a successful meeting with Minister Foster and Assistant Chief Constable Toner to discuss how all of us can contribute to the forthcoming review of the Northern Ireland road safety strategy. Members will be aware that that strategy was developed to promote an integrated approach to the planning, co-ordination and delivery of the Government's road-safety activities.

Roads Service, the Department of the Environment and the PSNI work in a co-ordinated manner to promote road safety across the North, through road-safety engineering, enforcement and education measures. We all give road safety a high priority and are fully committed to making a contribution towards reducing the carnage on the roads.

The implementation of the road safety strategy has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the substantial reduction in overall injury collisions since 2000. However, so far this year, 88 people have tragically

lost their lives on our roads. Although that figure is down on the same period last year, we must not be complacent.

The level of motorcycle fatalities — 24 riders and one pillion passenger — so far this year is a major concern, and addressing that statistic is a key priority for everyone involved in road safety.

Clearly, driving at excessive speed without regard to conditions is one of the major causation factors of collisions on our roads. I will shortly be considering the review of the speed management policy, which was carried out by my officials in conjunction with the PSNI and the DOE's road safety branch. I hope that officials will be in a position to discuss that review with the Committee for Regional Development by the end of the year.

Engineering, enforcement and education all have a vital role to play in reducing road casualties in the North. However, it is a well established fact that the vast majority of collisions are due to driver error. Therefore, road users also have to play their part in reducing road casualties. Drivers and riders must, at all times, drive at the appropriate speed for the prevailing conditions and pay attention to all of the hazards that contribute to the carnage on our roads.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his concise answer. *[Laughter.]*

On a serious note, I thank him for his comprehensive answer. As road conditions clearly have an impact on traffic accidents, will the Minister detail how often resurfacing of main roads and trunk roads takes place, and whether the time frames for resurfacing are improving?

Mr Murphy: If the Member wants a concise answer, he should perhaps ask a concise question.

Road maintenance is, of course, important to DRD Roads Service in helping to maintain safety on all of our roads.

I draw the Member's attention to statistics that have consistently indicated over the years that 81% of accidents are due to driver behaviour. Only 2% of accidents are attributed to road conditions.

Road safety is of key importance in my Department's structure and maintenance budget, and remedial work is carried out along the routes where accident clusters occur. However, the overwhelming proportion of road fatalities is caused by driver behaviour. My Department will continue to invest in addressing road conditions as far as its budget allows, and will bid for the maximum possible budget for such investment to enhance road safety. However, road condition is not the major factor that causes fatalities on our roads.

Mr P Ramsey: Given the concern of all Members about road deaths, particularly in cross-border regions,

will the Minister outline what procedures are in place to ensure that relatives are fully informed as to the causes of road fatalities? He has already mentioned driver behaviour as a cause of fatalities.

Will the Minister inform the House how the collation of information on road deaths is used in publicity campaigns that are designed to reduce deaths on the roads?

Mr Murphy: Some elements of the Member's question relate to responsibilities of the Department of the Environment. My Department is responsible for roads: their structures, surfaces and conditions. However, informing relatives of the causes of accidents, and the use of statistics in publicity campaigns, are responsibilities of the Department of the Environment. That Department is responsible for road-safety campaigns.

As I have explained, police inform the Roads Service of accidents that have caused an injury, and if a pattern emerges at a certain spot, it is deemed a collision cluster. The Roads Service will take remedial action at that spot or along the route where it lies.

Some of the other matters that the Member has queried, which relate specifically to road safety, are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment.

Mr G Robinson: Mine is a precise question. Does the Minister agree that the Frosses Road — the A26 — is a mortality hot spot and urgently requires upgrading to a dual carriageway, considering the number of tragic deaths on that stretch of road? Will he give a timescale for that work?

Mr Murphy: The Member and others have been in touch with me on a number of occasions about the Frosses Road. There is a programme of work, but I have no precise timescale to hand. However, that information has been communicated in responses to written questions and in letters to Members from that general area.

However, I have just received a note that states that — *[Laughter.]*

No; I am sorry: that note relates to a different question altogether. *[Laughter.]*

There have been fatalities on the Frosses Road, and local people and elected representatives are concerned that remedial action be taken. I do not have the precise date for the beginning of that work, but I will communicate that information to any elected representative who requests it.

Independent Water Review Panel

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the impact on the financial models upon which the proposals of the

strand one report of the Independent Water Review Panel are based, if increased affordability tariffs are proposed. (AQO 657/08)

Mr Murphy: Any assessment of the financial impact of an improved affordability tariff is subject to the independent panel's further recommendations under strand two of its review. However, my Department's preliminary assessment suggests that that could cost £6 million per annum.

The Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report made two main points about the affordability tariff. It suggested that the proposed arrangements were efficient at helping those who qualified: in other words, the tariff lifted out of water poverty almost all those who qualified for it. However, it did not appear to adequately target working families on low incomes or pensioners who were not entitled to benefits or who failed to claim them. Consequently, the panel has undertaken to do more work on that matter, with a view to making further recommendations in its second report.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer. Under what he calls the current preliminary assessment, will he assure the House that, after 2009, household rates bills will not be increased as a result of the introduction of the water tax?

Mr Murphy: The Member should know that the issue of household rates bills is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel. My Department has set out clearly that more work will be done on the costs that will be incurred over the next couple of years or so in the second report of the Independent Water Review Panel.

I made a statement to the Assembly on 22 October, for which I had the approval of the Executive. Then, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, as part of his Budget statement, said that there would be no increase in the regional rate. There had been some expectation that the regional rate might be hiked to meet the cost of attributing some of the money towards the cost of water, as had been the case traditionally. I assure the Member that we will continue to look closely at the matter. The financial impact over the next number of years for the Executive and the general public has been set out in my statement and in the Budget statement.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. As regards affordability tariffs and those people who would be unable to make a one-off payment, has water metering been considered? How much difference would there be between one-off payments and metering?

Mr Murphy: Domestic metering was dealt with in the panel's report, and it is a subject on which there will continue to be diverse views. It should be obvious that metering will not make everyone's bill more affordable. Although certain households with low consumption would see a reduction in their Bills,

others would have to increase. On 22 October, in response to questions following my statement in the Assembly, I expressed my view that it would be appropriate to have a debate in the coming weeks and months about what the benefits of metering are presumed to be. Such a debate will shed more light on the subject, as there has not been a proper debate on metering. I know that other people have very firm views on the matter.

In response to the second part of the panel's report and the related consultation, in order to move forward, debate — and perhaps legislation for the Assembly to vote on — will be required.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the proposed water charges — and public confidence in them — will stand or fall on the basis of the affordability tariff? Will he assure the House that he has already discussed the issue with the review panel and has outlined his suggestions in order to ensure that any form of water charging is fair, seen to be fair, and will have public confidence?

Mr Murphy: Public confidence has already been increased as a result of how the debate has been conducted. In retrospect, there was a great lack of confidence in how the previous Administration and the direct rule Administration dealt with some of the issues. The current Administration has succeeded through the good work carried out by the panel.

The Member knows that some panel members have a significant knowledge of affordability and water poverty issues. At the start, I gave them my general view on the issues. It is not appropriate for me to suggest to the panel how it might deal with those issues. The panel is independent of the Executive, and its recommendations will be considered by the Executive and the Assembly. I assure the Member that I share his view that affordability is one of the key elements.

People should not be made to suffer or to fall into water poverty as a result of our propositions. The Executive's overriding objective, despite the poisoned commentary that I heard over the weekend, is to provide the fairest possible system within the constraints facing us and to provide a transparent system so that people can understand clearly what they are being asked to pay for and the service they will receive as a result. The proposals that we brought forward, and that the Executive agreed, set us on our way, and I look forward to the second phase of the panel's report, which will bring more light to the issue of affordability. I share with the Member and many others the view that affordability is a key issue.

New Homes

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to compel developers

to pay the full cost of connecting new homes to services.
(AQO 701/08)

Mr Murphy: Connecting all new homes to services involves the cost of making a connection to the water main or public sewer and the cost of ensuring that the local network has the capacity to meet the increased demand placed upon it.

Those costs are recovered through connection charges and the new infrastructure charges that have been introduced, on a phased basis, this year. For a relatively small number of properties there is also the cost for providing a water main or for sewer extension requisitioning. For that work the water company provides a reasonable cost allowance to the developer. The arrangement is intended to fairly apportion the costs of a requisition between the developer and the company.

In its strand-one report, the independent panel recommends that that should be reviewed, and it is my intention to initiate that review shortly.

Mr McCarthy: Recently, most developers have made huge amounts of money by building new developments and apartments, some of which are required and some that are not.

However, all of those developments need sewer and water pipes, new street lighting and, sometimes, new roads, for which the taxpayer is usually obliged to pay. Does the Minister not agree that it is ridiculous that taxpayers must, effectively, subsidise the business interests of some of the wealthiest people in society?

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that, in line with the panel's recommendation, I intend to review that situation. However, last year's consultation document indicated that the annual cost of requisitions — the connection charges to which the Member refers — was around £7 million, half of which was borne by the developers under proposals that were introduced by the direct rule Administration and the other half by the water company. More recent data from the current financial year suggests that those figures may have been overestimates. Clearly, the issue must be examined further. The Department intends to review the contribution that is made by developers.

Mr S Wilson: Developers are currently required to bring the infrastructure in their developments up to adoption standards before they are handed over to Roads Service. In many cases, developments have been completed for five, six or, sometimes, seven years before the roads are brought up to standard, which causes great problems for residents. What plans does the Minister have for early activation of the bonds that developers must take out, so that people do not have to wait for years before the roads in the developments in which they live are brought up to proper standards?

Mr Murphy: I accept entirely what the Member has said. Several Members have written to me or submitted questions on the matter. I understand the frustration of people who live in such developments. Obviously, the onus is on the developer to bring roads, footpaths and other infrastructure up to an acceptable standard. Roads Service cannot adopt them until that happens. However, as a situation drags on, the question is at what stage Roads Service should take the bond and carry out the work itself. Roads Service must consider the cost of the work and whether it can take on a planned schedule of work in a particular area given the tightness of the schedule elsewhere. I am happy to consider the issue and to discuss it with Roads Service. I am aware that it is a source of frustration that has been raised by many Members right across the North. On the Member's suggestion, I am content to sit down with Roads Service senior management and discuss how progress can be made.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister ensure that any changes to connection charges do not add to the cost of social housing and that there will be provision for first-time buyers?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure how the Member makes that relation. Kieran McCarthy's proposition is that any changes to connection costs should be borne by the developer. I do not see how that would add to the costs of social housing. Perhaps, the Member refers to affordable housing or social housing that is built by developers. That is fair enough. Had he said that at the outset, his question would have been clearer. The amount that a developer charges for a house and what he or she receives is a matter for the buyer in that particular market.

The panel has suggested that a review be initiated, and people have made the case that developers are receiving a substantial amount of money for the properties that they develop. Therefore, the Department has suggested that, if there is scope for an increase or reconsideration of the cost of connection in such a way that it will not affect public funds or the money that would otherwise be spent by the water company, which is received from the general public, it is quite happy to carry out a review of the matter.

Water Bills

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact that future revaluations of domestic rating will have on the newly proposed water bills. (AQO 646/08)

Mr Murphy: The level of water and sewerage bills under a capital-value-based regime depends on two factors that are independent of each other; first, the cost of providing the services, and, secondly, the

capital value of an individual property as a proportion of the aggregate capital value of all properties. The effect of a revaluation depends on a change in the proportion rather than in the actual capital value. Although it is impossible to predict the effects of a revaluation on water and sewerage bills at an individual level, some properties increase in value more rapidly than others for a variety of reasons. It is important to keep in mind that the individual capital values are used as a means to distribute the total cost of providing the service across all customers. It is my assessment that, provided that revaluations are carried out at frequent intervals, their impact on water and sewerage bills will generally be small.

Mr B McCrea: As the water tax proposed by the Department for Regional Development will be based on capital value, will the Minister tell us how that will affect social housing tenants who — obviously — do not own their own houses?

Mr Murphy: I dispute the Member's description of the charges as a "water tax". That assumes that a progressive tax is being imposed on people rather than a charge for service provision. I understand where, perhaps, the Member has got the idea of a water tax, because he is a member of the same party as the previous First Minister. It was something that was hatched in the plans that that First Minister had with the Treasury.

The contribution made by households will be subject to affordability tariff discussions in the second part of the panel's review. The intention of the system — as I have said to another colleague — is to have the fairest and most transparent system possible. That is a marked difference from the system that was proposed by the Member's former party leader. It is certainly a marked difference from the system that was proposed by direct rule Ministers. It is our intention that the system will be fair and transparent, and that those who can least afford to pay will be the people who are asked for the least payment.

Mr O'Loan: When a revaluation happens, will the Minister explain how he will ensure that it will be made clear that an opportunity has not been taken to increase the water component of a domestic charge? There is widespread misunderstanding about the issue of charges, and people take it for granted that, in the event of a revaluation, their bills will simultaneously increase in the same way. What is the Minister doing — and what is he doing in conjunction with the Minister of Finance and Personnel — to contribute to more public understanding about that issue?

Mr Murphy: I am happy to contribute to answering your question. We will have a debate tomorrow when — if that question arises — I will be happy to address it. The question reveals a certain misunderstanding.

The contribution made from domestic and non-domestic customers will pay for water and sewerage services — whatever those services may cost. If there is a hike in the value of property, that does not necessarily mean that there will be a hike, to the same level, in water and sewerage bills.

Charges are not based on the value of a house. Rather, charges are based on the cost of the services to people across the region. Therefore, the domestic or non-domestic customer can be charged only for that which is needed to ensure provision of water and sewerage services. There is a misconception in that people think that charges are linked to the value of property, and, as the value of property increases, so do the bills. Bills, and the contributions for which domestic or non-domestic customers are asked, will pay for service provision. That will be made apparent. That is where the system's transparency and fairness is a marked improvement on the system that was formerly proposed.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. What evidence is there for the following statement in the Independent Water Review Panel's 'Strand One Report':

"Capital value is a broadly acceptable proxy for ability to pay",

especially for those who are asset rich and income poor? Will the Minister confirm that all his colleagues in the Executive backed and supported the findings of the panel? Will the Minister recommend to his Executive colleagues that they should inform their party colleagues about ministerial decisions that they have taken in Executive Committee meetings?

Mr Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to answer.

Mr Murphy: The truth is often difficult to face. The first part of the Member's question should be addressed by the panel, because it brought forward the work. Most unmeasured regimes are based on property values, in one form or another. In Scotland, for example, water charges are based on council tax bands and command a fair degree of acceptance. Earlier work that was undertaken by my Department a number of years ago suggests that, in general terms, a capital value system directs higher charges to more affluent areas of the North.

With regard to Ms Anderson's second question, the Executive agreed a way forward on the decisions that needed to be taken for the budgetary discussions, decisions and statements that were made. That received unanimous support in the Executive. The Executive, and my colleagues in the Executive subcommittee, will wish to discuss further a number of other recommendations made by the panel. I was pleased that the Executive decided the general way forward on how the panel's report impacted on the budgetary decisions that had to be taken.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Roads Service Budget

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development what funding bid he had submitted in relation to structural maintenance in the Roads Service budget. (AQO 681/08)

Mr Murphy: The House heard the statement on the October monitoring round this morning, and we have not secured any money in that round for structural maintenance. We submitted bids totalling £22 million as part of that round. The bids submitted in the current comprehensive spending review (CRS) have been in line with the Roads Service structural maintenance funding plan, and they amount to £323 million over the three-year CSR period.

Mr A Maginness: It is disappointing that the Minister's bid in the October monitoring round has not secured additional funding. The amount of money that he mentioned — £323 million over three years — is clearly not adequate to meet the real structural maintenance demands. The likely consequence of the inadequate funding that the Minister has allowed himself to receive is that although major roads may be attended to, minor roads and drainage systems will not.

Mr Murphy: I share the Member's disappointment. He will know from his former position as the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee that structural maintenance often does not receive the allocations that the Roads Service would hope for. However, as the monitoring rounds continue, there is a tendency to make up that shortfall. Members will be aware — particularly from this morning's discussion on the statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel — that the December monitoring round often offers the most potential for securing additional funding. We will continue to push the case for such funding, and we are very much aware of our responsibilities.

It is not the case that the larger roads are prioritised and smaller roads neglected. We try to make available as much structural-maintenance funding as possible across all the Roads Service divisions. Those divisions try to spend that money as best they can, according to their own priorities. We will continue to push the case for more structural maintenance funding, as the Department has normally been successful in securing additional funding when it becomes available in the later monitoring rounds.

Mr I McCrea: Like the Member for North Belfast Mr Maginness, I too am disappointed that the funding available for structural maintenance is nowhere near adequate. I represent the rural constituency of Mid Ulster, where money is tight, to say the least. Will the Minister assure me that when any future moneys are being made available, such areas will be given a fair share of that funding? It certainly seems that rural

areas get the lesser amounts of money, given the figures for city routes.

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that whatever moneys are made available will be distributed fairly. Like the Member, I represent a rural constituency that would certainly consider itself to have been neglected over many years in respect of infrastructural funding. Many border constituencies would consider that they have likewise been neglected.

However, there is a formula for distributing the money across the various Roads Service divisions. It distributes the money as fairly as possible, and I will ensure that that fairness persists. As I said in response to the previous question, we will always continue to argue for the maximum amount of money for the structural maintenance budget, not just during the budgetary discussions at the start of the year, but during the monitoring rounds and whenever any money becomes available throughout the year.

Mr Burnside: I am sure that the Minister is aware of the statistics that emerged in the Comptroller and Auditor General's 2000 report on the state of our roads. On some 17% of our roads, anti-skidding standards were below the required threshold. Are the present standards on trunk roads throughout the Province higher or lower than that 17%? If they are lower, what are the Minister and his Department doing about it?

3.30 pm

Mr Murphy: The current standards are lower, but it depends on whether the Member considers those standards to be absolute prerequisites for road safety. They are lower than the expected standard, but less money is available to spend compared with what is available for other areas. However, we will continue to argue that road safety is a key factor of the roads maintenance budget, and we will try to spend money according to our priorities. I am aware of the statistics that the Member quoted, but the overwhelming cause of road fatalities and injuries is driver behaviour rather than the surface or structure of the road. Nevertheless, we will continue to treat road safety as a priority and, where the money is available, invest in it.

Sewage Treatment Facilities

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of whether or not the current sewage treatment facilities at Whitehead and Ballystrudder met the standards required under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive; and to give a timescale within which proposals to upgrade sewage treatment facilities at these locations would be implemented. (AQO 685/08)

Mr Murphy: Responsibility for determining whether waste-water treatment facilities meet the appropriate treatment requirements of the EU urban waste-water treatment directive rests with the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service, which has determined that appropriate treatment facilities are not in place in either Ballystrudder or Whitehead. I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that an option to combine flows from Ballycarry, Ballystrudder and Whitehead for discharge —

Mr Speaker: I apologise for interrupting. The time for questions to the Minister for Regional Development is up.

Mr Murphy: I will respond in writing to the Member.

Mr Speaker: We now move to questions to the Minister for Social Development. I call Mr Danny Kennedy again.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

House Prices

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact of the recent cooling of house prices on the affordable homes situation in Northern Ireland. (AQO 709/08)

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have had three firsts. I wonder what that would mean for an accumulator in the bookies. I will never know.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Sir John Semple's review and report on affordable housing were undertaken at a time when the housing market in Northern Ireland was extraordinarily buoyant, with very high price increases and with growth in the price of land outstripping that of houses. Nonetheless, the market never stays the same, and future adjustment to a less buoyant market seems inevitable. If recent media reports are to be believed, prices seem to be steady, and, in some cases, dropping. I hope that the market is calming, but we have yet to get concrete evidence that that is happening across the board, and not just in pockets. The panel of experts that I set up for the purpose will address those issues, and I look forward to receiving its report. Coincidentally, I will meet with the chairperson of that panel later this week, and I will raise those issues with him.

In the meantime, affordability and housing investment will remain priorities for me. I am keen to identify and explore all options, in order to allow my Department to fulfil its housing and regeneration responsibilities over the next three years, notwithstanding the Budget and

investment strategy limitations. To that end, my officials are engaging with Baroness Ford of Cunningham, chairman of English Partnerships, to gain information and advice on how such challenges, including legislative implications, have been successfully addressed in Great Britain and Ireland.

It is anticipated that the relevant information will cover the three areas of land, subsidy and planning. Baroness Ford has already commenced her work for me in that regard. It is necessary that that assignment is cognisant of, and dovetails with, the work of the capital realisation task force, and that emerging findings are available sufficiently quickly to inform the outcome of the final Programme for Government and Budget settlement, which, as Members know, is anticipated in January 2008.

Mr Kennedy: Again, I thank the Minister for a concise answer. It must be my questions.

How will the recent announcement in the draft Programme for Government of 10,000 new social homes in the next few years affect the demand for affordable homes? Will the Minister confirm whether she has access to any other funding streams to assist her in achieving her objective?

Ms Ritchie: The target set by the draft Programme for Government is for 10,000 houses over the next five years. The funds that I have received in the draft Budget are inadequate if we are to meet that target, because it will provide for only 300 houses in the coming year.

However, as a result of the capital-realisation task-force initiative, social housing has been factored into the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland as a priority for capital receipt. My Executive colleagues and I must be more innovative and creative about accessing funding from the private sector. I will consider alternative funding-investment models for the provision of social housing, such as: alternative methods of borrowing; private finance; land sales; and developer contributions. In that respect, I will meet with my ministerial colleague Minister Foster next week to discuss article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and the provision of social housing in the context of mixed-tenure development. I am sure that the Member will agree that the whole purpose of the exercise is to increase the supply of social housing.

All that will take time to deliver, but none of us must lose sight of the fact that a cost is associated with servicing borrowing and with private finance. Similar to a mortgage, that borrowing must be repaid with interest. Notwithstanding all that, I am charged with addressing the needs of the 36,000 people who are on the social-housing waiting list, around half of whom are in urgent housing need. There are around 21,000

homeless people. Housing is the challenge that faces everyone in the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister said that the affordable-homes situation has been factored into the investment strategy, and she talked about the impact that the cooling of house prices has had. Will she explain the impact that that will have on the social-housing waiting list, which she said comprises around 36,000 people?

Ms Ritchie: When the Executive discussed the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, I sought — and was given — an assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that social housing would be a priority from the return on capital receipts along with schools and education. That will all come about from the probable successful outcome of the capital realisation task force. I am conscious, as the Assembly and Executive must be, of the high number of people who are in urgent need of housing, the high number of people who are homeless, and the fact that the current Budget, if implemented, would not deal adequately with addressing the decent homes standard, or with dealing with maintenance and fuel poverty. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that we lobby for a sufficient Budget and to ensure that social housing is given the priority that is being afforded to it in the investment strategy.

Lord Morrow: I am sure that it gives the Minister no pleasure to preside over a housing crisis, albeit one that is not of her creation. However, she is now charged with the responsibility of taking us out of that housing crisis. Will she consider thinking outside the box about the future for social-sector housing? Has she explored all options? Did she say that 36,000 people are on the waiting list for social housing and that there are 35,000 vacant homes in Northern Ireland? Surely it is time to tackle the issue of vacant homes: to date the Housing Executive has not given that the necessary consideration. Will the Minister also undertake to re-examine the delivery of social-sector housing, and in particular, examine the roles of the Housing Executive and housing associations?

Ms Ritchie: In May 2007, I told the House that I had instructed the Executive to implement an empty-homes strategy, which was one of the recommendations of the Semple Report. At that time, I was told that there were 40,000 empty homes in Northern Ireland, of which around 5,000 were in the social-housing sector and which belonged to the Housing Executive and housing associations.

In July, I received an interim report, which identified about 5,000 houses that could be improved at a reasonable cost and returned to that sector. Last week, when I met the chairperson, the chief executive and board members of the Housing Executive, they

promised that I would receive a further report, which I hope to get this week. I impressed on them that I needed the report as quickly as possible, because some void houses could be improved and made ready for use. People could subsequently be allocated suitable houses in their area of choice.

Girdwood Site

2. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the future of the Girdwood site. (AQO 721/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Girdwood site will be developed as part of a wider area that includes the former Crumlin Road jail. The regeneration and redevelopment of that combined site is progressing on the basis of an integrated master plan. As Members will be aware, on 16 October 2007, I announced a period of public consultation on the draft master plan for the site, which is due to end on 22 January 2008.

There has been considerable speculation about the site's potential to accommodate social housing. I assure Members that the draft master plan simply illustrates how the site might be developed. I am conscious of the Government's commitment to a shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland. In that strategic context, I hope that the site will be developed as a place where everyone can live, work and socialise.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I want to focus on social housing and, in particular, a shared future. The Minister is aware that some people, bizarrely, argue that the goal of a shared future is a reason for not having social housing on that site. Will the Minister assure the House that there is no contradiction between the provision of social housing on the land and the promotion of good relations?

Sticking to the shared-future agenda, what steps will she take to ensure that the land is open to residents from all sections of the community and will remain so in the future?

Ms Ritchie: The —

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to answer the question.

Ms Ritchie: I am acutely aware of the shortage, problems and crises in housing in north Belfast. I have no doubt that the site has the potential to meet some of the pressing housing needs there. Indeed, the advice from the master-plan consultants is that new housing of mixed tenure is a vital component of the site's regeneration. I am strongly compelled by the need for shared housing, investment opportunities and recreational space on that site, because the needs and

requirements of the people of north Belfast must be catered for.

Mr Cobain: Will the Minister tell the House how much progress she has made in discussions with the local communities about housing on the Girdwood site?

Ms Ritchie: Mr Cobain was a member of the Committee that discussed the master plan and was aware of all its work before I announced the plan for the draft consultation. He also knew about some of the problems that arose. I met the Member last week to discuss a particular housing issue in north Belfast, and I know that there are extremely long waiting lists for housing in certain communities there. I am determined that all Members of the House reach an adequate solution to the housing crisis that has been happening for years. It is an urgent issue that requires a cross-departmental resolution from me and all members of the Executive.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's answer. Her recognition of the high level of need for social housing in north Belfast is to be commended.

I declare an interest as a former member of the Girdwood advisory panel; I attended many of its meetings. I am aware of the concerns in the community. However, will the Minister reaffirm that a mix of social and affordable housing will meet the objective need of those on the housing waiting list, and that the accommodation needs of key workers around the site will be factored in, where possible?

3.45 pm

Ms Ritchie: When I launched the draft master plan, and even prior to that, I had several meetings with political representatives who are members of the steering group to take forward the plan for the Girdwood and Crumlin Road site. We must promote equality, we must address the housing needs and the acute housing crisis that has been endemic in north Belfast for several years, and we must deploy a caring, compassionate attitude to it. I am sure that everyone will invest their consultations and their work in it. I look forward to working with all parties in respect of that. There must be a shared, equal approach to the provision of housing on that site.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reassurance that social housing will be a top objective in the plan for the Girdwood site, given the grave and chronic housing shortage in north Belfast. This is an opportunity for people — not a threat to any community — to develop the site in the interests of all the people of north Belfast, Catholic and Protestant. No one has anything to fear from the full, comprehensive development of that windfall site. I urge the Minister to continue her work to provide leadership in that direction.

Ms Ritchie: I agree with the Member that the Crumlin Road and Girdwood site provides an opportunity for all the people of Belfast. That is why, on 16 October, I urged all the residents of north Belfast, including those with an economic interest, whether they owned a retail establishment or had investment opportunities or wanted to invest, to make a contribution to the consultation process. I also urge all public representatives, from MPs to MLAs and councillors in north Belfast, to make a contribution to the consultation process. No one has anything to fear from a fully comprehensive development on that site, to include affordable housing, social housing, development opportunities and recreational space. We must look forward, and we must provide for the needs of the current generation and of future generations if we are to resolve the housing and investment problems and to provide a better way of life for everyone in the constituency of North Belfast.

Semple Review

3. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the funding bid she has made to meet the recommendations of the Semple Review.

(AQO 668/08)

Newbuild Housing Plan

4. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what alternative plans her Department has developed as a contingency, if it is not fully successful in its bid for £1.1 billion for a new build housing plan, in light of the current budget restraints and the ongoing Comprehensive Spending Review.

(AQO 693/08)

Newbuild Social and Affordable Housing

14. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that there is an adequate provision of affordable and social housing in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 609/08)

Ms Ritchie: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3, 4 and 14 together, in the light of the similarities between them.

A bid for £2.173 billion, which includes receipts from house and land sales, has been made available to the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI 2) for the social-housing development programme to provide 2,000 new houses each year, as recommended in the Semple Report, over the next 10 years. In case the bid is not fully successful, methods to increase the supply of homes in the new social-housing development programme are under consideration and are being

evaluated. However, it may take time to realise the benefits of those alternative methods. We intend to maximise the developer contributions provided for in article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, and my officials are working with their colleagues in DOE and DRD to advance that.

Next week, I shall meet my ministerial colleague Arlene Foster, the Minister of the Environment, to consider ways in which we can speed up the introduction of article 40 developer contributions. Several Members from all sides of the Chamber have discussed that issue with me, because we are all aware of the need to increase the supply of social housing.

Similarly, we are examining an aggressive sale of Housing Executive land to bring in much-needed capital finance. I am looking to the capital realisations task force, which was established under the auspices of the Strategic Investment Board, for a guarantee that the full receipts for the sale of any surplus lands that belong to the Department for Social Development or the Housing Executive will be retained by the Department for allocation to the housing budget.

I acknowledge the £20 million that has been given to the Department as part of the October monitoring round. That will give a much-needed lift by providing for approximately 200 starts in the social-housing development programme, and although I am disappointed that that will not allow me to reach the target of 1,500 new starts, it will still allow approximately 1,100 starts during this financial year. I will continue to make representations in further monitoring rounds to secure additional finances, because as everyone in Northern Ireland, the Assembly and the Executive knows, social housing should be a number-one priority.

I am very keen to progress the Semple recommendations on affordability, but unfortunately his work did not include any cost-benefit analysis of any of the report's 80 recommendations. I must ensure that the implementation of those recommendations will assist us in providing affordable housing — roofs over people's heads — and that they provide the best opportunity, the timeliest mechanism and value for money in delivering that objective.

The Department also funds the co-ownership scheme, which is aimed at providing those on low incomes who would not be eligible for a full mortgage to become homeowners on an equity-sharing, part-mortgage, part-rent basis.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her answer. Bearing in mind that Northern Ireland is facing a housing crisis, does the Minister agree that the large banks of land that the Housing Executive holds could be sold off to fund social housing?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with the Member that there is a housing crisis, but it is not of the Assembly's making,

because Northern Ireland inherited a woefully inadequate Budget.

Notwithstanding that, we must examine all possible measures to increase the amount of money that is available to the Department in order to deal with the social-housing crisis. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive holds an extensive land bank, which it has built up in anticipation of current and future housing development. In the past three years, land and houses to the value of more than £400 million have been sold to facilitate a number of capital programmes, and this year we are planning for lands and house sales amounting to £140 million. Over the next three years, I will require the Housing Executive to sell surplus land and housing to the value of £475 million through the house sales scheme.

The Housing Executive's current land bank and housing stock has a significant value, but it also creates a significant opportunity for social and economic development, because housing is central to regeneration and improving people's lives. The portfolios of land and buildings are managed and reviewed regularly, and opportunities for disposal are considered. The Housing Executive has approximately 300 primary sites that are ready for development or earmarked for development in the near future.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister quoted a figure of £20 million for 200 new starts, which equates to £100,000 per house. Is that correct?

Ms Ritchie: As I said, I have received £20 million in the October monitoring round, which will enable 200 new starts and will allow further work to be done in the Northern Ireland co-ownership scheme.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister has talked about sale of land and developer contributions in funding new housing, although this is coming at a time when developers are going to be less likely to make contributions than they were two or three years ago. However, she has not mentioned the considerable cash assets that are lying in the bank accounts of housing associations. Those assets could release up to £120 million in cash, and against which — even if the current rate of borrowing by housing associations were considered — a further £150 million to spend on housing could be released. Has she given any consideration to using those assets, which, if properly utilised — given her own calculations a moment ago — could enable the building of another 2,000 houses?

Ms Ritchie: The Member and I have had discussions about article 40 contributions, and I take his point on board that we are now entering a phase in which developers may not find it as attractive to explore that route. However, when I have had discussions with the Member's party colleague the

Minister of the Environment, I hope that we will be able to find some new and innovative ways of dealing with that.

Cash receipts and housing association assets are, along with others, being explored by the interdepartmental affordability implementation group on the Semple Report, which I chair. We hope to be able to report by December. I am very conscious that the Housing Executive is also exploring that issue because the bottom line is that we must be able to increase the supply of social housing in order to cater for the large number of people who are homeless or who are on the waiting list — many of whom are in housing stress. I will get back to the Member on that issue.

Child Support Agency

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on future plans for Child Support Agency jobs in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 692/08)

Ms Ritchie: It is my intention that the existing Northern Ireland Child Support Agency should be wound up and that the delivery of its services should be brought under the direct control of my Department. In reaching that decision, I concluded that the needs of clients and staff would be best served by the agency's staff remaining under the umbrella of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The size and scale of the new child support organisation has not been determined, so I am not in a position to assess the impact on jobs.

I commend the agency's staff for the hard work that they do. They handle complex and challenging work, and do so in a caring, compassionate and sensitive manner that recognises the emotional difficulties experienced by the parents who they deal with. I am confident that the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the staff of the Child Support Agency will carry the organisation through the challenging period ahead with a continued clear focus on getting money to more children. I have written to all MLAs indicating what I have done, as well as to the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance — the trade union that represents the vast majority of the agency's staff — and to the staff in the Child Support Agency outlining what I have just said.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister must be aware of the absolute frustration endured by so many people in our constituencies because of results from the Child Support Agency. Whatever plans the Minister has for staff in the agency, they have to produce positive results in as short a time as possible — no years of agonising wait. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that she has no plans to privatise the Child Support Agency?

Ms Ritchie: I gave the assurance that I have no plans to privatise the Child Support Agency in my previous answer. I am conscious of the need to deliver a good quality service to parents throughout Northern Ireland, who have suffered undue pressure and stress.

Moreover, I have been conscious of the needs of many staff who are employed in the Child Support Agency and who work on behalf of parents throughout Northern Ireland and eastern England. That is why I decided to protect people in Northern Ireland and bring the agency within the ambit of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

4.00 pm

Mr Campbell: I am glad to hear that the Minister will consult widely before going down the route that she has outlined with regard to the Child Support Agency. That is a good principle, particularly in light of recent events. Assuming that she proceeds with her plan — and she has notified the Social Development Committee of her intention to do so — how will she address the considerable under-representation of the Protestant community in the agency when it comes within the ambit of the Northern Ireland Civil Service?

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that Mr Campbell, the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, knows that the Civil Service appoints staff on the basis of the merit principle.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of extensive concerns among staff in the Child Support Agency. What assurances can she give to those people about their jobs?

Ms Ritchie: I have arranged to meet Lord McKenzie, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions, later this month to discuss future working arrangements between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and to discuss the protection of jobs. I will write to the Member with a more detailed answer.

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the Minister, but, unfortunately, time is up.

Adjourned 4.02 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 6 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Before we begin proceedings this morning, I want to deal with a matter relating to the debate that took place on 15 October 2007 on the Bill of Rights Forum. During the debate, Mr Attwood raised a point of order about a Member placing people's names on the record. The Deputy Speaker ruled that that was in order and that the comments made were part and parcel of the cut and thrust of debate. I concur with the Deputy Speaker's ruling on the issue.

I note that Mr Attwood also raised the matter as a point of order yesterday and asked for a further ruling on the subject. The Deputy Speaker advised that I had already planned to make a statement to Members on the issue. I want to do that because the debate prompted letters from organisations outside the Assembly. I have replied to each of those letters, and I have placed copies of the original letters and my replies in the Assembly Library. I have also referred some of the procedural issues raised in the correspondence to the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures.

Let me make it clear: I am satisfied that there was no breach of procedures during the debate. Members will know that, for the purposes of the law of defamation, absolute privilege attaches to the making of statements in proceedings of the Assembly. However, I think that with such protection comes responsibility. I encourage Members to remember their responsibilities when speaking in the Chamber. I will take no further points of order on the issue.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Sixth Meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the inland waterways sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets): The North/South Ministerial Council met in the inland waterways sectoral format in Ballyconnell, County Cavan, on Wednesday 17 October 2007. That was the first such meeting since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. The Irish Government were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, who also chaired the meeting. Conor Murphy, the Minister for Regional Development, and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. Minister Ó Cuív and I began the day by meeting at the site of the new Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen. Later in the day, following that meeting, we visited Clones Canal Store and met with local community representatives.

The meeting opened with a progress report from the chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, Mr John Martin. His report focused on accommodation; restoration of the Royal Canal; a sponsorship programme and joint activities; moorings and boat registrations; and the Ulster Canal. We were satisfied to hear that, in general, the body has continued to discharge its remit of managing, maintaining, restoring and developing the navigations that are in its care, mainly for recreational use. Maintenance and capital-work programmes have been advanced significantly in the past five years. All corporate governance requirements have been met, day-to-day administration matters have been attended to, and a wide range of enquiries has been addressed. The Council noted the content of the 2002-07 progress report, the main points of which I will now summarise.

Where accommodation is concerned, work has commenced on a new headquarters for Waterways Ireland in Enniskillen. The western regional office in Scariff, County Clare, opened in August 2006. Significant progress has been made on the restoration of the Royal Canal, and it will be opened fully to navigation from Dublin to the Shannon in 2009. Major international sporting events, such as the Waterways Ireland Classic Fishing Festival at Lough Erne, the Waterways Ireland World Water Ski Championship in Enniskillen, and the Triathlon Ireland in Athlone — the Tri-Athlone — were the joint activities that were supported by sponsorship programmes.

Where moorings and boat registrations are concerned, 8,500 additional metres of mooring have been provided across the waterways, and boat registrations have more than doubled, increasing from 5,544 at the start of 2000 to 11,468 in 2007. The Council welcomed the decision that was made at the NSMC plenary meeting in July to proceed with the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal. The Council also agreed on how to proceed with that major infrastructural project. We agreed that Waterways Ireland should appoint a single entity consortium to design and construct the restoration of that section of the Ulster Canal. We noted that the Irish Exchequer will meet the full capital cost of the project, which is estimated at €35 million, or £23.8 million. On completion of the project, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government will meet the annual maintenance costs, which are in the order of €300,000, or £201,000 a year. Waterways Ireland will establish a project team for the day-to-day management of the undertaking. That team will report monthly to a monitoring committee that will be chaired jointly by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

We stressed that good local liaison will be crucial to the smooth running of the project. We also noted that Waterways Ireland will engage with all key stakeholders in implementing the project. We welcomed Waterways Ireland's intention to establish a targeted marketing programme during construction in order to highlight the attractions and uniqueness of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal.

Waterways Ireland presented its future plans to the Council for consideration. The main priorities for 2008 are to ensure that the navigations are open and that all existing facilities are operational during the main boating season, which lasts from April to October; to complete the major bridge-building programme and works to reconnect the Royal Canal to the Shannon; to commence design and land acquisition processes on the section of the Ulster Canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones; to promote the waterways and to extend and expand recreational use of the waterways in all their forms; and to apply the highest standards of operational management and business practice so that the use of the waterways is maintained and expanded in a sustainable manner.

We discussed plans for Waterways Ireland for 2008 to 2010. We also approved its business plan for 2008 and its 2008-10 corporate plan, subject to budgetary considerations by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. The Council also noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2005, which were presented prior to their submission for laying before the Assembly and the Oireachtas. When the accounts have been printed, copies will be forwarded to

both sponsoring Departments for them to arrange laying. The Council agreed to proposals for a compulsory purchase order and a number of disposals, all of which are in the South. The Council agreed to meet again in the inland waterways sectoral format in March 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas seo agus guím rath agus bláth ar an dá rialtas agus ar na hAirí uile ar an ábhar seo. I welcome the statement and am delighted that the meeting of the Council in the inland waterways sectoral format on Wednesday 17 October took place. That timely meeting was the Council's first in that format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly.

The Minister referred extensively to the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. What was missing from his statement, however, was a timeline for the successful completion of the project. I appreciate that it is an exciting and ambitious project, to which both Governments are contributing financially, but can the Minister indicate a date for its completion?

What is not contained in a statement is sometimes as interesting as what is contained in it. My colleague Mr Willie Clarke has pressed the Minister on a number of occasions in questions for written answer to provide details on pay disparity between Waterways Ireland employees in the North and those in the South. I, too, ask the Minister to advise the Assembly on the pay awards, applied and consolidated, North and South, for administrative and professional technical staff in Waterways Ireland since the body's inception. What is being done to resolve that issue?

Mr Poots: The answer to the Member's first question is fairly simple: 2014. We are looking at four years to complete the planning process and two years for development. It takes more time to complete planning and land acquisition, and so on, than it does construction. However, we are looking to have the canal fully operational by 2014.

Pay disparity is a significant problem, but it relates not just to Waterways Ireland but to every cross-border body. I sought clarification on the matter. Waterways Ireland is one of the larger cross-border bodies. Its being based in County Fermanagh makes it a bigger issue, because more people from Northern Ireland are affected. At the outset, pay scales were broadly similar, but differentials in pay rises between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have led to a pay disparity between people who are doing the same job.

I recognise that individuals feel that they are being unfairly treated as a result of that disparity, and we have asked the Department of Finance and Personnel

to consult with the Department of Finance in the Republic of Ireland on the issue. I sound a note of caution, however, because, should we rectify that pay disparity, we then create a pay disparity between employees of North/South bodies and the rest of the Civil Service. Therefore, it is a very difficult and complicated issue to resolve. Nonetheless, I understand the anxieties of the individuals involved.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Minister's statement. Waterways are important to the development of tourism in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is, therefore, important that we set out a good programme for the future and that Waterways Ireland be fit for purpose.

10.45 am

In that context, I will mention the recent case in which a former director of corporate services in Waterways Ireland was awarded €75,000 after having been sacked from that organisation — I understand that he has now returned to the Department. He was sacked after he had made allegations and complaints about the organisation's recruitment practices. Was the matter raised during discussions, and what action will be taken to address the issue? It is clear that there are problems in the organisation.

I notice that no border is being shown on the map of the island that appears on the cross-border body's website. The map shows waterways but no border between the countries. I ask that Waterways Ireland reinstate the border.

Mr Poots: I will look into the matter. The Member's first point related to an individual, and I understand that there is an ongoing case involved. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to comment on the matter in the House until the case is finalised.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the statement and thank the Minister for bringing it to the House today. There are a couple of issues. First, Mr McCausland has mentioned one aspect of Southern aggression in which the border has disappeared: I am worried about a more active type of Southern aggression, which takes the form of the zebra mussel. Was that problem discussed with Southern representatives during the deliberations? What steps are being taking to halt that form of aggression, which has now spread into the Lough Neagh system?

I would like to see Waterways Ireland pushing for more recognition of the significant canal system that already exists in the east of the Province: I am thinking about the Newry Canal, the Lagan navigation system, and improvements to the River Bann as far as Coleraine. I hope that the Minister will use his influence to ensure that there is balance in the Waterways Ireland forward programme so that those areas are covered. One can clearly see the potential for tourism there, and that must be examined.

I can help the Minister with another difficulty by saying that the Lagan Canal used to run close to the proposed Maze development site. Perhaps the introduction of a spur into the proposed national stadium site would reduce the cost of the road and rail network links.

Mr Speaker: Order. Does the Member have a question?

Mr K Robinson: Yes. I have already asked a question about the River Bann and the eastern waterways. I ask the Minister to look seriously at the zebra mussel problem because it is affecting the boating fraternity and the infrastructure around Lough Neagh.

Mr Poots: The invasion of zebra mussels was not discussed during the meeting. However, there has been a publicity campaign on the issue. Boats are the main factor in the spread of zebra mussels, and the Department has been advising boat owners on how to reduce the problem through good boat management. I trust that they will act responsibly and that they will ensure that the problem is minimised as far as possible.

Waterways Ireland will be happy to service all new canals. Responsibility for the development of canals rests with the Governments, whether it is that of the Republic of Ireland in the case of the Royal Canal, or this Administration as regards canals in our jurisdiction. I would love to be in a position to develop our canal infrastructure because it would provide great opportunities for tourism and economic development. Agreeing to open the new 12 km stretch of the Ulster Canal from Enniskillen to Clones, 60% of which is in Northern Ireland and 100% of which is being paid for by the Republic of Ireland Government, is good news for us.

I trust that the Republic of Ireland will take it that step further and bring it from Clones up to Caledon, and that we can then take it from Caledon right down to Lough Neagh, and open it up onwards from Lough Neagh to Belfast, Coleraine and Newry, and reinstate the canal infrastructure. This is going to be a very long-term project; it will involve central Government, local government and the private sector, along with the Heritage Lottery Fund. We have to look at creating a cocktail of funders to make it happen, and I am very keen to see it happen.

On a side note, Mr Speaker, I see that we have a lot of members of the Indian community with us today. As Culture Minister, I should like to make them very welcome. This is a very special week, with the celebration of Diwali, the festival of lights.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement and the clear intent of Waterways Ireland to continue on in full co-operation. Obviously, the Minister is intent on that as well.

I note that Nelson has just left the Chamber. I wonder whether, given his call for the border to be reintroduced, he would also call for the Republic of Ireland's money to be kept at the border. That is another story.

Can the Minister outline the capital investment by the Irish Government and our own Government since 1998, and the serious economic, social and environmental impact that those investments have had on Waterways Ireland? Also, the Minister will be aware that we had a good, healthy discussion yesterday about fishing and the Fisheries Conservancy Board. I note that there is an intention to promote the waterways of Ireland as a key tourism product. What type of activity, outside of fishing, does the Minister intend to promote to bring greater use and activity to the rivers and waterways?

Mr Poots: There has been limited investment by the Northern Ireland Government since 1998. However, a lot of work has been done in opening up access to the waterways. There have been major improvements to towpaths in a whole range of areas — between Portadown and Newry, for example. The towpath between Belfast and Lisburn, among others, has seen considerable improvement. There has also been maintenance work on the Bann navigation and other navigations across Northern Ireland. There have been a range of capital investments, but nothing to compare with what the Republic of Ireland has invested in the Royal Canal, for example. That Administration has carried out major investments.

Opportunities on the waterways other than angling mainly relate to boating — barges, powerboats and canoeing. A lot of the water activities relate to boating and those types of occupations. Boating is hugely popular. There are around 13,000 registrations across Ireland, and over 4,000 in Northern Ireland, so there are a very significant number of boats using our waterways. This is a huge opportunity for tourism and to bring people in. Anyone who has tried to hire a boat will know all about the costs that are involved, but it is something that people enjoy participating in, and there are a lot of opportunities there.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the statement. It is partnership working across the island, and that has to be welcomed. As the Minister said, it should contribute enormously to tourism. It is a start on a shared future across this island; perhaps they are making more progress on the inland waterways than we are in Northern Ireland in rolling out our shared future. However, that may come in the near future, and let us hope that it does.

I also pay tribute to the Southern Irish taxpayers, who are contributing around £23 million to the project, and who will contribute half of the maintenance costs in the coming years. The Minister's statement shows

that we have a very good deal. I have really no question to ask, other than to support what has been said —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have said continually to all sides of the House that when a Minister makes a statement, we certainly do not need statements from Members — I expect questions.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the decision to proceed with the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal, as that will help the economic development of that area.

However, I am sure that the Minister is aware that Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council came together over two years ago to initiate plans for the reopening of the Lagan Canal to link Belfast to Lough Neagh. This, like the Clones and Upper Lough Erne scheme, would bring many economic advantages, including tourism and sport, to the area. Has the Minister any plans to advance that worthwhile project in conjunction with those three councils?

Mr Poots: I can add Craigavon Borough Council to that list of councils. It will kick in around the Lough Neagh and Aghagallon area. Dungannon and South Tyrone does not quite stretch to the Lagan navigation just yet, Lord Morrow, but we look after the Ulster Canal there.

The Lagan Canal Restoration Trust has been established. It is funded by the four local authorities and the Environment and Heritage Service, and it will explore the scope for delivering the 26-mile project. As successor in title to the former Lagan Navigation Company, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure owns the residual property rights remaining in Government ownership — primarily the locks and towpath on the lower Lagan. The new body will have the task of identifying the cost and the potential sources of income for the delivery of such navigation.

Belfast City Council can receive around £1 million from Ulster Garden Villages for the opening of the first lock at Stranmillis, and I trust that that will proceed. It is another important step in the reopening of our canal navigation. When the Island Centre in Lisburn was opened by Lisburn City Council, one of the locks was reopened. There is the opportunity for further openings with engagement from the private sector through developer gain and funding from other sources — as I indicated earlier — such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, local authorities and my Department.

I trust that the Lagan navigation can continue once Belfast City Council commences its work at Stranmillis, and that that navigation can be opened up to the wider public.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. The headquarters of Waterways Ireland is currently being built in Enniskillen, and it will be vital to the economy of Enniskillen and the wider area. I welcome that, and I urge the Minister to press for its completion as soon as possible, as it has been quite a long time in the making.

I have a question about the jetties and moorings, which have already been mentioned. Farmers who have land along Lough Erne, and others, are asking questions about a new cost for jetties. Is Waterways Ireland creating a new annual cost for mooring boats or establishing jetties, as compared to those who controlled the lakes previously?

I assure the Member opposite that there are gates on Lough Erne, but it is very difficult to define where the border is.

11.00 am

Mr Poots: Obviously, we want to establish more jetties and moorings in order to give boat users greater land accessibility. If the Member was attempting to ascertain whether the building of such facilities would mean an additional cost to farmers, I can tell him that they would be funded by the public sector, not the private sector.

Lord Morrow: I was interested to hear the Minister speak about Waterways Ireland. As he considers his reply to Mr McCausland's request to have the border shown on the map on the Waterways Ireland website — although I suspect that that will not stop water flowing either north or south of the border — will he also consider the political connotations? The name of that body is off-putting and threatening to many unionists. Therefore, will the Minister consider renaming the whole project in order to make it more user-friendly to unionists?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Lord Morrow: The Minister referred to the fishing festival on Lough Erne, which is a major international event that is supported across Europe and further afield. How does the Minister envisage Waterways Ireland's enhancing the annual Classic Fishing Festival?

Mr Poots: We will consider all those matters. In the past, we have supported the Classic Fishing Festival. There is a budget — albeit relatively small in real terms — to support such events, and grant aid is based on those events' quality. To date, that fishing festival has been of sufficient quality, and I expect it to grow in stature rather than diminish.

Mr Dallat: Without political connotations, such as those to which Lord Morrow referred, I welcome the reopening of part of the Ulster Canal and the Minister's prediction that it will be fully opened by 2014. That is excellent news and sends out a strong signal to long-term

investors to begin to create the required infrastructure. Will the Minister assure Members that, as far as he can, he will cut red tape in order to ensure that that infrastructure is put in place — particularly on the Lower Bann route, comprising Coleraine, Portglenone, Antrim and Kilrea — and that the canal will be ready and up and running in 2014?

Mr Poots: The 2014 target date for opening that section of the Ulster Canal is realistic. Thereafter, I hope that further work will be carried out on canals, that this is the beginning of a process and not the end, and that we will be able to commit more resources to the reopening of canals.

There are substantial tourism and economic-development benefits to be derived from such projects. The Member knows well that, in East Londonderry, the Lower Bann navigation is a superb stretch of water that, even now, is heavily used for sporting and recreational purposes. That should be encouraged, and we will seek to do so. I am happy to work with all Members in order to deliver that.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Following on from Mr Morrow's question, what progress has been made in attracting flagship angling events to the canal infrastructure? Does the Minister agree that angling forms an important part of the tourism package?

Mr Poots: I have little to add to the response that I gave to Lord Morrow's question. Good water quality is essential for angling and is the responsibility of the Environment and Heritage Service. Investigating fish kills is the responsibility of the Fisheries Conservancy Board. Water quality has been improving and will continue to improve.

We must examine ways to reintroduce the levels of fish stocks in our great rivers that we had in the past. For example, the River Lagan was extremely rich in salmon before the industrial revolution drove them from the river. Now, salmon are returning to the River Lagan, but that is only one stretch of water. We must improve water quality and spawning beds to increase the population of salmon and other species, and we must enhance the quality of rivers for angling.

People do not recognise the opportunities that angling creates or how tourism can benefit. Lough Erne, in particular, used to be popular with German anglers, but its popularity has diminished greatly in recent years. Such opportunities must be recreated, and new ones must be sought.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members should note that as no amendments have been tabled to the Bill, there will be no opportunity for debate this morning, although a further opportunity for debate will occur during the Final Stage of the Bill.

As no amendments have been tabled, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the two clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the long title.

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Independent Water Review Panel's Strand-One Report

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Independent Water Review Panel's Strand One Report.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the review team, headed by Paddy Hillyard, for its hard work in introducing strand one of the review in a very tight time frame. The Committee looks forward to receiving the completed report in December. It would be remiss of me, as Chairperson of the Committee, not to acknowledge the Committee's appreciation of the long hours worked and help provided by its staff, and I give special thanks to the Committee Clerk.

The Committee for Regional Development has brought the motion to the Assembly because the review of water and sewerage services is probably one of the most significant challenges facing the Assembly. What we, as elected representatives, decide over the coming months will have long-term consequences for every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland.

The previous Administration were criticised for — among other things — lack of transparency, failure to consider the full costs and alternative policy options, and undue haste in developing and implementing water reforms. The danger is that, with the best of intentions, but because of budgetary and other pressures, we may make the same mistakes.

Today's debate is an opportunity to consider and explore the wide-ranging findings and recommendations in the review panel's strand-one report. It is an opportunity to open up to wider debate some of the important issues touched on in that report.

I want to make it clear from the outset that the Committee for Regional Development has had many constructive engagements with the Minister for Regional Development regarding strand one of the review, and we look forward to more engagement as strand two progresses.

I appeal to all Members to remember that the people of Northern Ireland will not thank us for using today's debate simply as an opportunity to score points. The issue is too important and should be treated as such.

It is important to clarify some misunderstandings of the Committee's initial response to the report. As a Committee, we have not, at any time, endorsed the report. We have welcomed it in the most general terms as an important early first step in finding a solution to this complex and challenging question. The Committee believes that that solution must both protect the most vulnerable in society from poverty and hardship, and ensure that all households and enterprises in Northern Ireland have clean, safe and reliable drinking water and sewerage services. Those services must be provided in an efficient, sustainable, fair and transparent manner. That is a tall order by anyone's reckoning.

I want to address a number of assumptions that were made in the report. First, the Committee agreed that a figure reflecting the historical cost contributions paid by customers and contained in the regional rates should be taken out and ring-fenced, and, if technically possible, allocated to Northern Ireland Water (NIW). The figure of £109 million per annum was a conservative estimate. There are other, less conservative ways to calculate the historical cost contributions made by the ratepayer to the costs of water and sewerage. For example, taking the proportion of the regional rate identified as a contribution to the cost of water and sewerage services in 1998, and uplifting that proportion to today's prices, yields a figure higher than the £109 million identified in the report.

The Committee recognises that ring-fencing a higher proportion of the regional rate for water and sewerage services would have consequences for the level of expenditure available for other public services. However, let us have that debate. It remains an issue worthy of discussion as strand two of the review progresses.

The method of assessment for charging — capital values — is an area in which the Committee has concerns. This relates to the issue of asset-rich but cash-poor individuals. In particular, the Committee has concerns about the ability of many pensioners living on fixed incomes in family homes to pay this tax.

There are many views on the use of capital values as a proxy for the ability to pay. I suspect that many Members will have points to make regarding that. Those views were reflected in the Committee's discussions regarding the recommendation. However, the Committee will reserve its opinion on the use of capital values as a charging base until December, when the work on the affordability tariffs is complete. It is worth pointing out that the Minister for Regional Development, in his statement to the House on 22 October, stated that the Executive also reserved their final decision on the way in which payments for service should be made until the panel completed its strand-two report.

Much has been made of the issue of billing and the importance of having a single entity collecting both rates and water tax. The review panel recommends, in paragraph 2-36 of its report, that:

"householders' payments should be clearly and separately identified on their rates bill ... from 2009/10 householders' payments should be collected through the same billing and collection system as the rates: there should not be a separate system".

Paragraph 7-1 of the report states that those recommendations, among others:

"will make it possible to release further substantial savings in relation to billing, collection and customer service."

That is fine in theory, but herein lies one of the many problems. The report contains no financial modelling of the full costs of varying, or opting out of, if necessary, the Crystal Alliance contract, or, indeed, any costs in relation to the feasibility of whether Land and Property Services could actually perform that task.

The Committee is clearly of the view that more evidence is required. That evidence should include whether Land and Property Services could provide the billing and collection service for water and sewerage services more efficiently than, and at least as effectively as, the existing Crystal Alliance arrangements. Failure to provide that assurance will clearly increase costs to the consumer.

The Committee has also been considering the recommendations on how billing will impact on the approximately 100,000 households with septic tanks, who are not connected to the sewerage system, and on those people currently billed on a non-domestic basis but with a domestic water allowance.

In that respect, the report lacks clarity. One of the main observations of the review panel in its efforts to identify lessons for the future was a failure to fully consider and evaluate potential costs and policy alternatives in advance.

11.15 am

I was pleased to hear, in the Minister's statement to the House on 22 October, that the Committee is not alone in its concerns about the cost of billing and collection recommendations. The Minister indicated that the Executive also considered necessary further analysis by the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel to determine how single billing, which identifies water and sewerage charges separately, might be arranged and to assess the implications for existing billing arrangements and contracts.

One of the most important issues in respect of future costs to the consumer is Northern Ireland Water's ability to reach its efficiency targets. The strand-one report recommends that Northern Ireland Water's operational efficiency targets should be raised from

22% to 40% by the end of 2009-10, and the report leaves the capital expenditure efficiency target for the regulator to review. The Committee supports the principle that the interests of water and sewerage customers will be best served by making Northern Ireland Water as efficient as possible, as quickly as possible. However, the Committee heard a variety of views on the achievability of increased efficiency targets within the 2009-10 time frame.

The Committee hopes that the 40% efficiency target is achievable. However, a clear understanding of the implications for customers of achieving that target is required, particularly with respect to service level; planned investment; water and waste water quality; the implications of failure to achieve the target for charges to customers; and the cost to the departmental budget. In the first instance, the Committee wants to see consideration of those issues in the context of a range of efficiency targets, from the current 22% to the recommended 40%, and it has decided that it is more appropriate to await relevant information.

Another recommendation is that the cost of road drainage, borne at present by Northern Ireland Water, should be transferred to the budget of the Department for Regional Development. The panel's report identifies a sum of £48 million for that cost. The Committee takes the view that it would not be prudent to endorse any recommendation that may place additional unquantified pressures on the departmental budget. Should the Executive decide to accept such recommendations, the necessary additional budgetary cover should be agreed at Executive level. The Committee would be particularly concerned if there were any attempt to reduce the roads maintenance budget, which, at present, is underfunded by 40%, to facilitate that cost, particularly as the acting chief executive of the Roads Service has, in the 'Road Service Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2007', highlighted the increased risk of skidding that arises from failure to make adequate provision for the roads maintenance budget.

I turn to, arguably, the most important issue, and one that I have already touched on briefly, namely water poverty and the affordability tariff. That work will be dealt with in strand two of the review, but it is important for the Committee to put down a marker at this stage on its concerns. Water poverty and the affordability tariff had been a key element in the Committee's consideration of the review of water and sewerage since its earliest meeting in May. The Committee welcomes the panel's comments on affordability tariffs and the ongoing work on water poverty to enhance the affordability tariff.

In particular, I draw the attention of the House to chapter 9 of the panel's strand-one report. The panel reported that, without the affordability tariff, almost

50% of households would experience water poverty. About 40% of those households were occupied by pensioners or couples with children. With the existing affordability tariff, the report estimated that 11% of households would still be in water poverty, and that the affordability tariff would take those eligible for the tariff out of water poverty. That tells us that the existing affordability tariff, if it were taken up by those who are eligible for it — and that is a big "if" — is not sufficiently inclusive to embrace all those who will face water poverty as a result of the water and sewerage tax.

It is the view of the Committee that much more work must be done on enhanced affordability arrangements —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Before I call Mr Wells, I should tell the House that the Minister is on his way to the Chamber. He has been caught in traffic and he is well aware of the debate.

Mr Wells: It is extremely unfortunate that the Minister is not present. He has already missed the contribution of the Chairman of the Regional Development Committee. It now looks as though he will miss the contribution of the Deputy Chairman of the Regional Development Committee, which, to my mind, is particularly significant. *[Laughter.]*

This issue dominated the election of May 2007 and has generated vast numbers of correspondence, emails and phone calls.

The Minister cannot even organise his diary to ensure that he is in the Chamber to listen to the debate on this important issue. We will ask him for a good excuse when he comes to the House, dishevelled, no doubt, in around 30 minutes' time.

If I were asked to summarise the review report, I would say that much has been achieved but there is a great deal more to be done. The achievements are notable and are in line with the DUP's manifesto. It has been established that homeowners will not be asked to pay twice for the provision of water in Northern Ireland. That is a major achievement of the review, and it is one for which my party and others have pressed for many months.

As a result of effective analysis of the statistics, the review panel has been able to establish that £109 million already being paid through the rates should have been going towards the payment for water provision. The link was broken in 1998; however, the review panel has been able to calculate the amount that should have been included for water provision retrospectively. That works out at approximately £160 per household per year, which has been hypothecated and will be removed from any future charge for water provision. That is good news.

Another aspect of the review panel's work that will reduce bills is the transfer of £25 million for the

provision of road drainage from Northern Ireland Water back into the Roads Service budget. That is to be welcomed, but there may be an element of robbing Peter to pay Paul, because transferring that money back to Roads Service may cause a reduction in roads maintenance. Therefore, we must watch what happens to that £25 million carefully.

There has also been an increase in developer charging. Currently, for house builders, there is a subsidy for linking houses into the water and sewerage systems. However, from now on, they will pay a realistic amount. I realise that that may have a knock-on effect for affordable and social housing, and perhaps mitigating factors could be instigated to prevent that happening. However, if a man is building a house for which he will be charging £300,000, he should be charged a realistic amount for linking that house to the water and sewerage systems.

The review panel has stated that greater efficiency savings will be required from Northern Ireland Water. However, the targets in the report are extremely challenging, and I am not certain that Northern Ireland Water will be able to achieve them in the time given. I will return to that point.

There are still issues outstanding, and the affordability tariff is one issue on which Members will dwell this morning and this afternoon. Acceptability of the proposed water charges by the general community will stand or fall on whether the affordability tariff is fair and is seen to be fair. There must not be a situation in which a pensioner living alone in a large family home and using a tiny amount of water each week is paying three or four times more than the household down the road in which six children are using huge volumes of water. Capital valuation is not the way to determine whether a person can pay for water, and the review panel will have a very difficult task in squaring that circle and in bringing about a sense of fairness.

The DUP is extremely keen to give pensioners, widows, or people who live alone the option of using water meters: that would solve the problem. Water metering is fair; it simply taxes people on the basis of the amount of water they use, and it promotes the conservation of water. If the Minister bothers to turn up, I would like him to tell me whether the proposals, as they stand, have been tested against the EU Water Framework Directive, which demands that Governments carry out actions to conserve water. However, the question is academic because the Minister is somewhere between here and Camlough, and has not turned up to answer our questions, which is a disgrace.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has been in touch. He had a previous engagement and is running late as he is stuck

in traffic, but he will be here shortly to answer MLA Wells's points.

Sinn Féin has been consistent in its opposition of the imposition of water charges, which it considers to be a regressive form of taxation that would have the greatest impact on low-income families, single parents, the elderly, farmers and small businesses.

Since the formation of the Executive in May, my party has committed itself to undo any plans for the privatisation of water and sewerage services. Our focus has been to stop the introduction of water tax, because we believe that the initial consultation process was deeply flawed and that the models proposed were limited and were based on a predetermined outcome.

My party is determined to tackle what most people consider to be the injustice of having to pay twice for something — double taxation for water and sewerage services. It is also wrong that the people of the North should be penalised unfairly and made to pay for an investment that successive British Governments failed to deliver. For generations, people here have been paying for water through their rates, yet that investment has not resulted in the maintenance and the upgrading of the water and sewerage system to European and international standards.

The independent review on water charges carried out by Professor Paddy Hillyard marks the end of British Government proposals for water charges. People are looking to the Executive for a fair deal and for a root-and-branch review of the direct rule proposals. I welcome the approach that has been adopted by the Regional Development Minister, Conor Murphy, who proposed the fundamental review. I also congratulate Professor Hillyard and his team for the work that they have done on the project and the staff of the Department for Regional Development.

The Hillyard report recommends that British Government plans for water charges should be scrapped. Sinn Féin endorses that position, as it has always argued that no one should have to pay twice for water. Indeed, we fought the election on that commitment, on which this report delivers. People will pay for water within their rates bill, as was the case in the past. The improvement is that there will be a clear, separate line on the rates bill, and people will be able to see the amount that they will be paying. It will also mean that people who are eligible for relief under the rating system will be eligible for relief for water charges. People on low incomes will benefit significantly as a result of the review. Water charging will be open and transparent.

There is a recommendation for further targeted assistance; for example, for people who are asset rich but cash poor. The affordability tariff will undergo further work in strand two of the review. Although metering has merit, it would be costly and would push

up the cost to the individual. Some people believe that metering is a panacea, and that its introduction will mean that water will be cheaper. That is not the case.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr W Clarke: I do not have much time.

Mr Wells: The Member will get an extra minute.

Mr W Clarke: I doubt it. *[Laughter.]*

People believe that metering is a panacea, which it is not. Ultimately, water and sewerage infrastructure must be paid for. If everyone used meters, tariffs would continually rise in order to pay for infrastructure. Therefore, metering is a red herring.

I welcome the fact that the Regional Development Minister has ruled out privatisation, and I fully agree with his assessment that imposing water charges was an attempt by the British Government to provide an incentive to sell off water services. The review's recommendations include a £160 reduction in the rates element of the combined bill to meet the cost of water in 2008. The result will be that people will pay less for water and rates than the amount forecast.

The second part of the review will consider the overall governance, accountability, management and status of the water company. In that context, the Executive have considered strand one of the report and have agreed a way forward that presents a much fairer deal and that will be an important step towards ensuring that the people of the Six Counties are not taxed unfairly for water.

Mr Dallat: I also want to add my thanks to the Committee staff and, in particular, the groups who gave evidence. I recall with great clarity those who represented people on low incomes and those at the margins of society. The Consumer Council also deserves particular thanks for its work.

It is regrettable that the Minister is not present, because I would have liked to assure him that any stories that he may have heard about the report's being put together with great enthusiasm have been highly exaggerated and are, perhaps, even inaccurate. Indeed, as the Chairman of the Committee will be aware, the Committee was recalled to discuss certain serious issues further because it could not reach agreement on them.

The Minister will be aware that the SDLP was the only party that met the review panel. From that point of view, we are pleased that our concerns are featured in the report.

11.30 am

However, given that so many imponderables are outstanding, it would be impossible to begin to claim a victory for common sense. To date, it is not known how far down the river the direct rule Ministers went in signing up — legally — to the contract with Crystal

Alliance. That was disgraceful and should never have happened. I urge the Minister to end that contract and to confirm that there will be no separate water charges. I hope that those matters are realised sooner rather than later.

Again, it is recognised that people are already paying for water and that a notional figure is accepted. However, is that figure accurate? We know that for several successive years, there was a hike in the regional rate. The reason given for that was the cost of investing in water services. In that case, it must surely and logically follow that if the bulk of the increase in the regional rate were spent on infrastructure and water, the charge of £160 per annum would increase.

The SDLP has always said that if we are not to have water bills, the cost of metering would be prohibitive and quite unnecessary. I hope that I am correct in that assumption. We welcome the fact that there is now recognition that water consumers should never have had to pay for the dispersal of surface water, a matter to which the Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development has already referred. We hope sincerely that we do not play a game of draughts in which that cost has simply been moved to the rates section of the bill, leaving the consumer no better off. There is, of course, the review of public administration to deal with, and that is another imponderable.

We have dealt with only strand one of the Independent Water Review Panel's report. It would be unwise to declare any opinion on that until we know the outcome of strand two. However, we can assist the Minister by repeating our view that there should be no separate bill for water and sewerage services. We also believe that there must be protection against water poverty, whether in the form of charges or metering. However, metering would merely restrict the use of water by those who can least afford it. We can also tell the Minister that the notion of a shareholders' dividend is a feature that is designed for privatisation and that we do not need it, given that there is an understanding that privatisation is out of the window for all time. I hope that I am correct in saying that.

Finally, and most importantly, the savings that the review panel suggested would be achieved are not unreasonable, given that the original target that was set out for the company could hardly be described as a target at all. With a great deal of goodwill and an acceptance that the decisions that were taken in our name in the past — under direct rule — were wrong, or, dare I say it, even wicked, we can move on and provide a water service that is of the highest standard, at a cost that should vary little from that which is being charged presently. That is the challenge that the Minister must meet. He will not find the SDLP wanting in its determination to ensure that that challenge is met.

I hope that the Minister has more success with water than he is having with traffic management this morning.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mrs Long to speak, I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones. They are causing problems for the audio system in the Chamber.

Mrs Long: I apologise to the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development and to Mr Wells for missing part of both their speeches. However, what I heard of Mr Wells's contribution, I found very interesting, and, no doubt, I will refer to it at some point.

Water is a valuable and expensive commodity. Even here, where there seems to be an overproliferation of it at times, we should not lose sight of the fact that the provision of potable water is an expensive business. The biggest public-health investment that we as a society can make is in water and sanitation, rather than in hospitals. The greatest change in mortality rates over the past few centuries is due to the delivery of good sanitation and clean water.

We must be realistic and accept that the debate is about how we pay for water; it is not about whether we pay. It is important that, in the context of what has already been produced, we focus on three key interlinked issues: fairness, affordability, and sustainability. We must address them comprehensively and give them good consideration. On reading the report, my concern is that I am not convinced that each of those issues has been fully addressed.

First, where fairness is concerned, most people are uncomfortable with the notion of paying an additional water charge while their rates remain unaffected. That was the original direct rule proposal. However, if people have to pay a separate charge, they would be relatively more comfortable paying for what they use, rather than simply paying for services that are based on the value of their houses.

When I have discussed water charges with members of the public, I have noticed very little resistance to the notion that people should pay for what they use. The fundamental resistance seems to be to the introduction of any kind of flat-rate charge based on the capital value of property. People believe such charges to be punitive and are much happier with the idea of paying for the water that they use — they believe that to be fairer. However, that approach obviously raises a more complex argument because of the huge infrastructural costs that would be involved. Nevertheless, I believe that most people are comfortable with the principle of paying for what they use.

Fairness is also an issue in relation to basing charges on the capital value of property, and, therefore, it cannot be detached from the general discussions on the rating system. A single person living in a particular property will end up paying the same in water charges

as a large number of people living in the same size of property. That is inherently unfair and runs contrary to people's expectations. Although such a system clearly badly affects pensioners, they are not the only people who will be affected — it will also impact on single working adults and young people, who will also find that they are paying the same amount for water as larger families. Single people are annoyed that they have to pay the same rates as larger families, even though they feel that they do not make the same demands on services. That will continue to be an issue with water charges.

I accept that these proposals have attempted to address the issue of paying twice for water. However, there has been a significant escalation in our rates bills in recent years, so when people compare what they were paying three or four years ago with what they are going to be paying under any new system, they will find that they will be paying more. There is no point in our trying to disguise or hide that fact.

The Sinn Féin Member Willie Clarke suggested that people will now find that they will be paying less than was forecast — that argument is unsustainable, because if we are determined to invest more in water services, there will be a requirement on people to pay more. We must be honest and open with people about the costs involved, not just in the short term but in the long term.

That leads me on to affordability. Affordability is not just an issue of the level at which the charges are introduced; the long-term cost of the charges is important. If, over time, rates bills continue to escalate in the background, through continued hikes in the regional rate and district rate and rises in water charges, the proposals will not necessarily be affordable in the long term. We must have a strategy, and I will address that further in my comments on sustainability.

This matter also concerns those who are asset rich but cash poor. We are very aware of people who have worked their whole lives, are now on fixed incomes, and live in rather modest properties but find that, due to the property boom, their houses have been valued at quite a high level. One may have a good property, but one cannot take a brick out of the wall to pay the water bill. We must be realistic about that.

If the charges are to be sustainable, we must be realistic about conservation. We need a proper, sustainable water policy that deals with, for example, grey-water recycling and limits the usage of potable water in properties to a minimum. If we can develop a sustainable water policy within which the context of charging can be considered, it is more likely that we will have sustainable, affordable and fair charging down the line.

Mr Moutray: When reflecting on the introduction of water charges, and, in particular, the Independent

Review Panel's strand-one report, it must be said that, without doubt, progress has been made towards achieving an improved water and sewerage service for the people of Northern Ireland. At this point, it is necessary to note publicly that advances have been made on two particular issues — there will be no payment until 2009, and consumers will not have to pay twice for water services.

A recent publication, 'Water Matters: Have Your Say!', details the implications of having a water supply that is unclean and unfit for use. We know that Northern Ireland is not immune to such problems, so it is essential that this country has in place a strong and robust water and sewerage system that we, and future generations, can enjoy.

As the population increases, further demands will be made on water supplies, so it is essential to plan for the future. In doing so, we must take practical action to ensure that our entire water infrastructure is in a healthy state. We, as an Assembly, must endeavour to align ourselves with the rest of the UK with regard to quality and usage of water, to reduce our carbon footprint and to develop sustainable ways to deliver clean water and dispose of sewage.

However, my party is concerned about two particular aspects, the first of which is the property values option in which domestic users are required to pay an amount based on the capital value of their property. My party feels that that is not an accurate measure. Members know how much water would be used by a person living alone in a relatively large house in comparison with a family living in a similar-sized dwelling. Therefore, how can such a measure be justified? My colleagues and I call on the Minister to reassess the charging mechanism and protect the vulnerable in society, particularly elderly people who may not be able to pay such high charges for water. The implementation of such a charging mechanism would be contrary to the Minister's statement to the House on 22 October 2007 in which he said that:

"there will be robust arrangements to protect the vulnerable in society from hardship and water poverty." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p418, col 1*].

I call on the Minister to ensure that his words have substance and not just spin. Such a charging mechanism would cause major distress to the vulnerable in society and particularly to those who are asset rich but income poor.

Secondly, the report suggests that domestic metering should be discontinued; in essence, that metering would be prohibited. My party believes that because there is broad public interest in volumetric measuring, some consideration must be given to that method. I recognise the significant cost of the mechanism, but metering would benefit many people, such as elderly persons, particularly if they believe that they are not

using large volumes of water. It is important to protect the vulnerable in society, particularly elderly people, who would be susceptible to extortionate rates and water poverty owing to their inability to pay. In light of that, the Minister must take water usage into consideration.

Furthermore, the people of Northern Ireland still have misconceptions, having neither been consulted on nor informed about the decision that water services would no longer be funded out of the regional rate. People assumed reasonably that they were paying for the service through the rates when it was announced in 2004 that there would be a direct charge. That gave rise to the suggestion that users were being asked to pay twice for the same assets and services, but people could not comprehend why, in that case, the rates bills had not been reduced correspondingly.

We must learn from that mistake. Decisions made by the Assembly on water rates and the appropriate charging mechanisms must be made public. I call on the Assembly to consider the issues raised in the debate and to ensure that the vulnerable in society are not susceptible to water poverty as a result of the use of inappropriate charging mechanisms.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would not normally speak on an issue such as this, but it is important for my constituency, and, in particular, for towns such as Enniskillen. It has been said that efforts are being made to end double taxation, and that people are pleased that a new approach is being taken. The "Durkan tax" was also mentioned, and it is important to note that the link between the rates and water charges that was created by Mark Durkan and David Trimble, though broken, has been re-established, which is all to the good.

Mr Cobain: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Member explain to the House who else was in the Executive at that particular time?

Mr Speaker: That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr McHugh: That is interesting: perhaps I drew that particular remark from the Member.

My constituency, and the town of Enniskillen in particular, has paid dearly for historical underfunding and the underdevelopment of infrastructure. There is too much pressure on the sewerage system, and, partly because of Planning Policy Statement 14, developers have been allowed to go flat out and build any number of houses in towns and villages.

For example, in at least two villages, the building of more than 200 new houses is proposed in the next couple of years, but there is no capacity for dealing with sewage.

11.45 am

Mrs Long: Does the Member accept that the cost of providing sewerage services to individual houses in the countryside, and the potential environmental consequences of not doing so, are much more significant than those of connecting to existing services in the city and upgrading those services?

Mr McHugh: I disagree — that has not been proven to be the case. There are new methods of dealing with sewage in the countryside that are less dangerous to the environment. In Enniskillen, raw sewage can run into Lough Erne when there has been any degree of rainwater over a weekend. That happens in Enniskillen and other areas, year in, year out.

Sometimes, departmental breaks have more impact than anything that happens in the countryside. I take Mrs Long's point about the overall way forward for planning. However, overall planning does not currently consider the towns to which people are being pushed. The area plan has not been adhered to in any part of the North, and that has implications.

Serious efforts must be made to advance the affordability issue. Older people who live in large houses have to pay similar tariffs to others who pay a large amount of money each year. In England, some vulnerable people paid £360 a year, but paid £5 a week after a meter was installed. That is an example of the difference that metering can make, and yesterday I asked the Minister for Regional Development to give further consideration to water metering. Metering must be considered, although I am aware of the infrastructural difficulties.

Farmers know what it is like to have meters, and I know what it is like to pay water charges on a cubic-metre basis. Under that system, we try to save water. However, when water is charged at a flat rate, there is no incentive from an environmental point of view to save water, to stop the waste of running water, or to stop watering gardens — on which there is a ban for most of the year in England. We wash cars here several times a week.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr McHugh: I do not have enough time.

Recycling has already been mentioned, and global warming must also be taken into account. Water, as a resource, will be seen in the future as oil is today. Food, quality of water and rising temperatures as a result of global warming will mean that issues that relate to water will have to be taken seriously in the future. The Minister has taken those concerns on board and he is prepared to do something about it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: I begin by considering what the situation would be if a direct rule Minister were still responsible for water charges. Every person in

Northern Ireland would already be paying a separate water charge. The non-domestic sector would already be paying a separate water charge. Those charges would not have taken into consideration the amount that was already being paid through the regional rate.

Those points must also be set against the background of direct rule Ministers who did not — and do not — understand what is required in Northern Ireland, and against the background of the historical underinvestment in Northern Ireland's water and sewerage infrastructure.

Since devolution, all of the MLAs and residents of Northern Ireland have come face to face with the realities of governance. That includes tackling the poor state of water and sewerage infrastructure. The Independent Water Review Panel has produced its strand-one report to give us all a clearer picture of the immediate and mid- to long-term priorities, and guidance on solutions. To my mind, the fact that stands out most is the panel's agreement that, until 1998, all of us had been paying for water and sewerage services via our regional rates. Therefore, the scheme that was to have been implemented by a direct rule Administration would have represented a double whammy of water payment.

The Executive took the tough decision to scrap the plans for a separate payment for water and sewerage and to introduce a system whereby people are charged for those services as a component of their household bills. However, that has been deferred until 2009-10. The additional money will be used to put in place the infrastructure that Northern Ireland desperately needs to meet all the European water benchmarks. Parties agreed that no one should find themselves in hardship due to the additional charge. In his speech of 22 October 2007, the Minister for Regional Development said that "robust arrangements" would be necessary to protect those who are asset rich but cash poor.

Thanks to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the number who may be affected by water poverty will be reduced. The average of £160 per household that has been paid for water through the rates since 1998 has been recognised, and the additional charge takes that into consideration. The deputy First Minister, speaking on 25 October 2007, stated:

"We will invest £3 billion in the water, waste water". —
[*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p480, col 1*].

Regrettably, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has not got a magic wand, and, with the agreement of the Executive, he must allocate the resources at his disposal in the best possible way. He has done so, but the system entails each and every household making an increased contribution via the rates bill. The stepped introduction of the additional charge, the acknowledgement that people have always made a financial contribution for water and the introduction of a reduced charge — compared with what was proposed

under direct rule — demonstrate that the devolved Government are working, and will work, for the best deal for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: As a dairy farmer who produces a vital product and, of course, as a water user, I declare an interest.

Mr S Wilson: The Member produces watered-down milk.

Mr McCallister: That is to keep Mr Wilson healthy, because I know what a great environmentalist he is. *[Laughter.]*

It is crucial that the Assembly gets this vital issue right. Water and sewerage services are extremely capital intensive, and the Assembly must set out its long-term proposals. Mr Clarke talked about Sinn Féin's total opposition to water charges, but I do not know how he can get round them. On 28 February 2007, Councillor Alex Maskey said:

“Today it was officially confirmed by the Department for Regional Development that a re-established Assembly would have the power to abolish the proposed Water Tax.”

Not only has the Assembly been re-established but there is a Sinn Féin Minister for Regional Development. No matter how it may be dressed up, it is a tax on water. I acknowledge that initially it has been decided that it will be included in the regional rate; however, as Mrs Long pointed out, the rate may be frozen for the next two years but it will unquestionably rise at some point.

I commend the work of the panel, and I agree that it has produced an excellent document that enables Members to start the debate. However, it is only a start: huge issues and questions must still be addressed. The panel's report acknowledges the cost that has, historically, been paid for water and has incorporated the issue about paying for water twice.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way: at least he is more sympathetic than the last Member whom I asked to do so, Mr McHugh. Mr McCallister referred to the fact that, as a farmer, he already pays water charges. I have not fully grasped all that is in the report: does it mean that you and I would pay twice for water through the meter system and regional rate?

Mr McCallister: I am glad that Mr Elliott asked that question. When I asked the Minister the same question on the 22 October 2007, following his ministerial statement, his response was:

“The Member may be straying into areas that will be dealt with in the strand-two report.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p421, col 1]*.

That is not correct, because it is not an issue for the strand-two report; it is an important issue about fairness, and I am sure that the Minister will want to address it. When he gets rid of the domestic allowance for metered customers — who are predominantly farmers, like myself

— will they then have to pay a double taxation? I hope that the Minister takes advantage of the debate to answer that point.

Owing to the state of the roads, the Minister did not arrive in time to hear Mr Wells's comments. Nevertheless, will the owners of the 100,000-plus septic tanks that are dotted round our countryside have to pay for a service that they will not receive, considering that the charge will be levied on water and sewerage services?

There are many issues in the report, and the Minister must respond to, and address, those that concern Members. My colleague Mr Cobain mentioned Land and Property Services and its ability to conduct the matter. Will the Minister clarify whether his Department has considered the cost of transferring part of the contract from Crystal Alliance to Land and Property Services, and whether it can deliver that service? Crystal Alliance's contract deals not only with billing, but with customer services.

The matter of efficiency targets is vital. If Northern Ireland Water does not meet its efficiency targets, who will pick up the bill? Will it be the ratepayer, through the rates, or the customer, through water charges? Either way, they are more or less one and the same person. The 22% efficiency target was set by experts, and it was approved by Deloitte and by the Department for Regional Development.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCallister: Am I not allowed another minute for the intervention? I hope that the Minister will answer those questions.

Mr Speaker: Order. The intervention did not take one minute. If interventions are lengthy, granting a further minute is not a problem. However, if interventions are short, we must consider the time.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Minister's attendance, although he has found out to his cost this morning that the roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland probably needs some upgrading. I hope that he pays attention to the lesson that he has learned.

This has been a good debate. It has been measured, in a way that some of the pronouncements that were made when the report was first issued were not. Even the Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development has moderated his comments. About three weeks ago, he said that he would not support any moves to make every Northern Ireland household pay for their water. Of course, that was contrary to the opinion of most of his party members, apart from perhaps the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who was here for a while. He seemed to take the head staggers for a while, but then he began to realise that he could not ask for more money for his own budget while, at the same time, saying that he did

not want money to be raised in the ways in which the Assembly had put forward.

There has been some moderation in the tone. We have even seen some conversion from Sinn Féin. I welcomed Mr McHugh's speech, but I do not know what it will do for his promotion prospects in the party opposite. He can thank his lucky stars that there has been decommissioning and everything else. Otherwise, he might have faced some sanctions from his own party.

12.00 noon

I am glad that he has accepted that charging people for what they use is a way to make water charges fair — it is a common-sense approach. It may go against the ideology of his party, and even be contrary to what Mr Willie Clarke said, but it is common sense if we want to conserve water. We should not simply give people a fixed charge and let them use as much water as they want — as if to leave the tap on or have a burst pipe does not matter. It is fair that people should pay for water as they use it; that is the case with electricity, gas and many other services, so why not water as well? I hope that the Minister gives serious consideration to metering water consumption, because it will be essential in ensuring that people find water charges acceptable.

As a party, the DUP made a commitment; it did not hold out an unrealistic prospect that a service could be got for nothing. People were going to pay for water in some way — if they did not pay through water bills, they would pay as a result of other services being pruned due to the use of money from the block grant. The DUP has ensured that people are not paying twice for water — that was unfair and has been addressed. Affordability remains an issue, and I hope that in the second stage of this process that will be properly addressed for those who are asset rich and cash poor and do not opt for the meter — although they should have the opportunity to do that — or those who find themselves in difficulty for other reasons.

Naomi Long made the important point that we have to find ways to reduce expenditure on unnecessary infrastructure when it comes to collecting water — whether that is grey water from houses or rainwater — which could be used again. As a gardener, I collect a lot of water from the roof of my house, which is very good for plants in greenhouses and in the ground, et cetera. That is a very useful way of recycling water.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr S Wilson: I just wanted to get my green credentials on the record.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the strand-one report and congratulate Professor Paddy Hillyard and the members of the Independent Water Review Panel, who have done an important job on our behalf. Although all comment

at this stage is provisional — as final conclusions must await stage two — strand one represents real progress and offers much for a constructive way forward.

Fundamentally, the SDLP has been opposed to a separate water charge and to the privatisation of the water system. We are reassured by what has been indicated so far, but will continue to be vigilant on those issues. Equally, the SDLP is fundamentally concerned about the relationship between any payment for water and the ability of people to pay. Affordability is a key issue for us. Although I welcome the proposal for an improved affordability scheme to prevent water poverty, we must see the full detail before giving it full backing. Water is essential to life and good health; there must not be a system that makes such a basic necessity a major financial burden for any part of the community.

Any consideration of this scheme — designed as it is to be included in the rates bill, which is based on property value — inevitably leads to consideration of the many issues that are currently part of the review of rating. I do not want to go into those in detail, but rather make some broader points.

A property tax is a crude mechanism for raising revenue. As I said in the Chamber previously, houses do not pay rates or any inbuilt water charges; it is the owners or occupiers who do that, and their ability to do so is only loosely related to property values. Therefore, a growing system of relief schemes is required to make the system fairer. However, there is a significant problem with the take-up of relief schemes, and we will scrutinise closely the detail of those schemes to see that they genuinely address the difficulties of those who are low paid but who are above the benefit levels, and groups such as pensioners who are often — and I hesitate to describe them as such — asset rich but cash poor. There is real need for an effective and workable affordability scheme.

I believe that the Minister has not ruled out the introduction of metering in his immediate response to the report. Many people are keen on metering, and it must be recognised that they include the pensioners to whom I just referred, but those most keen are the people who use the least water. It remains to be seen whether any system of metering would be compatible with a broader system of charging that is based on property values. It will be useful for everyone to recognise that there is no perfect way of imposing water charges: there are difficulties and anomalies with any scheme. Some recognition of that point might make any future scheme more acceptable.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for missing the comments of some Members and especially those of the Chairperson, who I notice has just left the Chamber. I thank my Committee colleague, Mr McCallister, for mentioning the predica-

ment of farmers. He is the only man who pays for water in his part of the country. Sammy Wilson mentioned decommissioning. I hope that we will not be talking about decommissioning or hosepipe bans in years to come. I add my voice and that of my colleagues to those who welcome the report, and I congratulate Professor Paddy Hillyard and other members of the panel for their work on strand one. Their efforts in dealing with this difficult issue in the time frame that they were given is to be commended.

Sinn Féin called for a mandate to oppose unfair separate water charges and any attempt at privatisation, as did all the political parties here. I welcome the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, to the Chamber. He ensured that an open and transparent review was conducted, that a fair payment for water through rates — as has always been the case — be highlighted on any bill, and that the notion of privatisation be consigned to the dustbin. I welcome those assurances. Members must also welcome the suggested freeze on payments. This is a clear illustration of local politicians making local decisions, which is what Members are elected for. I am sure you will agree, Mr McCallister.

We must ensure that there is adequate protection for families for whom higher bills will cause undue hardship, those on benefits and the working poor. I am pleased that all Executive Members welcome and endorse the independent water review panel's recommendations. I hope that any surplus assets found — now or in the future — will be reinvested in the infrastructure to further alleviate any payment from the public purse. I look forward to the next part of the review and to focusing the debate on ensuring that everyone is treated fairly and equally in the required water reform initiative. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Irwin: Like Mr McCallister, I declare an interest as a farmer and I declare that I pay for my water. However, he omitted to say that he gets a free allowance for his household water, just as all farmers do.

Mr McCallister: It is well and truly known that that is the case.

Mr Irwin: I am grateful that future decisions and deliberations on our water and sewerage infrastructure will be taken by locally elected politicians, and I am delighted that we have a high level of control over how the matter will be finalised. I also welcome the opportunity to debate the response to the strand-one report. The report contains the recurring theme of the need for transparency and the restoration of public confidence while deliberating on the reform process.

There is a general feeling that direct rule Ministers had damaged public confidence and, indeed, many votes in the last Assembly election were cast on the basis of parties' pledges on the water issue. As a member

of the Committee for Regional Development, I am keen to ensure that this matter is concluded in the best interests of the consumer.

In the context of the public's wish for transparency, who could disagree that a step in the right direction was taken with the announcement that we would not be paying twice for our water, and that the amount that had already been contributed through the regional rate would be recognised and documented?

I am under no illusion about the huge challenge that the Committee faces in deciding how best to take this matter forward. However, the initial steps that have been taken have provided a firm foundation for that work.

I am encouraged that the report pays particular attention to the vulnerable in society, because we must not let a situation develop in which, for example, the elderly or those on low incomes are forced into becoming severely prudent in their use of water, or are forced to use water instead of home heating or other vital services in the home.

The report refers to the lack of consensus on metering and on the capital-value method of charging. It could be argued that both methods could affect the vulnerable, with varying consequences. However, it is vital that, at the very least, the option to have a meter installed be a right that is afforded to any consumer. Protection of the vulnerable should be a key priority in any new arrangement, and the determination of methods to apportion charges must avoid, where possible, a detrimental impact on that section of the community.

Efficiencies can be made in the water and sewerage network to help to reduce the level of water wastage and, ultimately, reduce the tariff that customers must pay. I await the review's strand-two report with interest, because I understand that issues of efficiency will be dealt with in that. I also look forward to the publication of that report because of the further opportunities that it will present to debate this matter.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: No, I will not. I am almost finished.

We have an opportunity that did not exist under direct rule to establish a fair and accountable system, and we have already seen positive steps towards that. I pledge my full commitment to tackling the challenges ahead.

Mr McCallister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Irwin made an allegation about my not declaring a water allowance. Actually, the non-domestic —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an seans labhairt ag an díospóireacht seo. Easy now lads, easy. Glac go réidh é.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Independent Water Review Panel report and its recommendations.

Until the establishment of the panel, the history of water reform was one of a lack of public confidence. It was felt, with great justification, that the system was not open and transparent. Indeed, people held the firm view that there was a hidden agenda, at the heart of which was privatisation and, with it, unfair water charges.

Sinn Féin opposed the direct rule proposal and involved itself in the public campaign to stop it. Going into the 7 March elections, Sinn Féin stated — and I quote directly from our election material, in case anyone is in any doubt:

“If we get a fresh, enhanced mandate, Sinn Féin will go back into Stormont to oppose the present system of water charges. In a future Executive Sinn Féin will bring forward workable alternatives that will include full and open consultation, fairer arrangements and a pledge not to privatise water services.”

I have listened to other Members this morning, and perhaps they should read their election manifestos, because the Ulster Unionists said that they were going to ask everyone to pay £100, irrespective of their ability to pay. Fred Cobain, the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, said that he is totally opposed to that, so he is obviously opposed to the UUP's own manifesto.

As the Minister for Regional Development —
[Interruption.]

There it is, Danny, in black and white, and I deliberately did not —

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr McCartney: Our election material was available in both Irish and English. However, not to confuse Members, I decided to read in English, but it seems that Danny Kennedy still does not understand it. Perhaps his uncle, or his great-uncle — or whoever it was that gave up the Irish language for English — did not pass his knowledge on to Danny, because he does not seem to understand English.

12.15 pm

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

Indeed, Conor Murphy, as Minister for Regional Development, helped to deliver on that pledge. Perhaps this is more false information from the Executive, but I am told that the Executive subcommittee — which is made up of all parties, and includes the Ulster Unionist Party leader — and the whole of the Executive, including the two Ulster Unionist members, agreed that it was a positive report.

No one can dispute that, under Paddy Hillyard's direction, the review has been open and transparent. Its

findings were influenced by the panel's contention that the society we live in is often described as:

“a 25/25/50 society with 25% of households living in hardship, 25% living in comfort and 50% with a good standard of living.”

The report stated clearly that any increase in the outgoings of poor families would push them further into poverty. Rather than make petty political points in the debate, we should focus our attention on the protection of the most vulnerable in society.

It is evident that the panel had that foremost in its mind as it set about its work. Sinn Féin welcomes the report as an important, positive first step in the process of creating a fair and equitable system and ensuring that water poverty will not be a facet of life in the North.

I want to highlight several positives from Sinn Féin's point of view. In particular, we welcome the declaration that the direct rule proposal should be abandoned and put in the dustbin. Furthermore, we welcome that there will be no separate bill for water and sewerage services, and the acceptance that we already make a considerable contribution to water through the rates. We also support the recommendation that the efficiency savings should be doubled. Some say that that is an ambitious target, while others argue, correctly, that the current target lacks ambition; therefore we agree that there should be efficiency savings. We also want to ensure that there are affordability arrangements and look forward to that matter being addressed in the strand-two report.

I want to acknowledge the work of Paddy Hillyard, Joan Whiteside, Charles Coulthard, John Fitzgerald and their secretariat. Some believed that their task was onerous. Some said that they were involved in a paper exercise. It was an onerous task, which the panel members embraced with gusto and integrity. They did not seek comfort zones and nor should this Assembly. We asked for an independent assessment; we cannot now hide from its findings. The panel's recommendations point the way to a fairer system: an end to paying twice; an end to the water charges that the direct rule Administration wanted to impose; and to the delivery of the Sinn Féin manifesto. Go raibh maith agaibh.

Mr B Wilson: I welcome the report. The Green Party has always argued that water should be funded from general taxation and therefore supports the recommendation that there should be no separate water charges.

The report is useful in identifying potential savings; however, I suggest that some of the assumptions are unduly optimistic. For example, I cannot see Northern Ireland Water making 40% efficiency savings within two years, particularly when it has no control over much of the costs.

The main recommendation that £109 million should be transferred from the regional rate, and the suggestion that Roads Service should pay £25 million for road

drainage, will clearly reduce Northern Ireland Water's costs. That also means that there will be £134 million less to spend on other services, a fact that has been ignored by Members who have spoken previously.

In accepting the report's main recommendation and freezing the regional rate for two years, the Executive are giving the impression that the problem of paying for water and sewerage services has been resolved. In fact, nothing has changed, and any public celebrations are premature — the issue has not gone away. Even on the most optimistic assumptions of the Hillyard report, the domestic sector will still have to raise £217 million to pay for water services. The fact is that, under the Barnett formula, there is nothing in the block grant for water. In the rest of the UK, consumers pay the charges directly to the water companies, and there is no call on public finance. Therefore, Northern Ireland Water must be funded from existing resources — that is, either from the regional rate or from the block grant.

Given that the Executive have decided to freeze the regional rate, funding must come from the block grant. That would mean that £217 million less would be available to spend on other services that are funded from that grant. Therefore, any money that we give to Northern Ireland Water must come from another source. That fact seems to have been ignored, and it explains the reason that the NHS here received an increase of only 2·6%, while the NHS in England received an increase of 4% in real terms, despite the fact that it does not share our problems of people waiting on trolleys and waiting lists.

In practice, demographic trends and the fact that NHS inflation is significantly higher than basic inflation mean that that 2·6% increase for the Health Service represents, at best, a freeze in overall expenditure. That may mean that no funding will be available to implement either the recommendations of the Bamford Review, the new cancer screening programme, or measures to reduce incidences of MRSA.

Although the rates freeze is politically attractive, it is unacceptable if a reduction in healthcare services for the sick and the elderly is to pay for it. Taking the longer-term view, the panel's report suggests that household payments in future should be based on property values. The Executive appear to agree with that. For example, Hillyard suggested that £84 million would have to be raised in 2009-10. That sum would represent an increase of 16% in the regional rate. However, it would not represent a freeze in the regional rate, as the Budget suggested. We are totally opposed to any increase in the regional rate; rates are regressive and take no account of ability to pay. The payment load falls heaviest on the elderly and those who are on fixed incomes. It is unacceptable for those vulnerable groups to shoulder the main burden of water charges. I

ask the Assembly to re-examine other forms of taxation, particularly one that is based on ability to pay.

I was previously opposed to metering, particularly on grounds of fairness. I also doubted whether it was of any benefit to the environment. Having read the report, and having spent some months listening to evidence from many NGOs and pressure groups, I feel that metering cannot be justified on social, economic or environmental grounds. Evidence on the matter from Welsh Water and Scottish Water was significant, stating that metering is unnecessarily expensive, causes many technical and administrative problems, and adds between £40 and £50 to every water bill. Evidence from NGOs that shows that metering has led to public-health concerns in English cities and that the burden of payment falls heaviest on those who are on low incomes, the disabled, and young families casts doubt on the claimed fairness of the measure. I therefore support the recommendation not to introduce metering.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet today as soon as the House suspends for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00pm, when the Minister for Regional Development will deliver his response to the motion.

The sitting was suspended at 12.23 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Thank you, go raibh maith agat. I apologise for my late arrival this morning. I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House, and in particular to those Members whose contributions I missed. I have had an opportunity over lunchtime to pick up on what some Members said, and I certainly intend to reply to their contributions. As is normal, I shall study Hansard and, if I have missed any points, endeavour to reply to Members in writing.

I welcome the motion. The Assembly has had the opportunity to discuss the Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report on the cost of water and sewerage services, and how those are to be funded. I thank Members for contributing to what has been a wide-ranging debate. I have listened to the points that have been raised, and I acknowledge that we face serious challenges in deciding the best way to deliver sewerage and water services.

Before I deal with some issues that were raised during the debate, I shall recap the Executive's position. The Executive have agreed that the Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report provides the best way forward for achieving sustainable delivery of clean water and disposal of sewage, while minimising the cost to users and taxpayers. The Executive have accepted the recommendation that, from 2008-09, there should be full recognition that revenue from the domestic regional rate contributes to the funding of water and sewerage services. The independent panel has estimated that amount to be around £109 million, based on an uplift to today's prices of the 1998 position. It has calculated that that equates to an average household contribution of around £160. In 2008-09, that will be households' only contribution to the funding of these services, with the balance being paid from the NI block. That represents the Executive's commitment to tackling the inequity of double charging.

The Executive have accepted the panel's finding that the revenue from the regional rate does not cover the full cost of water services, and we have agreed that, from 2009-10, additional contributions from householders will be necessary. We have concluded that those additional contributions should be phased in, and are working on the basis that, in 2009-10, household contributions for water and sewerage will equal the existing contribution from the regional rate, plus two thirds of the balance of the income that is required to fund the services fully. In 2010-11, household contributions will equal 100% of the amount that is required to fund the services fully. However, the amount that is due to be collected from domestic households will be reduced by the amount that households already contribute via

the rates — £109 million, or an average of £160 per rates bill. That means that there will be no double payment for households.

The Executive have noted the proposal that a single bill be issued to customers, with rates and water and sewerage charges identified separately. Further analysis by the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel will be necessary to determine how that might be done and to assess the implications for existing billing arrangements and contracts. The Executive have also noted the panel's recommendations on the way in which payments for services should be made in future, but have reserved our final decision until the panel has completed its strand-two report.

I do, however, wish to allay one concern about the panel's proposals on the use of property values as the basis for calculating water and sewerage payments. There is a belief that an increase in house prices will automatically lead to an increase in water and sewerage payments. First, payments will be based on the capital value of properties at 1 January 2005, as assessed by the former Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA). Secondly, the total payments that consumers make will cover the cost of the services provided. That will remain the case, even if there is a revaluation and the overall level of property values rises. Property values are used only to distribute total costs among individual consumers. Were the overall cost of water and sewerage services to stay the same and everyone's house price to rise by about the same amount, bills would not change. Increases in house prices will vary, and that will lead to some redistribution, just as is the case with rates.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure whether it is appropriate for a Minister to give way when responding to a motion, but I am happy to do so.

Mr Speaker: Yes, it is appropriate, Minister.

Mr Wells: The difficulty is that some parts of Northern Ireland have already experienced the rapid house-price increase. In my constituency of South Down, there has been an enormous price rise since 1 January 2005. However, that rise in house prices will kick in only when the revaluation occurs in five years' time. When that happens, people will face an enormous rate hike, far higher than that in any other part of Northern Ireland. Equally, they will experience a much greater increase in their water payments.

Mr Murphy: Declan O'Loan asked me about that during Question Time yesterday. The Member is presuming that, if house values increase, contributions to water and sewerage services will also increase.

The amount of money required from domestic and non-domestic customers will be what is required to

cover costs. If the cost of providing water and sewerage services does not increase, then, regardless of house values, that cost will remain the same. There will not be a corresponding increase in the amount required to fund water and sewerage services should house values rise. That is a misunderstanding, which this debate and other discussions on strand two of the report may clarify. There is a presumption that because house values may increase, the amount taken from domestic customers will rise accordingly. That is wrong. What will be taken from domestic customers will be enough to pay for the services provided to them and will not increase just because house values increase.

Although the Executive wish to see the strand-two report before determining the method of payment, they have agreed that there will be robust arrangements to protect the vulnerable in our society from hardship and water poverty regardless of the payment system adopted. The Executive recognise the challenges and difficulties faced by the non-domestic sector and have decided to phase in the new charges more slowly; at 50% of the full charge in 2008-09 and at 100% of the charge in 2009-10. The Executive will also endeavour to reduce the burden on the consumer — both domestic and non-domestic — through delivering efficiencies and by attracting further revenue resources.

There were several common themes running through the debate: affordability; ability to pay; metering; implementation of the panel's recommendations on efficiency; the single bill; and other matters. Several Members welcomed the panel's approach to dealing with double payment and the overall approach taken by the Executive on that matter. On issues such as affordability, Members have noted that we will have to await the strand-two report. In other areas, such as metering, there is a divergence of views, and we can debate those as we go forward.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development and John Dallat made the point that the estimated contribution of £109 million was too low. That figure is not mine: it was derived by the independent panel and is comparable to the figure provided by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. If Members believe that the figure is too low, they will have the opportunity to speak to the panel about it during the course of its ongoing work.

Mr McCallister stated that a water tax was being introduced. The Executive's decision not to impose water charges in 2007-08 and to set up an independent review reflects their commitments and is in line with the recommendations of the Committee on the Programme for Government at the start of the year. The aims of the review are as follows:

- “● Carry out an independent and comprehensive review of the costs and level of funding needed for water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland, to review how these costs should be met and

how the services should be managed and governed within a public ownership model.

To help ensure that there is public trust and confidence in the future arrangements for financing and delivering water and sewerage services.”

That is what we have sought to do.

I heard Mr McCallister's reference to party manifestos. Perhaps he should check his own party's manifesto, although I realise that he was a late entry into the Assembly race. Nonetheless, he should have checked his party's manifesto because I am satisfied that the position that Sinn Féin outlined in its manifesto is being met by the approach that is being taken by the Executive.

John Dallat, Naomi Long, Gerry McHugh and the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development mentioned affordability protection. The panel has identified an issue that is within the scope of the affordability tariff, and that will be considered under strand two. I am confident that the panel has the required expertise in that area. The Executive's key concern is that there should be adequate protections for all those on low incomes.

Several Members, including Declan O'Loan, mentioned people who are asset rich and income poor. The strand-one report specifically says that the panel will look at that issue in its second report. Of course, all Members will have the opportunity to engage with the panel if they wish to do so.

Domestic metering has provoked some discussion: it was mentioned by Naomi Long, Stephen Moutray, Sammy Wilson and others, and Brian Wilson had a counter-argument. We must bear in mind that the panel's recommendations on charging will not be introduced until 2009-10, and that there are different views on domestic metering. The Executive will be reconsidering the matter following receipt of the panel's second report in December. In my view, we should undertake a thorough appraisal of domestic metering as recommended by the panel.

Several points were made about metering, and I will make several observations. One would have to question whether an immediate, universal, metering operation would be feasible. If everyone who might benefit from installing a meter chose to do so, that would require a high upfront cost of around £40 million and could prove to be unmanageable. Considered from a social perspective, metering does not prioritise those who might need help most — the asset-rich, income-poor group. From an environmental point of view, it is far from clear that metering would be the most effective solution.

Even if it is popular with the public, metering is unlikely to provide the cost reductions that people imagine. In identical properties with the same consumption, a metered bill will be higher than an estimated bill.

Water conservation requires a longer-term outlook that must relate to all those propositions, and that must happen sooner rather than later.

Mr McHugh and George Robinson raised the matter of underinvestment, and the Independent Water Review Panel's findings support the argument that, since 1989, investment levels have been lower than those in Britain. The panel is satisfied that, over the next few years, a substantial programme of investment is required to reduce the continuing gap in compliance performance. I wish that we could secure the funds to rectify underinvestment, but we must address the situation in which we find ourselves. I emphasise the investment that we are making — more than £500 million in sewerage alone before the end of the decade. Therefore, we must continue to rectify the shortfalls. Unfortunately and regrettably, we have been charged to find those funds from our own means.

Naomi Long asked about a sustainable water policy, and I agree that we need such a policy. That is why, by the end of the decade, we will have invested more than £1 billion in our services. That will enable NIW to reduce leakage, to meet EU standards for drinking water and urban waste-water treatment, to improve the quality of bathing water and to protect the environment.

John Dallat spoke about the dividend. The purpose of the dividend is to ensure that the company applies the appropriate disciplines to make a return on capital. I can confirm that the dividend is not linked to privatisation and that privatisation is off the agenda.

John McCallister, Ray McCartney and others mentioned the single water and rates bill, and I have already stated that further work is required on that matter. Members asked whether such an arrangement could work and about the ability of Land and Property Services to make progress with it.

John McCallister asked whether I had already begun to assess the situation with Land and Property Services, but it would have been inappropriate for me to have done so before the publication of the independent panel's strand-one report. It would have been presumptuous to have anticipated that report's outcome. However, on 22 October, I stated that my Department would work with the Department of Finance and Personnel to help to progress its assessment. Arrangements have been initiated to do that.

John McCallister and Brian Wilson asked questions about efficiency targets. Executive subcommittee colleagues and I have not yet reached a view on the panel's recommendations, which may require further investigation. Under direct rule arrangements, the Department for Regional Development was responsible for setting efficiency targets. That was in the context of reaching agreement on the strategic final plan for NI Water. The regulator is responsible for setting efficiency

targets for 2009-10 onwards. It is prudent to engage the regulator in the review process as soon as possible — the advantage being that efficiency targets could be set independently. The fact that domestic contributions will be phased in over two years means that there will be more time in which to consider how to achieve more appropriate efficiency levels than those that are suggested in the panel's report.

John McCallister also spoke about the removal of the domestic allowance. The domestic allowance will remain until households make additional payments in 2009-10, when those who qualify for the domestic allowance will begin to pay a little more. The Member's query related specifically to agricultural land. That land is not valued on the VLA database.

Several Members mentioned septic tanks. Beyond their being emptied once a year, no charge is levied for septic tanks. When the sewerage contribution is removed from the regional rate in 2009-10, customers will begin to pay to have septic tanks emptied. The new charge will not mean that customers will pay twice, because it will be balanced by a reduction in rates.

Declan O'Loan made the important point that no charging regime is perfect. Capital values are used only as a proxy for ability to pay or as an indication of water usage. The aim is to achieve the best balance between conflicting objectives, and the Executive are committed to finding the fairest and most transparent method of doing that. I take Mr O'Loan's point that questions are raised. The fact that Members are in this arena discussing such issues shows that the matter has been taken up by a locally elected Assembly and Executive, and gives people a sense of confidence that they are being dealt with openly and transparently.

Cathal Boylan mentioned surplus assets that belong to NIW. I agree that those assets should be disposed of in order to maximise benefit to customers and to invest, where possible, in future infrastructure. We will ask the regulator to undertake the proposed review of NIW's assets. I note that the Committee for Regional Development has pointed out that it is not in anyone's interest to engage in a fire sale of those assets.

2.15 pm

Brian Wilson raised various issues about funding and where it should not come from, although perhaps his speech was not so strong on where funding should come from — he suggested some other form of local taxation. At present, NIW is fully funded from existing resources. The additional payments from domestic customers will release funds for other services, as will the extension of charges in the non-domestic sector. That will not be to the detriment of other services, but to their benefit. Brian Wilson also suggested that rates will increase as a result of the proposals. Rates will decrease in the short term, and the Minister of Finance

and Personnel has said that rates will be frozen for the next three years.

A household payment for water and sewerage services will be introduced because the strand-one report states that the current contribution that is made through the rates is not sufficient to pay for the service that is required.

Those are some of the points that I managed to pick up. Again, I apologise for my absence during some of the contributions. I will study the Hansard report and, if there are other points that I have failed to answer, I will contact the Members who raised them.

I thank the independent panel for its work in providing a way forward on this issue. I also thank the Committee for Regional Development and other statutory partners for their constructive comments. The Executive have shown leadership in accepting the independent review's recommendations as the basis for progress. However, a great deal of work remains to be done by the Executive, the independent panel, the Committee for Regional Development and all the stakeholders. With co-operation and commitment from everyone involved, we can meet the challenge of providing a modern high-quality water and sewerage service at the lowest possible cost. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: I thank all of the participants in this morning's interesting debate. Many issues were raised, and the House is better off for that.

I am sorry to see that the Member for East Antrim Mr Wilson is not in the Chamber, because he implied that I was going soft when I spoke this morning. I will reiterate my position: I represent a large working-class constituency where thousands of families fall into the economically-challenged bracket. They deserve a voice in this debate. At the last Assembly election, in common with many MLAs, I gave an undertaking that I would not support the introduction of any water tax during this mandate, for precisely the reasons that all the Members who spoke outlined. I refuse to make tens of thousands of working-class people poorer than they are today.

As I said when proposing the motion, water reform is probably one of the most important and challenging issues that face the Assembly. I listened with great interest to many thoughtful contributions that were made. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Jim Wells, put it aptly when he said that:

"much has been achieved but there is a great deal more to be done."

Several key themes emerged from the debate, which I will touch on in turn. First, there is a need for careful consideration and for more information, and most of the Members who spoke in the debate mentioned that.

John Dallat, who is also a member of the Committee for Regional Development, made several important points in the debate. In particular, he spoke of the cost associated with varying the existing Crystal Alliance contract.

Northern Ireland Water's ability to meet increased efficiency targets was also raised, as the Minister said, as was the ability of the existing rate-collection mechanism to deliver a single bill with separately identified charges for water and sewerage services to all customers — including those on a non-commercial meter, those with a domestic allowance, and households that are not connected to the sewerage or mains-water systems. It will be interesting to see whether those individuals will have to pay twice.

The Committee's broad view was that there was a need to explore the costs of many of the proposals before making a decision. The Minister's statement of 27 October 2007 on the Executive's responses to the strand-one report showed that the Executive shares some of the Committee's concerns. The key concern should always be the impact on the customer of service level and cost.

Affordability was the most important issue for many of the Members who spoke today. The plight of asset-rich but income-poor householders was a recurring theme, as was the need to ensure that an enhanced affordability tariff clearly meets the needs of those who will face water poverty as a result of the introduction of water tax.

As Naomi Long rightly pointed out, affordability is a long-term issue, and we now consider a short-term one. Charges will be frozen in 2009 and 2010, but not after that. Water will cost £218 million this year and in the next financial year; however, that will rise to £428 million by 2013. Who will meet that deficit? The Minister for Regional Development has not addressed that today.

Experience of other relief and benefit schemes has often demonstrated low take-up rates from the very groups that those schemes are designed to benefit. Therefore, any affordability tariff must be accompanied by a focus on a take-up campaign. Advice NI, Help the Aged and Age Concern could share their many years of expertise in that field.

Allied to the issue of affordability is the question of fairness. For some Members, fairness is paying for what is used. For others, fairness means that those who cannot afford it do not have to pay more. There is no clear consensus. Indeed, the ministerial statement of 22 October 2007 made no reference whatsoever to that.

Another recurring theme in Members' contributions was transparency. There was a great sense that the mistakes of the past should not be repeated. Several Members, including Willie Irwin, Stephen Moutray

and Naomi Long, felt that, this time, the proposed charges must be explained and publicised in an open manner in advance of the introduction of any tax.

Mrs Long made a useful suggestion regarding the development of a sustainable water strategy. The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Gerry McHugh made a general point on the need to consider the linkages between sewerage infrastructure needs and patterns of housing settlements in the regional development strategy. The Member for South Down Willie Clarke talked about the need for the affordability system to catch all those who are in need.

The rating system is central to many of the panel's strand-one recommendations. The present rating system provides relief on a pro rata basis. For those people who are most deprived — including pensioners, the working poor, near-benefit-level families and those individuals suffering from a disability — there is total relief.

Irrespective of how generous the new affordability tariff is, there will not be total relief. Tens of thousands of working-class families in this part of the United Kingdom will be driven into water poverty because of this tax. It is a regressive tax, and there is no relief. That point was emphasised by the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he said that, because this is a hypothecated tax, there will be no relief.

Members should be aware that thousands of people — including working-class individuals who are the poorest in society, and who look for help and guidance from Members — will be listening to this debate. It will be an absolute disgrace for Members of this House to drive those people further into poverty. I will not be one of those Members.

Yesterday, the Minister for Regional Development raised an issue regarding the previous Executive, and several members of his party raised it again today, giving responsibility for this particular problem to David Trimble and Mark Durkan. I remind the Minister and members of his party that there were also two members of Sinn Féin in the previous Executive — the current deputy First Minister and Ms de Brún. Members of the party opposite fail to recognise that point.

The Minister referred to Mr McCallister, and some issues were raised regarding the Ulster Unionist Party's manifesto. A submission made by Sinn Féin to the consultation on water reform and sewerage services stated that:

"Sinn Féin are opposed to the introduction of water charges. We view it as an additional tax. We are concerned that this consultation is premised on limited options around water charging and misleading perceptions about how people here have in the past paid for their water".

The same submission stated that Sinn Féin:

"endorse the view that everyone has the right to an adequate supply of safe, wholesome water as a basic entitlement."

Perhaps a better one is —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: No, I will not give way. I asked the Member a question this morning and he would not give way for me. The Member should sit down.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. It is for the Member who is speaking to decide whether to give way. Members should not persist in asking to intervene.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I should not have to read this out. Members of Sinn Féin should know this word for word, because this is their submission.
[*Interruption.*]

I am dealing with the submission made by the Member's party. I hope that I am not in the same position as the Member. Clearly, he does not know his party's submission. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker, will I be allowed to finish?

Mr Speaker: Let the Member finish.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: This is a better quotation:

"Given that we oppose direct charges for domestic rates, we cannot support proposals for metering of domestic water supplies. The Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly has already ruled out the option, and it is our belief that there is no reason to revisit that decision."

And this one is even better:

"Given that we propose that water services continue to be funded through general taxation and rates, we believe that the issue of safeguarding vulnerable groups can be dealt with through a generous rate rebate system."

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Independent Water Review Panel's Strand One Report.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Teaching Jobs

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours 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 have been 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 D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly abhors the fact that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and calls on the Minister of Education to formulate a strategy to bring these teachers into full-time teaching over the next three years.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.
Agus caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm an cheist seo a thógáil sa teach seo inniu.

I am delighted to move the motion. On 6 July, I received an answer from the Minister of Education to a question asking her to detail the number of teachers on the substitute teachers' roll who had not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching, and to state how many were male and how many were female.

I was totally taken aback by her response. She stated that, since September 2005, there had been 3,176 female and 695 male teachers, giving a total of 3,871 teachers in all, who, to quote from the Minister's answer:

"have never worked in a permanent teaching post."

By any standard, that statistic is alarming, and, as I have said, it has been supplied by the Minister herself.

On 17 September, in response to a question I asked on the progress made in reducing the number of teachers on the substitute roll who have never been in full-time employment in teaching, the Minister told me that her sports and languages programme for primary schools offer another means for newly-qualified teachers to gain experience of working in schools. I am interested to hear what the Minister says today, and I welcome her.

I want to know how many posts that will involve and what length the teachers' contracts will be in those cases. The Minister also told me that:

"It should be recognised that teachers trained here have the opportunity to apply for teaching jobs in the South of Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, where they are highly regarded."

I am afraid that the message there is clear — get out, take — tá fáilte romhat a Aire — the emigration boat, like many of your ancestors had to, and find work elsewhere.

2.30 pm

Will the Minister tell me into which Sinn Féin policy that particular proposal fits? Although it may be handy to travel South, the Minister has told me that she has no plans to provide for An Scrúdú Le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge — the Irish-language qualification exam — at either initial or in-service training level in Northern Ireland. That is hardly an all-Ireland approach that encourages North/South worker mobility.

When we debated a related matter on 19 June 2007, Mr Storey, who is present today, said:

"We cannot disallow people from travelling and choosing to live elsewhere. However, it is essential that we do not operate policies that encourage people to leave Northern Ireland. I trust that we have left those days behind, and that no Member will encourage that." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, No 13, p543, col 1*].

I agree with Mr Storey on that point, given that immigration contributes to the brain drain from Northern Ireland. In this case, it denies young people the chance to experience the skills, enthusiasm and dedication of many of our young teachers.

Where does all that leave us? Apart from introducing those two relatively small schemes, does the Minister have any plans to bring those teachers into permanent employment? Members have already debated the introduction of a guaranteed initial year of employment for newly qualified teachers, yet little progress has been made. In the previous debate on the matter, I discussed the findings of part two of the final report of the 'Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Service Inquiry', also known as the Curran Report, which was commissioned by the Minister's party colleague and predecessor as Minister of Education. Some progress has been made in implementing the report's findings; however, three key proposals in that report would help to improve the lot of teachers and take more into the system permanently. Those proposals include: a guaranteed initial year of employment for newly qualified teachers; 10% preparation, planning and assessment time for all teachers; and two days' administration time for teaching principals in small primary schools.

Recently, the East Belfast Primary and Nursery Principals' Group gave a presentation to the Committee for Education outlining a wide range of educational issues that it would like to see addressed. That group comprises people who are working daily at the chalk face and who understand the situation well. At the end of the session, when the group was asked which one of those issues it would prioritise, it unanimously placed the 10% preparation, planning and assessment time at the top of its list. I have no doubt that its views are representative of those of a wide range of teachers across the system. If that element alone were introduced, the burden on an already overburdened teaching profession

would be lessened and space for more teaching posts would be created.

The group also told us of the plight of teaching principals in small schools. Their duties stretch far beyond their hours of service, and they therefore need those two days' administration time. I welcome the reference that was made to a related aim in the current Programme for Government, and I am sure that the Minister will update us on her intentions in that respect.

Although the provision of administration time is welcome, it will result not in more full-time jobs, but in more substitute days. Other Administrations have been far-sighted enough to introduce some or all of those measures. So far, the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland has not benefited from any of them, and teachers are losing parity with their English and Welsh counterparts.

The teachers who are on the substitute roll awaiting full-time employment in education are a huge and invaluable resource. We have invested in their education and training. They have worked with dedication and diligence to gain their qualifications in highly competitive situations, and they have done so in the expectation that they will have the opportunity to work in the vocation that they love.

That resource should be used to the benefit of children in the education system. It is not good enough to point teachers to the emigration boat. It is not good enough to consign them to short-term schemes or contracts. They deserve the opportunities that a permanent career path offers. The Assembly must agree to, at least, make a start towards ensuring that they get those opportunities.

I want to hear the Minister respond to the issue with commitment, rather than with the repetition of more Civil Service-speak. Members debated issues to the walls during the Transitional Assembly, when there were no Ministers in the Chamber. Now that devolution has been restored, Members expect Ministers to listen and to act. Unlike the Minister for Regional Development during the previous debate, I hope that the Minister of Education will acknowledge Members' proposals and give them serious consideration. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Butler: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"acknowledges that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and asks the Minister of Education to consider ways to bring these teachers into full-time teaching."

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I dtaca leis an leasú seo, sílim go gcaithfidh an tionól seo tacaíocht a thabhairt dó.

All Members support teachers — particularly newly qualified teachers — who want to obtain full-time permanent employment in the teaching profession.

There is increasing recognition of the important role that teachers play in delivering a broad and balanced education curriculum in schools.

The Assembly must recognise that teachers have chosen to pursue careers in the education sector. Although I support efforts to get teachers into full-time employment, the motion as it is worded gives the impression that there are nearly 4,000 teachers who cannot get full-time permanent employment. That is simply not true: there are not 4,000 teachers who seek full-time permanent employment. The motion is, therefore, misleading, and one would have to question the real motive behind it. It makes wild and unsubstantiated claims.

Many unemployed teachers currently experience the frustrations that are felt by qualified members of other professional occupations. However, the figures that were quoted by Mr Bradley are wrong, because the substitute roll contains the names of individuals who are not actively seeking employment as teachers at present, including, I believe, Mr Bradley himself, who is an Assembly Member.

Indeed, figures from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June —

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to request that Members who may have a declaration of interest to bring to the Assembly's attention, should, indeed, do so in the debate?

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is a matter for the Speaker's consideration.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not on the substitute-teachers' roll, nor have I ever been. I may be in the future, although that is in the hands of the electorate.

Mr Speaker: It might be useful if Members indicated their profession in the debate, particularly if they are currently involved in the teaching profession or will be in the future.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Perhaps you will indicate whether it is required under Standing Orders for Members in the Chamber to bring their interests to your attention, or rather that those matters are best dealt with after the debate and that it is for individual Members to decide whether they should declare an interest.

Mr Speaker: If any Member feels that he or she wishes to raise a point of order with regard to a motion that is being debated in the House, it is appropriate to do so. Although proper points of order in the House are rare, I consider Mr McElduff's point of order to have been proper.

Mr Butler: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment statistics for June 2007 show that 240

teachers are on jobseeker's allowance. The substitute teacher register includes not only newly qualified teachers, but teachers of all ages, who wish to be employed as substitutes. It also includes teachers who no longer wish to be full-time members of the teaching profession. Therefore, it is disingenuous, to say the least, to call on the Minister to formulate a strategy — to be implemented within three years — to employ a supposed 4,000 teachers. That proposal could not be implemented under the present Executive's proposals for expenditure on education over the next three years. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin supports ways of trying to find full-time employment for newly qualified teachers.

The amended motion is a more realistic way of trying to bring that about without placing time constraints on the Minister. Therefore, I appeal to the Assembly, given the budgetary allocation to education and the priorities set by the Executive in the Programme for Government for the next three years — to which the SDLP have signed up — to accept the amended motion as the only possible way in which the Minister can make sensible and realistic progress on the matter.

Mr Neeson: Will the Member agree with me that his amendment is deeply flawed because he has criticised the numbers to which Mr Bradley has referred while, in that same amendment, acknowledging that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute teacher register?

Mr Butler: I acknowledge that that number is on the register. I have already pointed out that they are not all seeking full-time employment. Many of them are happy to work as substitute teachers. That is the reality of the matter. Shortly, I will explain why some retired teachers are coming back into the system.

I appeal to Dominic Bradley that, if he is going to take on the Minister for Education, he does so on her record of work, on what has been planned in the draft Budget and on the Programme for Government — and not on some fanciful and undeliverable motion such as that which has been proposed today.

Sinn Féin acknowledges the difficulties faced by young and newly qualified teachers who, after taking a conscious decision to enter the noble vocation of teaching, have increasingly experienced the frustration and disillusionment that comes with failing to secure full-time employment. I know that the Minister would like to address that issue. However, I will not follow Mr Bradley's attempt to belittle the challenges that lie ahead in tackling this difficult issue by trying to score some petty political points.

The problem of the disparity between the number of qualified teachers and the number of available teaching posts in the North of Ireland must be addressed. In short, we are training more teachers than we can employ. Therefore, the type of sensationalist motions that are laid down by Mr Bradley will not effectively address

that problem. The simple fact of the matter is that we are in the midst of a period of significant demographic decline, with thousands of empty school desks — a fact that has been the subject of a number of reports, such as the Bain Report. Faced with the declining number of pupils it is natural, though regrettable, that there will be a reduction in the number of teaching posts needing to be filled by young and newly qualified teachers.

The motion, which calls for the creation of nearly 4,000 additional teaching posts — on a whim — adds nothing to the genuine discussion between many in the education sector about how to effectively reduce the number of unemployed teachers who are actively seeking recruitment in the profession.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: No.

If the Assembly were to pass the proposed motion, which Department would lose out to the tune of between £75 million and £85 million annually to fund the Member's proposal? Perhaps Mr Bradley would like to ask his fellow party member in the Executive, Margaret Ritchie, how she would react to the announcement that her Department would lose approximately £80 million, annually, to fund the employment of 4,000 extra teachers at a time when the number of pupils in our schools is steadily falling. Sinn Féin is seriously committed to trying to introduce measures that, when taken together, will go a considerable way to opening up more opportunities for young and newly qualified teachers.

For example, Sinn Féin has proposed curtailing the ability of retired teachers to re-enter the classroom as substitute teachers, thereby opening up more opportunities for young and newly qualified teachers. I know that the Minister is currently considering that option.

2.45 pm

The following points can be noted from the figures on retired teachers that the Department of Education obtained. More than 1,750 retired teachers have been employed in the classroom as teachers. Their employment accounted for over 70,000 teaching days, which amounts to an average of 376 retired teachers being employed every day in the school year. It costs between £47 and £71 more a day to employ a retired teacher than to employ a newly qualified teacher. Thus, the cost to the Department of employing retired teachers is around £4 million to £5 million more than the cost of employing newly qualified teachers.

Imposing tighter restrictions on the re-employment of retired teachers in schools can help to provide much-needed employment opportunities for the growing number of unemployed young and newly qualified teachers. Tens of thousands of teaching days are taken up annually in our schools by retired teachers, who are

in receipt of pensions from the Government following formal retirement from their profession. That is a long-standing problem in our education system, but, due to the demographic decline of recent years, it has become all the more difficult for young teachers to find employment, temporary or full time, in the profession for which they trained. It is shocking that retired teachers filled some 376 teaching positions every day of the past year, particularly when one considers the hundreds of young teachers who, due to their failure to obtain employment, are struggling to remain in the profession of their choice. Imposing those tighter restrictions is one way in which the Minister, Caitriona Ruane, could effectively and permanently address the issue in order that we can provide more opportunities for those young teachers to remain in the profession.

I am in no way blaming retired teachers for the current situation. Indeed, many retired early, and, in the process, prevented a younger teacher from being made redundant. Rather, the system must be changed in order to compel schools to give unemployed and newly qualified teachers the opportunities that they desire to establish themselves in our schools.

I ask Members to examine the issue more realistically, rather than table some fanciful motion that cannot be delivered on.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the first "to" and insert

"prioritise these teachers for temporary teaching posts, and examine whether employment for newly qualified teachers is being restricted by the widespread employment of retired teachers in temporary posts."

This is an important problem that is growing, and I am glad that Mr Dominic Bradley has brought the matter to the House today. It is clear from listening to the contributions of the first two Members to speak that there is a clear difference of opinion on the matter, yet there is not much difference between the motion and amendment No 1 — there are merely a few words of difference. The thrust of both the motion and amendment No 1 is exactly the same. However, amendment No 2 is designed to be more precise and realistic in tackling the issue.

As has already been said, we have every sympathy for the many well-educated young people in Northern Ireland who have trained to become teachers yet cannot access their profession of choice. That difficulty affects not just newly qualified teachers, but their family circles as well. The accompanying uncertainty is tough for any young graduate and for their wider family. It is a major let-down for them after having worked so hard.

The fact that so many bright young people wish to remain in Northern Ireland is a tribute to recent developments here. The brain drain that was referred to earlier remains an issue, but we should at least be glad

that Northern Ireland is a place in which professionals who are well qualified in many fields wish to remain. It would be a waste if so many well-qualified young people were left with no option but to leave, despite having a strong desire to stay. It is therefore right that we, as elected representatives, examine the issue as a matter of priority.

However, there is no point in labelling an issue a top priority unless a decision is also made to tackle it head on. It is a fact that, as Paul Butler said, there are too many qualified teachers for the places available. It is another simple fact that we cannot guarantee every graduate a job in their chosen field. The situation will become worse as the programme of amalgamation and closure of schools rolls on. Sooner or later, the Minister and the Executive parties will have to learn how to make tough decisions. Such decisions should include an immediate reduction in the number of teacher-training positions to a more appropriate number and a broadening of teacher-training education so that those who go through the system will have sufficiently flexible skills to move into other careers, if necessary.

It is unfortunate that the four parties that are represented on the Executive have failed to include any action on this matter in the draft Programme for Government, apparently condemning us to having to deal with the problem during another Assembly mandate.

The problem is not that newly qualified teachers do not have access to full-time jobs, but that they have no access to any type of teaching job. It is standard practice in many occupations for people to gain experience by working on temporary contracts, and teaching is no different. The problem is that even temporary positions are too often unavailable in Northern Ireland, and anyone who follows the profession will by now have reached the inescapable conclusion that one of the main reasons for that situation is the number of teachers who retire and then return as substitute teachers, depriving graduates of the opportunity even to gain experience on a temporary or part-time basis.

It is long past the time when we can afford to pass vague motions calling for strategies on this and that. People know what the problems are and want them to be tackled directly. My party's amendment calls for the blockage in the system to be tackled and for the Minister to find ways immediately by which substitute positions in schools can go automatically to newly qualified teachers so that they can gain experience. Our amendment offers a way forward so that our best young teachers get the experience that they require to qualify them subsequently for full-time jobs here at home. Those who enter the profession deserve nothing else. I commend amendment No 2 to the House.

Mr Donaldson: I support the SDLP motion, and, in so doing, live in hope that I might get an invitation to its party conference next year, if I am lucky.

The entire House acknowledges that there is a problem to be addressed, even though there may be differences of opinion on how to deal with the matter. It is wrong that young teachers, who have qualified after a considerable time spent in higher education, are unable to enter the profession on a full-time and permanent basis. We have already heard some of the reasons for that situation. There is no doubt that demographics are a major factor; a downturn in pupil numbers has led to empty seats in classrooms and a reduction in the number of teaching staff required.

Nevertheless, it is important that the motion be debated. My friends the Member for East Antrim Mr Ross and the Member for Strangford Mrs McIlveen — Miss McIlveen; I am sorry, I just married you off there, Michelle — proposed a similar motion earlier this year on this matter. It is an important matter, and we are happy to support the motion.

As I carried out my research for the debate, I was mindful of the young teachers that I have met in my constituency, in places such as Dromore and Lisburn, who have graduated from teacher training and who have been employed in temporary substitute teaching positions for several years. They are increasingly frustrated that they are unable to obtain a permanent post in their chosen profession. I accept what the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Lunn says: we cannot guarantee that every graduate in a certain profession will get a job of their choosing. I am sure that Mr Lunn is aware, as I am, of young teachers who have given up the hope of teaching and have moved into other spheres of work. There are teachers who, after a few years in the profession, move on and develop their own business or take up some other type of professional work. Unfortunately, that natural turnover process is not making way for young teachers to come through, and demographic changes have prevented that space from being created.

I must challenge the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Butler. It is wrong to suggest that the motion seeks 4,000 additional teaching jobs. I did not understand Dominic Bradley to say that. Rather, he proposes a strategy that enables us, over a period of time, to address this issue. One way of addressing this matter is to consider the point that Mr Butler made about the 1,750 retired teachers who are teaching in schools. If even 1,000 of those posts were freed up, it would take care of just over a quarter of the number that is needed. There are ways of filling teaching posts without having to create new ones.

I accept that there are budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, it is important to have a timescale,

otherwise this matter will not be high enough up the Department of Education's list of priorities to secure the proactive approach that is required. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say later. At this stage, I support the SDLP's proposal that there be a time limit on the formulation of a strategy. It is widely acknowledged that this issue must be dealt with, and I hope that the Minister will come forward with some proposals. In the meantime, the DUP is minded to support the motion — we believe that there must be a strategy and that there must be a timescale within which it is hoped that that strategy will be delivered. Let us send out a positive message from the Assembly to those young people who want to get into teaching that we will do something about this matter.

Mr B McCrea: As the previous contributor said, this issue was discussed not long ago. Therefore, it is a pity that more was not contained in the Programme for Government in order to deal with the issue. That is why I am grateful to Dominic Bradley for bringing the issue back to the attention of the Assembly so that we can consider it further and see whether we can do something about it.

I read the amendment that was tabled by Mr Butler and, in common with Mr Lunn, I thought that there was little difference between it and the motion, other than some tweaking of the words. However, the debate has revealed fundamental differences of opinion, and I am confused and bemused about what the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Butler was talking about. His argument seems to be all over the place — I am not even sure whether he acknowledges that there is a problem. He tried to rubbish the figures as incorrect, but he then used those same figures in his speech.

If there is a problem, can we please quantify it and come up with a plan to deal with it? I know, anecdotally, that there is a problem. I have spoken to people in Lagan Valley who are in their seventh year as temporary teachers. The problem facing them is that they become more expensive to employ each year as they go up the salary scale, but they cannot secure proper employment. Is it any wonder that people in such a position eventually decide to do something else?

I can also tell Mr Butler that we are exporting our teachers. I know of 40 teachers who responded to a recruitment campaign in the 'Belfast Telegraph' for jobs in Scotland. How is it that we can let some of our best teachers leave the country? Surely, the Member accepts that there is a problem.

However, there is not only a problem, but an opportunity. All of our discussions about education involve increasing pupil-to-teacher ratios to try to focus more attention on those children who need it. Levels of literacy and numeracy must bear some relationship to the number of teachers in our schools.

Schools are currently being closed, which means that more teachers are being made redundant or are taking early retirement. That has a knock-on effect on newly qualified teachers. When a substitute is needed, it is quite natural for a primary-school head teacher to recruit a retired teacher whom they know to have the experience to look after a class. Discipline is important, and an experienced teacher is better able to provide that.

However, employing retired teachers in substitute posts prevents new teachers from gaining experience, and that is the point made in Mr Dominic Bradley's excellent motion. I am afraid that I must inform Mr Butler that there is a problem, and the Assembly should be tackling it.

3.00 pm

Several teachers have told me that they are burnt out as a result of the plethora of initiatives that are forced on them. Burdened with administration and experiencing angst and worry, they tell me that they cannot cope. Surely it would be a good idea to place the excess of teachers in schools, if only temporarily, thereby enabling established teachers to receive training on the new curriculum, and so forth.

Teachers simply do not have enough time to do their jobs. Members of the Committee for Education will recall that primary-school teachers recently told it that in an entire week, they had only 45 minutes for any form of preparation. They asked the Committee how they were meant to prepare for the new curriculum.

The motion, which I fully support, highlights the point that nothing in our country is more important than the education of our young people. It is not acceptable for those excellent teachers to be thrown on the scrap heap. The Assembly cannot wash its hands of them; it must act. It is the Minister of Education's responsibility, and I look forward to her doing something about it.

Mr Storey: Lest anyone is in any doubt, Halloween has passed. There is no witch-hunt this afternoon — in case the Minister's minder, Mr Butler, rises to her defence on this issue.

A clear rhetoric is developing. The current Minister of Education seems to be rehearsing the same responses that were given by her colleague and predecessor, Martin McGuinness. Records show that the same questions were asked of him during his term. Miraculously, his answers then appear now to be coming, practically verbatim, from the current Minister. Between them, however, they have made little or no improvement to the situation, and that does not portray Sinn Féin as a friend of the teaching profession. It is ridiculous that a staggering total of 3,871 substitute teachers are awaiting full-time permanent posts. I commend the Member for bringing the motion to the House.

The Member for Sinn Féin disputed and questioned the facts. Of course, it is known that his party has a difficulty with truth and fact. Remember its lapse of memory when it did not know the people in Colombia, before it suddenly realised that they were party members?

The Minister has been asked practically the same question three times, from three different Members, and she has dished out the same reply each time. She lays the blame firmly at the door of the employers but claims that her Department has issued guidelines on recruitment. Where has that type of rationale been heard before? The dispute involving classroom assistants is another example of the Minister's shifting the blame to someone else and saying that it is not her responsibility — although she just happens to be the Minister of Education.

Despite the Minister's strong protestations, she has done nothing to amend the situation. Just over two weeks ago, she was asked in the Chamber for her views on plans in Scotland to introduce an induction year for teachers, and whether it would be viable for Northern Ireland. Bearing in mind that, as has been mentioned, this problem was first raised in June, the Minister obviously felt that it was not important enough to deal with as a matter of urgency.

Instead, she fixed a provisional date of 12 December 2007 on which to meet her Scottish counterpart. In the intervening period, however, she has been able to travel throughout the Republic of Ireland talking to representatives of an education sector that is small in relation to the overall provision of education in Northern Ireland.

As has already been said, there has been six months of nothing. The Minister is again displaying her disgraceful habit of picking and choosing those matters that she deems to be a priority in her society of so-called equality. I see no such stringent efforts to ease the current crisis of dealing with the issue in hand; namely, the permanent posts expected, and, indeed, deserved, by teachers.

How will the Minister address the problem? We await her reply today. When does she intend to do something, or will it be like the 11-plus situation where there is no need to panic, no need to worry, no need to be in any rush about the issue, because suddenly parents and children are not that important? However, the rhetoric that she used in the 'News Letter' the other day tells a completely different story.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: I will give way, but I hope that I will be given an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member point out anything that the Minister has attempted to do with any sense of urgency on any topic?

Mr Storey: The Minister is considering club-banking for — would you believe it — Irish-medium schools,

because that issue is important to her, and it is more important than providing for the majority of parents and children in Northern Ireland. Only issues that are close to the Minister's own thinking are afforded the courtesy of a swift response. That is entirely unacceptable. It does not take a genius — and I am not the sharpest pencil in the box — to realise what is going on. I await the Minister's explanation — or should that be excuses — as to what should be done. The facts speak for themselves. She has proved on paper and in the Chamber that if an issue is not on her personal agenda, she does not care. We have the rhetoric, but not the results.

How many of the 3,871 substitute teachers awaiting permanent posts are dedicated Irish-language teachers? We will await a response to that. If such a terrible nightmare were to rear its head, Ms Ruane would stop at nothing to ensure that all the stops were pulled out and a purpose-built facility miraculously set up to address the matter. Perhaps the Minister is confused about the content and expectations of her role. She is not, as she continuously attempts to portray herself, an Assembly ambassador for the virtues of the Irish language, although I have no doubt that she would carry out that task admirably. She is, however, the head of a Department that structures, manages, maintains and develops the education system for all the children of Northern Ireland, not just for one sector that she feels is important. I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion. I, too, have met young teachers who are or have been on the substitute roll for a year or longer. They have applied for job after job only to be disappointed time after time. They are dedicated young teachers who only want to practise their chosen vocation. It is soul-destroying for them to rise every day wondering whether the phone will ring for someone to inform them that they will have employment for that day.

We have heard the stark statistic that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute teacher register. However, we must never forget that among those are young teachers struggling to make a career for themselves. Many have been unable to finish their early professional development, which is a total shame, considering the investment that society has made in their education and training, not to mention the cost to themselves. All our young students leave university with bank loans, so they really need to get jobs.

I spoke to a young teacher who is now a bank clerk because she could not get a permanent teaching job. She told me that she was broken-hearted making the decision to abandon the career that she had worked towards all her school and college life. She had worked with children all her secondary-school and student life in summer community schemes and had developed a love of teaching. Therefore, I understood her disappointment at having to turn to another occupation purely for

financial reasons. That is part of the human cost of the statistic reflected in the motion.

Members should also bear in mind the young teaching talent that our education system is losing. The Alliance Party amendment slightly baffles me; the motion calls for the development of a strategy over the next three years to bring these teachers into full-time employment, yet the Alliance Party amendment would condemn them to temporary work with no chance of a permanent position. That would weaken the motion, so I cannot support it.

My colleague Dominic Bradley has clearly outlined several proposals, arising from part two of the Curran Report, which would be effective if implemented incrementally. That is particularly true of the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, which has the potential to create opportunities for young teachers, as it did in England.

The Sinn Féin amendment would water the motion down and is a pale reflection of it. We need to see action on the issue within a specific time frame, or the Curran Report proposals will remain on the shelf gathering dust for years to come. We owe it to young teachers to take action that will enable them to develop their careers in education in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Miss McIlveen: I declare an interest, having been a teacher in a previous life. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the proposer of the motion for raising the issue, which ties in neatly with the motion that my party tabled on 19 June. The key question is what has been done to deal with the issue since then.

In that debate, the Minister advised that she and the Minister for Employment and Learning had agreed that they should meet Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to discuss a range of education matters. That was after she had had dinner with Alex Salmond, who had suggested the meeting only the day before. The Minister had managed to speak to Sir Reg Empey that morning, and matters seemed to be moving apace. That was extremely encouraging, and I am sure that the rest of the Assembly waited with bated breath on the outcome of that meeting. Consequently, we were all disappointed to hear on 15 October, when my colleague Mr Ross asked for an update on the meeting, that only a provisional date of 12 December had been set for the meeting. That is a full six months after the debate.

I fear that Mr Bradley's wish for the Minister to formulate a strategy to get the 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll into full-time employment will suffer the same fate of delay and inaction that blights the Department of Education. The amendment tabled by the Minister's colleague Mr Butler asks only that she "consider" ways to address the problem, which merely

allows for more procrastination. A strategy that can be implemented sooner rather than later is needed.

I sympathise wholeheartedly with the plight of substitute teachers, many of whom are newly qualified teachers for whom we have sought to guarantee a one-year teaching post. For such teachers, there is uncertainty over whether there will be any work available in any given week. Many ultimately make the decision to seek alternative employment or to leave Northern Ireland.

This matter has come before the Assembly time after time, with questions asked of the Minister and of her party colleague who held the post after 2000. We continue to find ourselves stuck in limbo, as with academic selection and classroom assistants. Perhaps if the 3,871 substitute teachers came to Stormont and attempted to ambush the Education Minister, there would be a swifter resolution to the issue. We could wipe 25 off that number immediately if they were employed in the Irish-medium schools to fill the posts taken by unqualified teachers. A former hunger striker was keen to point out in the media that many positions in Irish-medium schools — including some principal posts — are held by former IRA prisoners. We would not want to take any jobs away from “the boys”.

During suspension, my party continued to press direct rule Ministers on the issue in Westminster. The DUP has been concerned about this matter for a considerable time, and it is no surprise that we felt that it was necessary to raise the issue again during this Assembly. Given the lack of job opportunities for young teachers, Northern Ireland faces the prospect of losing a teaching generation. We are told that:

“Teachers, now, are potentially the single most important asset in the achievement of a democratically just learning society.”

Why, then, do we seem to be sitting back and letting that asset slip through our fingers? Only 22% of newly qualified teachers find employment in their first year after graduation, which is an astounding fall from 83·4% in 2001-02.

The NASUWT suggests that 25% of those obtained temporary posts only, and the remainder joined the pool of substitute teachers — if they had not already become disillusioned with their job prospects.

3.15 pm

The Alliance Party's amendment focuses primarily on those teachers who have seized the opportunity to take advantage of early retirement and who then realise how profitable it is to become a substitute teacher. The policy that the Alliance Party is suggesting already exists and has had little impact on securing long-term employment for newly qualified teachers. Substitute teaching is not a satisfactory alternative to a full one-year induction period, which would address experience

problems and provide untold benefits to the schools that take advantage of the scheme.

The motion is worthy, and I feel that the Member would have been well served in supporting the motion that was tabled by the DUP in June. That would have gone some way towards ameliorating a problem that will increase year on year unless it is tackled. It will require cross-departmental co-operation between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, and I ask both Ministers to clear time in their diaries and sit down and produce a clear workable policy.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú a chur Paul Butler ar aghaidh sa díospóireacht seo. I support the amendment in the name of the Member for Lagan Valley Paul Butler.

I listened carefully to Michelle McIlveen's comments, and I am seriously concerned about her remarks regarding the employment of former IRA prisoners in the teaching profession. She may have placed the lives of people in danger given that some people in the loyalist community have not put their weapons beyond use. Her comments were more than careless and irresponsible, and I ask her to be more careful about her remarks in the future.

All Members support newly qualified teachers who are at the start of their careers and wish them well, and we call on the Minister to consider ways to act and ensure that all teachers who wish to go into full-time permanent employment can do so.

To add value to Paul Butler's comments, I would draw Members' attention to the guidance that was issued to employers by the Department of Education and, specifically, by the Minister. Mervyn Storey referred to that guidance and contrived it, somehow or other, to be a negative development when, in fact, it is a positive development.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: OK, Mervyn, keep her lit.

Mr Storey: I was not saying that it was a negative development, but we have seen guidelines that have been issued by the Minister and the Department with regard to the classroom assistants' strike. That dispute is not resolved, and the Minister is merely shifting the blame. She has issued guidelines on this issue, and she is now trying to shift the blame on to other people. It is time that the Minister took responsibility and started to run the Department.

Mr McElduff: I join Mervyn in commending the Minister for issuing guidance to employers, advising them that preference should be given to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers who are seeking employment. That guidance is a welcome and

positive intervention, and I thank Mervyn Storey for bringing it to our attention. He has played a stormer: fair play to him.

Paul Butler is also correct to place the motion in the context of the Programme for Government. I have great personal respect for Dominic Bradley and Basil McCrea. However, a man from Eskragh in rural Tyrone — a place familiar to you, Mr Speaker — recently told me that he listens to BBC Radio Ulster's evening coverage of events in the Chamber.

He said that the more he listens to Basil McCrea and Dominic Bradley, the more he thinks they are playing the politics of Lanigan's Ball — stepping in and out of Government, stepping in and out of the Executive, and pretending to be semi-detached.

The fact is that Basil McCrea's and Dominic Bradley's ministerial colleagues were around the Executive table when the Programme for Government was signed off, and yet they want an entirely new Programme for Government with respect to education over a three-year period. Some of the contributions have been mischievous, at best, and not terribly realistic.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: Not on this occasion, Dominic.

Mrs M Bradley: I thought you said that you liked standing. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McElduff: Apart from that, are you keeping well, Dominic?

Undoubtedly, there is considerable work to be done in the creation of job opportunities on an all-Ireland North/South basis for teachers throughout the country. I hope that that issue will feature very strongly in the immediate future in North/South Ministerial Council meetings when Caitríona Ruane meets Mary Hanafin TD in the education sectoral format.

The situation is problematic, but the shortage of Irish-language teachers can be addressed. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has drawn attention to that issue, and it must be addressed with creative, all-Ireland solutions. If there is an oversupply of teachers in the Twenty-six Counties, and an undersupply in the Six Counties, we have a duty to address that and to ensure a harmonised approach.

I also welcome the recent introduction of sports and language programmes for primary schools, which offer a way for newly qualified teachers to gain experience in our schools. The Minister and the Department need to act on ways and means of bringing more teachers into full-time employment.

Mr K Robinson: I wish to declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of Whiteabbey Primary School and Hollybank Primary School and —

since this is obviously confession time — once upon a time, I was a young teacher, too.

Manpower planning throughout the public services is a fundamental function that the Assembly has a right to expect from all the Northern Ireland Departments. Under direct rule, the lack of public accountability seriously undermined the planning function of the Civil Service, and the whole regime was characterised by a lack of planning culture. Generally, Government tended to be reactive, and those reactions tended to be knee-jerk in nature, and driven by events.

All that will have to change now that the Assembly is in control of public affairs, and nowhere does that need to change more than in the manpower planning that lies behind the teaching workforce. It should be clear to any observer that there is no point in training teachers for whom no jobs exist, or are likely to exist, within the system. Not only is that wasteful of the very precious resource of young talent, but it is deeply cynical in the face of the hopes and aspirations of young people who spend years in training, only to find that there are no job opportunities when they qualify. Considering the amount of public money involved in training young teachers, it is an absolute disgrace that this situation ever arose in the first place.

Emigration is not the answer to unemployment — whether on the boat to England, or Scotland, or across the border, as Mr McElduff pointed out, as an escape route. That simply covers up the woeful lack of manpower planning in the first place.

Only 22% of new teachers manage to find work in their first year after qualification, and that signifies a serious problem both in human and educational terms. Beyond that figure, and based on payroll information since September 2005, there have been 3,176 female and 695 male teachers paid as substitute teachers who have never worked in a permanent teaching post. That is not a new problem. The former Minister of Education had this matter drawn to his attention in 2000, but nothing has changed in the past seven years.

The Assembly has debated the need to provide a guaranteed year of employment to young teachers, based on the Scottish model. That guaranteed year would help young teachers who are fresh out of college to apply for substitute teacher posts, which would be an improvement on the existing situation.

It is quite obvious that the drop in school rolls indicates that the reform of the education system, which is already under way, is necessary and needs to be far reaching.

Enrolment has already fallen by 9% — about 30,000 pupils over the past decade — and it is projected to fall by a further 9.5%, which amounts to a further 30,000 pupils over the next 10 years. In that context, major rationalisation of schools, sharing of resources,

amalgamations and various other strategies will be undertaken to deal with the situation.

The Minister is already reported as considering school selection at age 14 instead of 11, which perhaps indicates the introduction of primary, middle and high school splits in educational provision. Apart from the debate over the selection process, which is one for another day, such a major restructuring will have a dramatic impact on the configuration of the present teaching workforce. It will undoubtedly lead to many teachers wanting to retire early, either burnt out or wanting to opt out of such a major, or even seismic, change in education provision. Surely that must be facilitated, and the employment of young teachers must be considered in that context.

Irrespective of that scenario of change, there is a need for rational planning of teacher training. That must begin now, so that the number of young teachers qualifying bears some relationship to the actual number of young teachers needed by our schools.

We must ensure that any gains made through restructuring and rationalisation are not frittered away by the continuance of poor manpower planning by the Department. The new curriculum proposals, if they are properly introduced and developed, will provide an opportunity for up to 10% preparation time. That must be translated into extra teaching posts, aimed at those who have been out of college not just for one year, but anything up to five or seven years, and who have yet to acquire a permanent position.

Today's debate must be seen in a wider context than that of simply addressing the issue of unemployment among young teachers by the implementation of the Curran Report or some similar strategy. A range of interconnected and interrelated issues is involved, from manpower planning through to rationalisation of schools and the whole structure of the school system, all of which have massive implications, not just for young unemployed teachers, but for the employability and skilling of our entire workforce. I support the motion.

Mr Ross: As my party colleagues pointed out, today's motion in the name of Mr Bradley is not miles apart from the motion that Michelle McIlveen and I introduced to the House in June. It, too, recognised the difficulty that young teachers have in getting permanent full-time teaching posts and called on the Minister to look into the idea of introducing an induction year as a means of addressing the matter. However, since that debate, the Minister has taken absolutely no action on the issue, and today's motion is a timely reminder to her.

I am surprised to see the Alliance Party's amendment. It would seem to suggest some kind of discrimination against those teachers who have taken early retirement. I agree that there is a problem with younger teachers being prevented from gaining temporary work; however,

that is due to their not having the experience needed — an issue that would be addressed by introducing a teaching induction year, as proposed by my party in June.

I am less surprised by Sinn Féin's amendment, which tries to give its Minister more wriggle room so that her inaction can continue. Mr Butler got his excuses in early.

Given the fact that my party took the lead on the issue, and that the SDLP is following, I am happy to support the original motion proposed by Mr Bradley.

Although the Minister is often coy with her figures, we know that only one fifth of teaching graduates get a teaching job in the year after they graduate. 'The Irish News' reported on 26 July this year that more than 7,000 qualified teachers cannot get full-time employment in schools. I refer to teaching jobs: figures on those who are employed in some sector and in some form are irrelevant to the debate. The Minister should take the opportunity to tell the House how many of those young people who graduated with a teaching qualification this year, or last year, now have a full-time permanent teaching post in Northern Ireland, and not whether they are working in Tesco or somewhere else in the country.

The problems facing young teachers are well known, and today's motion specifically addresses the substitute roll. However, many young teachers cannot even get supply work, as many experienced teachers take early retirement and, given that experience, are ideal for supply work or maternity cover. We cannot fix the problem by actively discriminating against experienced teachers, as the Alliance Party suggested earlier. Rather, we must help young people to get the experience that they need to get jobs. We already spend huge amounts of money each year in training new teachers; however, many of those who have completed their training are forced to look for jobs in other regions of the UK, or to go into part-time work in other areas, as no teaching jobs are available.

3.30 pm

It is clear that the role of the Assembly and the Education Minister is to implement a strategy that will assist young graduates into permanent teaching jobs.

Previously, I highlighted to the Assembly the merits of an induction year as a means by which young teachers might attain the level of experience that they require in order to apply for full-time posts; yet, as my colleague said earlier, the Minister informed the House on 15 October that she was no further forward in considering the issue than she had been six months ago.

A full induction year has been supported by the NASUWT and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, which, in its final report for the Department of Education, recommended the introduction of a guaranteed

induction year for all newly-qualified teachers. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation also recommended that route, saying that it feared that the

"brightest and best young teachers [would be] lured across the water by an offer of £5,000."

The stark reality is that many young teachers are demoralised because they cannot find permanent teaching posts. If the Minister continues to procrastinate on this issue — and my colleague Mervyn Storey reminded me that procrastination is the thief of time — and no strategy is put in place, more students who are interested in a teaching profession will leave Northern Ireland never to return. Our brightest and best young teachers will be lost or they will pursue careers in other areas.

A strategy must be put in place and money must be spent prudently — spending huge amounts of money on teachers who will ultimately head for the mainland to find jobs is not prudent. There must be a return on the money that is spent on training teachers — they must get jobs here. As with other professions, we do not want our most talented people to leave, and it is important for our education system and our economy that they stay in Northern Ireland. Do teachers currently have the opportunity to follow their careers at home, or must they leave Northern Ireland? We should be creating opportunities for young teachers by opening doors rather than closing them.

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

I support the motion, and I hope that the Minister will take this issue seriously and get on with the job of finding solutions that will fix the problems that exist in education.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá mise iontach sásta éisteacht le gach aon duine a bhfuil suim aige nó aici san oideachas lena n-áirítear dearcadh an Choiste Oideachais. I welcome the debate on this important issue. During my time as Minister of Education, I have seen the quality, commitment and professionalism of our teachers at first hand. They do a tremendous job, and I wish to give them every possible support.

We are fortunate in that we continue to attract large numbers of highly qualified young people for every teacher-training place that is offered by universities and teacher training colleges. I am keen to hear the views of everyone with an interest in education, including those of the Committee for Education.

Is maith a thuigim go bhfuil muinteoirí óga, i mblianta luath a slí bheatha go háirithe a bhfuil deacrachtaí acu poist lánaimseartha a fháil. Feictear sna treochtaí, áfach, go bhfaigheann cuid mhaith acu post sealadach nó fostaíocht phartaimseartha san oideachas.

Turning to the motion, the issues relating to teaching jobs are complex. The figure of 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll, which appears in the motion proposed by Dominic Bradley, relates to information from the

Department's payroll system and refers not only to the number of teachers who are paid to work as substitute teachers in grant-aided schools but also to those qualified to teach in the further education sector. The figure also includes people who are not yet fully qualified and who are only eligible to teach for limited periods of time.

The Department has sought information from the substitute teachers' register. However, although that register records those who are eligible to teach in grant-aided schools and who are registered with the General Teaching Council, it does not give information about those who have not yet secured full-time employment.

It is worth remembering that the register includes retired teachers, those who are currently pursuing other private or occupational paths but who wish to remain a part of the teaching profession, and those who are not actively seeking full-time employment. That said, updated figures from the Department's payroll system indicate that there has been a slight decrease in the number of teachers who are paid to work as substitute teachers but who have not yet secured a permanent teaching post.

I am conscious of the fact that there are young teachers, particularly in the early years following qualification, who find it difficult to get full-time jobs, although trends indicate that many of them secure temporary or part-time teaching employment.

Tá mise báúil do mhúinteoirí nuacháilithe agus tá súil agam go n-éireoidh leo post buan san oideachas a fháil.

In that context, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, which is the official agency for the collection of information on publicly funded higher-education institutions, collects data about the destinations of higher-education students six months after they graduate. The latest available data, relating to the 2005-06 academic year, shows that, of those students gaining initial teacher-training qualifications at higher-level institutions here, 82% of those who returned destination information were employed variously in a teaching capacity six months after graduation, and 67% of those respondents were employed on a full-time basis. Allied figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June 2007 show that 240 jobseeker's allowance claimants specified teaching as their profession; 72 of those were under the age of 30.

We must examine the career opportunities that are on offer and whether it is correct to say that we are oversupplied with teachers. To that end, a first-rate career strategy is essential if the needs of learners are to be matched with an appropriate range of careers. The Department's mission is to ensure that all learners have an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential and enter the world of work with the appropriate skills, a

strong grounding in numeracy and literacy, appropriate qualifications in a broad curriculum — which includes vocational skills — and personal esteem and confidence.

To help achieve that objective, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning's draft careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) strategy was issued for consultation on 22 October 2007, and responses to that are due by 14 December. The CEIAG strategy is aimed at developing effective career decision-makers who have ownership of their careers and a commitment to lifelong learning. The strategy outlines a cohesive structure that is built around the key elements of education, information, advice and guidance, employability, and work-related learning.

I am sympathetic to the plight of newly qualified teachers, and I hope that they will be successful in obtaining permanent teaching posts.

Ní bhíonn na deacrachtaí céanna i dTuaisceart na hÉireann go ginearálta i gcompóráid le dlínsí eile. Is amhlaidh go mbíonn an iomarca daoine ag cur isteach ar chúrsaí anseo, bíonn suas le hochtar ag cur isteach ar gach aon áit. Léiríonn sé seo neart an choras oideachais, an dea-chuma atá ar an mhúinteoireacht mar shlí bheatha agus na roghanna saol a dhéanann daoine óga.

However, I have asked the newly qualified teachers to be creative and flexible in their choices when determining their career paths. Teachers are highly qualified professionals, and, as such, they have skills that prepare them for other jobs in related areas.

Dominic Bradley may scoff at a sport and languages programme for primary schools and at the idea that it offers opportunities for newly qualified teachers. However, I have met many of the new sports coaches, who are very excited about their posts — not only because they are teaching, but because, for the first time ever, there is a programme, supported by the Department of Education, for teaching Gaelic sports and soccer in primary schools. That is a very exciting initiative.

The issue is not about the number of posts that are created; it is about a new way of bringing sports and languages into the classroom. Given that we hear about levels of obesity almost daily, I am disappointed that Dominic does not see merit in that programme.

Secondly, perhaps Dominic Bradley views emigration differently, but I see it as a natural movement across borders — it is natural to go from Down to Louth or from Derry to Donegal. I also believe in the rights of young people to make choices. Young people choose to go abroad, and, in a previous debate on the matter, I urged young people to come back to Ireland to avail of the opportunities that the peace process is creating across the whole island of Ireland.

I welcome that fact that opportunities are opening up for young people in Ireland — North and South — in England, Scotland and Wales and, indeed, further afield. It is good for our young people to have such opportunities. Having said that — and I will say it again, in case Dominic misses it again — I call on all the young people to come back and join us in building a vibrant island where there will be opportunities for everyone.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for giving way. Despite the fact that she would like all those young people to come back to Northern Ireland, there are no teaching jobs for them to come back to.

Ms Ruane: I recently attended the North/South Ministerial Council's second institutional meeting in Dundalk. One of the issues discussed was cross-border mobility and the need to make it as easy as possible for people to move freely across the island in order to work, live and study. Facilitating mobility for the teaching profession will provide additional employment opportunities for teachers. Next week, I will be meeting Mary Hanafin at the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting, and that is one of the issues that we will be discussing.

I am glad that Mervyn Storey is not the Minister of Education. To quote a famous poet, when he is:

“old and grey and full of sleep”,

he will still be talking about Colombia and prejudicial views on the Irish medium, and he will still be urging that creationism be taught as part of the science curriculum. The rest of the world is moving on, and I urge people to move on.

Mr Storey: The Minister eats and sleeps equality — *[Interruption.]*

We do not need her minder to be jumping to her defence; surely the Minister is old enough to be able to answer for herself. If the Minister believes in equality, why is she afraid to deal with the issue of creationism and allow people the opportunity to have equality in the classroom?

Ms Ruane: Thank you for your interesting contribution.

Mr Storey: No answer, then?

Ms Ruane: The Member has received my answers to many questions. I suggest that he reads the answers to the questions that I gave him. I was asked how many Irish-medium teachers are on the substitute register. There are currently 148, so there you go.

There are subjects here that have too many teachers, and others in which teachers are in short supply — for example, maths, science, engineering and technology. Those subjects are central to the future economic success of society if we are to compete successfully in a global

market. There is also a demand for more Irish teachers to service the growing Irish-medium sector.

The North of Ireland has not generally experienced as many teacher recruitment difficulties as other jurisdictions. All the courses offered here are heavily oversubscribed, with up to eight times more applications than there are places. That is an indication of the strength of the education system, the continued attractiveness of teaching as a career and the life choices that young people wish to make.

Is ceisteanna tábhachta iad fostaíocht bhuan, oiliúint agus tacaíocht leanúnach dár gcéimithe uile sa Tuaisceart agus go háirithe do na céimithe sin atá nuacháilithe.

Regarding the determinants of demand, the direct matching of supply with demand is difficult, given that the number and type of vacancies for which newly qualified teachers may be eligible to apply in any one year are influenced by a wide range of factors, including, principally, the decisions of schools regarding the desired size of their teaching complements and the designation of teaching posts as full-time or part-time, permanent or temporary. Schools make those decisions in the context of their overall budgets, and particularly in light of the funding that they receive under the local management of schools common funding formula arrangements.

I will continue to seek to maximise the resources that schools receive under those arrangements. That will mean that, on the demand side, schools have the resources to devote to the most valuable resource — the teachers themselves. In that context, I am currently considering the implications for school budgets of the recently announced draft Budget proposals for education. For their part, schools, in trying to maximise their resources, will be cognisant of the fact that the cost of employing a teacher from the substitute teacher register varies from £24,500 per annum for a newly qualified teacher to £42,000 for an experienced teacher.

Another key issue is demographics. Some people like to forget that pupil numbers have declined from almost 347,000 in 2001-02 to under 333,000 in 2005-06. During the same period, the full-time equivalent teacher count has dropped by just over 1,000. It is anticipated that, over the next five years, pupil numbers will continue to decline.

3.45 pm

Demographics, or else falling pupil numbers, have a significant impact on our system, and further decline must inform the number of qualified teachers that we need in coming years. Education authorities are required to plan how to make the best use of resources and ensure that schools are sustainable, with sufficient pupils and resources to provide the quality of education that children deserve. That will necessitate examining rationalisation options in the context of falling rolls.

Demand side is also affected by the number of teachers who leave the profession each year. In the past three years, some 2,300 teachers have left our schools, mainly because of their reaching the retirement age but also because of ill health and other reasons. The age profile of our existing workforce also influences the number of newly qualified teachers who will be employed in future. Of the 19,811 permanently or temporarily contracted teachers who are registered with the General Teaching Council, 5,573 — that is, more than 28% — are now 50 years of age or over.

The Department already has regard to many factors that affect demand, including inward migration, falling rolls and geographical disposition. The annual determination is informed by statistical analysis in the form of a teacher-demand model, which is sensitive to a considerable range of factors. Moreover, annual intake to initial-teacher education institutions has been reduced by more than 20%, from 880 in 2004-05 to 699 in 2007-08. Those numbers are set to be reduced further for the 2008-09 academic year. I thank Trevor Lunn for his thoughtful contribution on that topic.

The Department is also in the process of collecting information from all grant-aided schools on the number and detail of teaching vacancies that exist in each school. That will be an annual survey, ensuring that there is sufficient intake of teachers to meet demand from the grant-aided sector.

The Department continues to tell employers that, when filling vacancies, they need to give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment. In the past, it has been suggested that retired teachers should effectively be banned from seeking further employment. Although I understand the reasons behind that suggestion, I have resisted it on two grounds: we cannot seek to restrict someone's right to seek employment on the basis of age, as such a measure would be open to legal challenge; and —

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: I will.

Mr K Robinson: Retired teachers are entitled to teach up to 110 days per annum before all sorts of benefits start to be affected. Will the Minister undertake to look at that ceiling, with a view to reducing it?

Ms Ruane: I will certainly look at it. I thank the Member for his contribution.

Schools have also been advised that, where there are genuine vacancies, they should seek to fill those on a permanent rather than temporary basis, unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature. We will continue to insist that, when filling vacancies, employers give preference to newly qualified teachers and experienced non-retired teachers seeking employment.

Before 1999-2000, evidence pointed to schools appointing low-cost substitute teachers when costs were met from the school's budget but high-cost teachers when costs were met centrally. Since then, the reimbursement of the cost of substitute teachers from the centrally held funds of all the education and library boards has been restricted. That measure has enabled more funds to be delegated to schools, while providing them with an incentive to employ newly qualified teachers for substitution purposes. However, schools have the flexibility to decide to engage a teacher at a higher cost, charged to the school's budget, if they so desire.

The Department is currently examining ways in which the escalating cost of premature retirement in the teaching profession can be managed more effectively.

The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have jointly undertaken a major review of teacher education to ensure that the profession is best placed to cope with the changes facing the education system in the coming years. In the near future, I will consider the way forward on a range of matters that affect teacher education, including the phases of initial teacher education, induction, early professional development and continuing professional development. Stable employment and continual training and support are important issues for all our teacher graduates in the North, particularly for those who are newly qualified.

As I indicated to Alastair Ross in my oral reply of 15 October 2007, I have arranged a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in Scotland to discuss a range of educational matters, including how the Scottish Government address the employment of newly qualified teachers.

Following completion of the teacher education review, my colleague Reg Empey and I will explore ways by which newly qualified teachers employed in grant-aided schools may gain greater stability of employment during their early years of teaching. However, any strategy that addresses the needs of the newly qualified teacher must have regard to the overall costs and the availability of resources. I accept that more must be done to improve the matching of supply and demand, and for that reason we have initiated our annual survey.

To summarise, the career strategy that Reg Empey and I jointly put out for consultation will be important. On the priority status for young teachers, we will continue to insist that schools employ newly qualified teachers and create as many opportunities for newly qualified teachers as possible. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek clarification on the Minister's habit of using bilingualism. For those Members who are not versed in the Irish language it is difficult to establish

which sections of her speech are made in Irish and directly translated into English. The Irish sections seem much shorter than the English ones. Therefore, it would be helpful to clarify if all sections are translated or if only selected sections are translated.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand that the Minister and other Members who speak in Irish give a translation of what they have said directly before or after. Furthermore, Hansard has an accurate report of what is said by all Members in the Assembly.

Mr K Robinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that the Minister has spoken in Irish for part of her speech and some of us are not sure whether she was translating the piece that had just gone or the piece about to come, will the Minister assure the House that she did give an English translation before or immediately after the Irish parts of her speech?

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is no such requirement on the Minister. The solution to avoid those problems in the future would be a simultaneous translation service for the House, which the Assembly may consider in the future.

Mr Neeson: At the outset, I declare an interest as I am a former schoolteacher, and one of my daughters qualified for the teaching profession this year. I am well aware of the issue that we are debating, which is serious and not straightforward. As I know many teachers, I am aware that many who take early retirement return almost immediately to take up a substitute teaching job. Dominic Bradley has correctly made the point that jobs are available elsewhere. There are many teaching jobs available across the water, but that is not the answer to the problem.

It is important to take into consideration the falling numbers on school rolls. Are too many teacher-training places being created? Is enough effort being made to train teachers for specialist subjects such as science, maths and engineering, as the Minister mentioned?

To turn back to the debate, Paul Butler commented that more teachers are trained than can be employed, which is an important point. Trevor Lunn said that those teachers should be given the opportunity of experience, even in a substitute role.

That is part of the substance of the Alliance Party's amendment. Interestingly, trainee teachers across the water are given greater opportunities to train in the classroom than trainees in Northern Ireland.

Jeffrey Donaldson made the important point about the influence of demographics on the present situation and the need for a strategy to deal with that. That is the crux of the matter. I am not convinced by the Minister's speech that such a strategy is emerging. However, I welcome the fact that she and the Minister for Employ-

ment and Learning are to work together on a strategy to deal with the problem.

Basil McCrea rightly gave consideration to many other duties that teachers must undertake. Mervyn Storey said that he would not get involved in a witch-hunt. In fact, however, he did get involved in a witch-hunt. Mary Bradley outlined the costs of training teachers, which are considerable. Michelle McIlveen made the point that the situation is currently stuck in limbo. She reiterated the need for co-operation between DENI and DEL. Barry McElduff confirmed that he is a member of the fan clubs of Basil McCrea and Dominic Bradley. *[Laughter.]*

Former schoolteacher Ken Robinson mentioned the lack of a planning culture under direct rule. I agree entirely with him. That is why a strategy must be developed. Alastair Ross restated his party's view that there is a need for an induction year for newly qualified teachers.

The Alliance Party amendment is a realistic proposition that takes the facts of the situation into consideration, whereas the Sinn Féin amendment is simply a slight rewording of the original motion.

The lack of full-time permanent teaching jobs is an important issue, which I am glad that the Assembly has had a chance to debate. I urge Members to support the Alliance Party's amendment.

Mr Butler: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although all Members of the House support the spirit of the motion and efforts to find newly qualified teachers full-time permanent teaching jobs in the education system, it is unfortunate that, once again, the motion has simply been used as a platform from which to launch an attack on the Minister of Education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A mobile phone has been left switched on in the Chamber, and is interfering with the recording equipment. Can the Member whose phone it is switch it off, please?

Mr Butler: Go raibh míle maith agat. I have taken on board some of the proposals that were made by Ken Robinson. However, the Members opposite did not put forward any realistic proposals on how to deal with the issue. Instead, they launched an attack on the Irish language, the Minister and how she is handling the Education Department.

In the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government, education has done better than any other departmental area, with almost a 4.5% rise in its budget. It is planned to open 100 new schools over the next several years; there is a focus on early-years provision; the gap between children who achieve less and those who achieve the best is to be narrowed; and a greater range of subjects will be made available to post-primary schoolchildren. Those are the positives.

Certain Members brought issues such as Colombia into the debate. I do not know what that has to do with the motion.

I also have to mention Basil McCrea who, for the past few months, has been stalking the Minister of Education, looking for her on every occasion — he is the Assembly's serial protester or serial whinger.

4.00 pm

When we get to the nub of the issue, figures have been obtained from the Department of Education, which show that there are 1,750 retired teachers in the system. Many took advantage of the early retirement scheme that has been available for the past number of years, and tighter restrictions on the number of days during which they can teach in each term might provide a way in which newly-qualified teachers could be brought into the system. We are not saying that retired teachers cannot come back into the system — they are needed.

We should look to the South of Ireland where there is a policy that retired teachers may not re-enter the education system if they have declared formally that they wanted to take early retirement. Therefore, we can learn a lot from the South of Ireland.

The Minister of Education has said that she is considering ways to bring newly-qualified teachers into the system. We have calculated that it would cost £70 million or £80 million to employ the almost 4,000 people listed on the substitute-teachers' roll in the education system. Are the Members on the Benches opposite going to ask Peter Robinson for another £70 million or £80 million? He has already referred, in the Assembly, to people bringing forward fanciful motions with implications.

Mr Storey: Constantly, we come to the House and hear Members — and we are all guilty of it — talking about the amount of money it takes to run Departments. Will the Member accept that if there were one education system in Northern Ireland — and not five — the Minister would have all the money that she needs to run the education system, rather than always trying to blame someone else because she is unable to run the current system due to her budget?

Mr Butler: There is one education system. Under the review of public administration —

Mr Storey: Is it a maintained system?

Mr Butler: Look at the proposals that George Bain is going to bring forward, which include: area planning; 'A Shared Future'; and schools in the Irish-medium, controlled, and maintained sectors that will share facilities.

Mr Storey: By the time that the Minister begins to implement 'A Shared Future', the policy on sustainable schools, and the Bain Report, she will have to allow all of the maintained schools to amalgamate, and then area

planning will be absolutely useless. It is time that we implemented those policies. We are all keen about that and we want to sign up to that. It is time that we did it now, rather than wait until the demographics have changed so dramatically that they will have absolutely no impact.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. Unfortunately, his views are not reflected in the debate. As the Member knows, I am a member of the Committee for Education, and his views are not reflected on that Committee either. All he is doing is attacking all of the proposals that come forward and attacking the Minister and her officials who make presentations to the Committee. Perhaps, Mervyn should try to take on board what Caitríona Ruane is trying to do. We have an education system that will change in the next few years for the betterment of everyone.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad to make the winding-up speech on the motion. At the beginning of his speech, Mr Butler said that the figure that I quoted was not accurate. I said that there were 3,871 teachers — as stated in the motion — on the substitute-teachers' roll who have not yet been in full-time, permanent employment in teaching. The source of that statistic is the Minister of Education. I did not draw that statistic down from the clouds: it came from her and her Department. Now I am not telling lies. Perhaps, the case is that, for once, the truth has leaked out and now they are trying to reel it in again.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to moderate his language, and also to be careful in relation to the word "lies".

Mr D Bradley: Mr Deputy Speaker, I did not think that my language was immoderate. However, I will defer to you on this occasion.

My question clearly related to the number of teachers who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in the teaching profession. Mr Butler says that the figure of 3,871, which is mentioned in the motion, includes retired teachers.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not sure whether I heard you correctly, but I think that you said something about lies. Surely if a Member of this House is telling lies, he is out of order?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I cautioned the Member about using the word "lies" and to be careful in the language that he used. I was simply cautioning the Member.

Mr D Bradley: In fact, what I said was, "I am not telling lies". I do not think that I should be admonished for saying that.

In any case, I will move on. As I said, I asked the Minister for the number of teachers in full-time permanent employment. Mr Butler said that the figure of 3,871

includes retired teachers. However, retired teachers have previously been in permanent employment in education. Mr Butler said that that figure also included teachers who have taken voluntary redundancies — such teachers have also previously been in full-time employment in education. Therefore, I believe that I got the figure right. If I have not, the fault does not lie with me; it lies with the Minister and her Department.

As was said earlier, Mr Butler's amendment is only a pale reflection of the original motion. An amendment should strengthen a motion, but this one seeks to water it down, and does so very poorly. I am also disappointed by the Alliance Party's amendment, which would seek to continue with temporary employment for teachers and thus exacerbate the problem, rather than solve or relieve it. Therefore, I cannot support that amendment.

Other Members made useful points. Mr Donaldson mentioned the frustration that young teachers feel at being unable to find employment in their chosen profession. He rightly challenged Mr Butler's misinterpretation of my motion. He pointed out that the motion allows for a defined time for the development of a strategy. The Sinn Féin amendment leaves that open-ended, resulting in more dust gathering on the proposal.

Basil McCrea referred to the fact that some teachers on the substitute list have been on the list for seven years. He also mentioned that 40 young teachers have recently left to seek employment in Scotland, and he highlighted the problems with literacy and numeracy in our society and how lower pupil:teacher ratios could help to solve those problems. He referred to the burnout experienced by many teachers. That problem could be alleviated by young teachers' being given jobs in primary schools. Primary-school teachers have only 45 minutes of preparation time during the week. The Curran Report proposes 10% planning, preparation and assessment time. If that proposal were to be adopted, many young teachers could be taken into the profession.

Mr Storey accused the Minister of riding the coat-tails of the employers. He also mentioned that she did the same with regard to another issue. Mary Bradley told of the soul-destroying experience faced by young teachers in their daily wait to hear whether or not they will be employed for a day. Miss McIlveen referred to the lack of progress that had been made since the previous debate on an issue related to this motion.

Mr McElduff is a great friend of mine. *[Laughter.]* Cara mór liom féin. He referred to an old Irish music hall song called 'Lanigan's Ball'. Mr McElduff and the Minister should perform a duet of Christy Moore's 'Go, Move, Shift', because that is what the Minister is telling young teachers to do: go, move, shift to Scotland, England, Wales — and Donegal.

The Minister told the House that she was calling on young people to come back home. Mr Storey said that

the Minister had brought three people home from Colombia, but in answer to my question, she was sending more than 3,000 young teachers away from home.

Ken Robinson mentioned woefully inadequate manpower planning, and said that it was a disgrace that this situation had been allowed to develop — only 22% of newly-qualified teachers gain employment in their first year after qualification. He also mentioned the importance of the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, yet, in her summing up, the Minister gave us more Civil Service-speak and statistics. If her original statistic has been called into question by her own colleague, how much faith can we put in the statistics that she has presented today?

The Minister berated me, and said that I had devalued her initiatives on sport and languages. I did not; I welcomed them. However, I did ask her how many teachers would be involved in those initiatives and how long those contracts would last. She did not answer my first question or my second question, which speaks volumes.

In conclusion, I want to refer to some of the core proposals of the Curran Report — the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, and the two days' administration time for teaching principals in small primary schools. Although those proposals are referred to in the draft Programme for Government, I did not hear the Minister expand on them today. Perhaps we will hear from her about those proposals in the future. I did not hear any reference to the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time. That is a feature of teaching in England and Wales, and it shows how teachers in Northern Ireland are losing parity with their colleagues elsewhere.

The Minister made a passing reference to the guaranteed initial year, and mentioned that she would discuss the matter with Minister Empey, but I would have preferred to have had more detailed evidence that the matter was being treated seriously.

We have had a lively debate. It has been humorous at times, but also serious. This is a serious issue, and I hope that the Minister will not only take note of the comments made by all Members, but act on them in the future. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will still put the question on amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly abhors the fact that there are 3,871 teachers on the substitute roll who have not yet been in full-time permanent employment in teaching; and calls on the Minister for Education to formulate a strategy to bring these teachers into full-time teaching over the next three years.

4.15 pm

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

Homelessness in Foyle

Mr Deputy Speaker: Cíúineas le bhur dtoil. I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes to speak. Depending on the number of Members who take part in the debate, all other Members who speak will have approximately five minutes.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an mholta seo. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the major problem of homelessness in my constituency of Foyle. Homelessness in Derry is at crisis point. Despite the huge commercial development that proximity to the border and the Celtic tiger economy have brought in recent years in the form of shops and commercial properties, the most appalling levels of homelessness lie underneath that commercial smokescreen of wealth. I am also sure that homelessness and the lack of social and affordable housing are issues that are continually brought to the attention of many other Members. Day and daily, my constituency office receives calls from distraught — and mostly young — people who are unable to put a decent roof over their heads.

That includes young families, some of whom are struggling to get by on benefits and some of whom are struggling to survive on low incomes, but all of whom are unable to enjoy the right of a decent home in which to raise their children. The stark reality is that there are currently around 2,300 people on the housing waiting list in Foyle. More than 1,100 of those are deemed to be in housing crisis — a term that masks the reality that those people face. They may not be sleeping on the streets, but they are homeless — that is for sure.

However, some people are sleeping on the streets. They have been failed by a system that does not provide the care that they need and to which they are entitled. Homelessness is not an isolated issue. The Programme for Government, which was presented to the Assembly last week, rightly stressed that homelessness is an interdependent, cross-cutting issue that is inseparable from health, education, employment and simple poverty.

Those issues cannot be addressed in isolation from one another. If someone's family is homeless, that person's health suffers, the education of the children suffers, access to employment suffers, and the confidence that is required to play a full part in the community is

deeply undermined. As a result of homelessness, the social capacity of our community is much reduced. The homeless are the disadvantaged people in our society that the Programme for Government mentions. Who here can stand in judgement on people who are homeless if they are driven, through the misery of their circumstances and ill health, to the abuse of alcohol and drugs? Our social policy must be based on compassion towards people who have borne the brunt of bad policies in the past. I have met people who are suffering from addictions and who have ended up on the streets of Derry. They come from decent homes; they are good people who have been failed by a bad system. Those people, and all those who come from the city of Derry, deserve better.

A co-ordinated approach must be headed and driven by Department for Social Development (DSD), with other Departments, to ensure that adequate services are provided. New thinking is required to tackle the wider problem of the housing crisis because it is clear that what has gone before has simply not delivered. We must make the aspirations that were set down in last week's Programme for Government a reality.

The number of people who are on housing waiting lists is at its highest level for 30 years. I find it incredible that Members are in the Chamber today to demand one of the same rights that brought people on to the streets during the civil rights campaign, which was led by the people of Derry: that is, the right to a decent home.

In some cases, people have returned to the pre-1969 situation, with three generations of one family living in appalling, overcrowded conditions in the same sub-standard house. We have come full circle, and the Assembly is now making the same demands as were made during the civil rights campaign. That is a damning indictment not only of the decades of neglect by British direct rule Ministers but of the failure of the previous Executive to tackle the issue.

It may sound incredible, but those who are defined as homeless may be the lucky ones. Of the 21,000 people who declared themselves homeless across the North, up to 60% were not accepted as such. The vast majority were young people, who ended up in private accommodation that they could not afford or, worse still, they ended up on the streets. In Derry, the best-case scenario for the coming year is that more than 300 applicants for social housing will be turned down. I ask the Minister where those people are supposed to go. They are at the mercy of private landlords, or, worse, some are at the mercy of the elements as they struggle to survive on the streets. Therefore, will the Minister tell Members whether the Semple Review of housing affordability caters for the needs of the many young people who fail to meet the current criteria for homelessness?

Despite past failings and the current crisis, the Assembly and the Executive have the opportunity to right those wrongs by creating a co-ordinated and integrated strategy that will tackle homelessness. Part of that must include a comprehensive and proactive building programme of social housing in those areas where need is greatest. Objective need must be the only criterion that is used. Homes must be built where there is the greatest need, not where the cheerleaders of the failed NIO policy, which abused the concept of a shared future, consider that it would look good for such homes to be built.

I welcome the pledge in the Programme for Government to build 10,000 new social homes over the next five years. However, it is clear that that will not go far enough. What steps is the Minister taking to secure additional funding to provide more social-housing stock? It is also clear that additional homes must be built, but that is only part of the solution. Innovative, cross-cutting approaches are required. Given that the Programme for Government also pledges to overhaul the planning system, social responsibility clauses should be incorporated into all applications for major housing development schemes. Property developers have made countless millions of pounds from housing projects across the North. Although they are perfectly entitled to do so, they must realise that they have a responsibility to those who are —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No.

— either priced out of the market or find themselves on a housing waiting list. In order to provide much-needed accommodation, housing associations end up purchasing a considerable proportion of houses that have been built by private developers. However, should the planning process not incorporate a requirement for developers to provide a certain percentage of social and affordable housing as part of their projects? Is the Minister's Department considering the inclusion of such social responsibilities in applications for housing developments?

An entire generation has been failed, and many face a bleak future in which owning their own homes will always remain an unattainable dream. Others live in overcrowded and poorly maintained housing conditions, or even on the streets. Is that all that lies ahead of them?

It is Members' responsibility to change that, to tackle the issue head-on and to come up with solutions. It is our responsibility to give our children a better future, and I am particularly concerned about the children of the Foyle and Derry area. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Campbell: The issue of homelessness has come back onto the political agenda. To some degree, it had disappeared through the 1980s and 1990s, as affordability of homes, in relative terms, was reduced because of

interest rates and the lower cost of accommodation. However, due to a combination of factors, it is now a priority issue.

Homelessness in Londonderry, as in other constituencies across Northern Ireland, has become a matter of concern, not only for people who are directly affected — those who cannot get a roof over their heads and those who are in housing stress — but for others who are affected as a result of the unaffordability of housing, particularly for young people. The Housing Executive has reported that, in most areas of Northern Ireland, the number of people in housing stress increases every month.

In Londonderry, a case is unfolding as we speak. Retail centres, and one of them is one of the largest shopping centres in Northern Ireland, are affected by people, many with alcohol-related problems and some of whom are homeless, who gather in significant numbers — not just two or three, but sometimes several dozen. Those people create difficulties for shoppers and for those wishing to use the car parks near Craigavon Bridge that are owned by the Department for Regional Development. Those problems occur as a direct result of the increasing problems that homelessness brings to society.

I appreciate that the Minister for Social Development is endeavouring to bring to bear her expertise, in the hope of obtaining resources from the Department of Finance and Personnel to provide more housing units for those people who are directly affected by homelessness. However, it is not only an issue for the Department for Social Development; it is also a problem for wider society and it must be dealt with systematically. The problem will not be resolved overnight, but we must try to ensure that we minimise it.

In Londonderry, retailers have told me that they keep their shop doors locked and unlock their doors as individual customers arrive at their premises, because they are concerned about the proximity of homeless people and of those who are affected by alcohol problems. Those problems are directly related to, and complementary to, homelessness, and we must try to resolve them.

The Minister is considering the provision of social housing, and, hopefully, she will get support for that. As a society and cross-departmentally, we must try to address the issues of those who have been directly affected by homelessness and also address the wider problems in society.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank Martina Anderson for tabling it. I acknowledge that there is a crisis in Derry.

Homelessness is a disaster for individuals and families, and it is the starkest cause of social exclusion. It both causes, and is caused by, poverty, ill health and family breakdown. It separates people from their communities

and cuts them off from opportunities for employment and proper education. As a public representative for Derry, I have been concerned about homelessness for many years.

In fact, homelessness and its causes were key reasons for setting up the SDLP in the first place. The allocation of housing — one family, one house — was one of the key goals of the civil rights movement. However, the civil rights slogans of “one man, one house” and “one man, one vote” seem strange given the current awareness of gender equality. We will be celebrating 40 years of the civil rights movement soon, and we hope that it will provide a reminder that we need to effect change. I have every confidence that the Minister will succeed in giving hope and comfort to the many families who are struggling at the present time.

4.30 pm

From the work in my constituency office, I know the problems that homelessness causes. Every day people arrive at my office asking for help to be housed after family or marital breakdown. Many of those people are single parents. Some are elderly and are homeless because their accommodation is not fit for habitation or because they can no longer manage to use stairs due to disabilities and are sleeping in their living rooms.

People wait for years to get housed in Derry. I am sorry that Gregory Campbell has left because I recall that, at annual meetings with the Housing Executive, it was denied that someone could wait a year for a house. Some people are now waiting for years to get housed. That puts a terrible strain on family life and on the education and development of children. Housing Executive figures show that there are over 500 families and individuals on the waiting list who are classed as homeless or as being in “housing stress”. Last year, almost 1,200 people declared themselves as homeless, although only half of those were given priority.

It is an indictment of the economic situation in Derry that people should be so dependent on social welfare and housing and have been for some time. It is also an indictment of historic governance that successive Governments failed to invest adequately in jobs or social housing.

The pressure on the social-rented sector is influenced by a number of factors in addition to unemployment, low wage levels and employment security. Marital breakdown, underage pregnancies, disability and ill health all contribute to the high demand placed on the social-housing sector. Therefore, in addition to ensuring that we continue to build social housing for those who need it, we must also reduce the demands from some of those quarters by taking people out of unemployment and low-wage employment and investing more resources in helping young people. Martina Anderson pointed out that, under the present housing selection

scheme, young people are not given priority among those named homeless in the figures.

An environment must be created in which marriages and partnerships are supported to reduce the pain and cost of marital and family breakdown. I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an assurance that all Government Departments and public bodies will work alongside DSD to find surplus land on which to build the social housing that is required. I ask Martina Anderson to convince her party colleagues on the Executive of that, too.

Recent spiralling house prices have made the problem of homelessness worse; people who would previously have planned to buy a house are now unable to do so. In the last five years house prices in Derry have more than doubled. A recent housing affordability study by Derry City Council showed that none of the houses sold in Derry were affordable for first-time buyers. I have a son who is married and is finding it difficult to compete with housing associations as a first-time buyer. I appeal to the Minister to give serious consideration to the regulations that enable housing associations to buy single properties that are, in effect, inflating the market against first-time buyers.

In addition to the price of houses, the cost of housing has been exacerbated by recent hikes in interest rates, which put house owners — particularly people who have bought recently — under terrible financial stress. In many cases, both parents are forced to work long hours to keep a roof above their families' heads.

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

Mr McCartney: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm labhairt ag an díospóireacht seo inniu. I thank my party colleague Martina Anderson from Foyle for bringing the issue to the House. The contributions from Pat Ramsey, Gregory Campbell and Martina have spelt out the extent of the problem of homelessness in Foyle. I have no desire to repeat their remarks, except to say that in the city of Derry there are 2,300 people on the housing waiting list and 1,100 in what is termed “housing stress”.

I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber, and I hope that she will take the opportunity to provide a definition of “housing stress”. I ask her to do that so that no one can mask the reality of homelessness by trying to dress it up as the latest newspeak. I welcome and support the pledge that the Minister made when she took up office that social and affordable housing would be a major priority for her in the coming years. All Members wish her well in her attempts to achieve that.

I also welcome the Programme for Government's target that 10,000 new social houses will be built in the next five years. That will be one of the major yardsticks on which the Programme for Government, and the Assembly, will be measured. Therefore, I agree with

Pat Ramsey's suggestion that all Departments should look for excess land on which to build social housing, but the Minister for Social Development must also be satisfied that all the land available to her Department can be used.

I urge the Minister to tackle the problem fairly and equitably, by making provision to address any regional disparities. The process must be effective and transparent. Perhaps, in the weeks and months ahead as the Programme for Government rolls out, the Minister will be able to outline on a constituency-by-constituency basis where she feels social housing should be built, so that Members have something for which to aim. The challenge faced by the Assembly is to make an impact on the lives of the people whom we represent. Members should be doing that, and we should view it as a collective responsibility. One sure way in which to achieve that is to bring an end to homelessness, be that in the constituency of Foyle or elsewhere. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: I am grateful to Martina Anderson for bringing the issue of homelessness in Foyle before the House. It is a problem in our city of Derry. For instance, there are only nine prospective social houses to be built in the Collon area of the city — an area in which a Housing Executive district office is situated. That is hopeless. There may be at least 400 social houses built in the Skeoge Road development in two years' time, but that is some time away.

Homelessness is linked to alcohol, drugs and substance abuse, and physical- and mental-health issues also play their part. In fact, homelessness can lead people to abuse drugs and alcohol in an effort to escape from reality.

There is also the threat of another interest-rate increase this side of Christmas, or immediately after.

Mrs D Kelly: I am not a Member for Foyle, but there are homeless people in my constituency. I plead with the Minister, as did Mr McCartney, to look at other areas across the North, because, regardless of the numbers of people on waiting lists for houses, their difficulties are the same. Does the Member acknowledge that one of the reasons for homelessness is that the cost of division and the Troubles meant a lasting legacy of lack of investment, poor investment in our infrastructure and a dispersed people?

Mrs M Bradley: I agree with Mrs Kelly. Furthermore, the past has caused so much antisocial behaviour in some areas that the Housing Executive cannot allocate some properties. People simply will not accept the available housing in some areas.

If more people experience serious financial hardship because of the probable interest-rate increase either side of Christmas, they will be forced to sell their homes. Although they will have some equity, most of

them will walk away from their homes with nothing, and the number of homeless people will, as a consequence, be forced upwards. Repossessions have increased by 60% in Northern Ireland in the past five years, and, with five interest-rate increases since August 2006, the situation is set to get worse.

A gentleman in our city recently camped out in Waterloo Place to highlight his, and others', plight. Many people signed his petition, because they recognised why he was doing what he was doing. I have every confidence that the Minister will set us right over the years if she is given the necessary money. That cannot happen soon enough.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic, Martina Anderson, for showing her concern about homelessness in Foyle.

I share that concern. I thank Members for their contributions today, and I hope to address many of the issues raised. However, if I cannot do that today I will be happy to write to Members on any matters outstanding. I also welcome Members' continuing interest in the very serious issue of homelessness, and I would briefly like to describe, or characterise, how serious it is.

There are 21,000 people in Northern Ireland who are homeless, and that number is rising every year; it rose by 4.4% last year, and by 16% the year before. Homelessness in Northern Ireland is significantly higher than the UK average, and homelessness in Derry is around the Northern Ireland average.

There is a real problem, and I am fully committed to tackling it. The issue is complex, and it is a good example of where having a policy involving joined-up Government is essential, which is the point that was made by the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development.

In July, I launched a strategy for promoting the social inclusion of homeless people. That strategy aims to ensure that Government Departments, agencies and voluntary sector bodies, in a joined-up way, try to prevent homelessness where possible, and try to ensure that people who lose their accommodation can continue to access services.

The strategy rightly recognises that homelessness is not just about bricks and mortar; it is fundamentally linked to factors such as health, employment and personal relations — issues raised by Martina Anderson in her speech. Therefore, we are relying on a range of partners to ensure that the action plan will be delivered.

My priority is to deliver on accommodation for homeless people. The Housing Executive's strategy on homelessness recognises that the nature of homelessness has changed, and that traditional responses are no longer adequate. Traditional family units account for

only one third of all homelessness in Northern Ireland, while single households account for more than 50% of the total. By far the biggest causes of homelessness are family disputes and relationship breakdowns, and we must deploy a caring, compassionate attitude in any approach that we take to resolve the issue.

A high proportion of homeless people also suffer from other problems, including abuse and addiction; therefore, this multi-faceted problem requires a multi-agency response, so that homeless people do not slide into a downward spiral leading to destitution.

It is not only the absence of accommodation that causes the problem, but the absence of an address. Members might like to reflect on how a homeless person would go about registering with a doctor or a dentist; or how they would open a bank account, apply for a job or do any of the things that we consider normal. How can someone apply for a job if they do not have an address?

In Derry there are concerns that the closure of the John Street hostel has resulted in more people sleeping rough. Although I understand that there is a reasonable level of accommodation in the city I will be asking the Housing Executive if more can be done.

When I visited Derry city in late August I made a point of visiting two social housing projects. The first was the Strand Foyer, which is a facility designed to address the housing needs of young people aged 16 to 25. It aims to prevent the downward spiral of homelessness and unemployment by linking provision of supported housing to training, guidance, personal development and job-search facilities. I recommend that everyone in the House visit the Strand Foyer.

Later that day, I visited the Sevenoaks project, which caters for people at the other end of the age range, many of whom suffer from dementia. During both visits I met with staff and residents, and the commitment of staff in both places was inspirational. I plan to visit Derry later this year to meet the staff at the district offices of the Housing Executive, along with others who work at the front line of homelessness, including a number of housing advocacy groups.

4.45 pm

Turning to the all-important issue of investment, if I am to succeed in tackling homelessness and the accommodation needed — as I intend and am determined to do — then I must find the resources. Equally, I must have the support of all my colleagues in the Executive to ensure that those resources are found and made available for social housing, which the people in Northern Ireland consider — along with health — to be a top priority.

I am pleased to say that, in the past two years, the Housing Executive has invested £28.15 million in

existing housing in the Derry City Council area, and this year it intends to spend a further £12.5 million. However, there is no doubt that more social housing is needed. The Housing Executive informs me that 1,054 new units of social housing are required to meet housing needs in the Derry City Council area between now and 2011. There are currently 846 new homes planned for the city, and the Housing Executive is working closely with local housing associations to identify other sites for the building programme. Successful delivery depends on securing land, planning permission and, of course, funding. The Housing Executive remains confident that sufficient land can be identified to deliver what is needed to meet the housing needs of the city.

The question of funding is challenging, but I will not let up in my pursuit of the necessary resources. My Executive colleagues have also agreed that social housing should be given top priority for funding when assets such as land holdings are released by Departments. I hope that all Ministers will adhere to that resolution and that all Members will ensure that the respective Ministers from the political parties represented in the Executive adhere to those requirements and that resolution.

The upsurge in house prices over the past three years has increased the need for more affordable housing in Foyle and across Northern Ireland. I am keen to meet the aspirations of first-time buyers, many of whom have been priced out of the market recently. I also intend to introduce a requirement on developers to provide a percentage of their private housing schemes for social and affordable housing. There is no doubt that increasing the supply of affordable housing will free up social housing and allow us to reduce waiting lists and homelessness. That applies right across Northern Ireland, but particularly in the Foyle area.

I am delighted that Derry's development corporation, Ilex, is setting aside a large number of units for affordable housing on the Ebrington site. I will soon launch the Fort George master plan in Derry, and expect to be able to announce an exciting affordable housing element in that major regeneration project.

Various issues were raised in the debate. Martina Anderson referred to the number of households in the Foyle area. At March 2007, 674 households were accorded full duty status by the Housing Executive. There are plans to provide 1,051 new houses in the Foyle constituency, and 119 new homes are currently under construction. It is intended that a further 156 houses will be started in the current financial year. Other houses are planned for future years, and I will write to Ms Anderson on that subject.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ritchie: I am near the end of my time. I will speak to the Member after the debate.

Raymond McCartney asked how many households were in housing stress: in September 2007, 1,342 households were in housing stress. Gregory Campbell also referred to the issue. I do not have figures that show housing stress increasing weekly, but I will check and write to the Member.

All in all, although there is much work for Members to do, there is also much work under way to tackle homelessness in Northern Ireland, and in Derry in particular. I look forward to the continuing support of my ministerial colleagues for efforts to secure a 100% return — or more — on capital receipts for land, and support for other measures that will increase the supply of social housing throughout Northern Ireland, and particularly in the Foyle constituency.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 12 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

THE LATE MR JOHN FEE

Mr Speaker: It is my sad duty to inform the Assembly of the death of Mr John Fee, a former Member for the Newry and Armagh constituency. I want to take this opportunity to extend my personal condolences to his wife and family circle on this very sad loss.

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, I join with you in extending the SDLP's condolences to Collette Fee and to John's wider family circle. Members will recall John as being very diligent on behalf of his constituents and very dogged in his arguments. He had a sense of honour and a sense of humour, and he brought passion and compassion to politics. His only commitment was to try to make people's lives better, and, sadly, his own life was all too short.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I had the pleasure of knowing John Fee for some years, and I served with him during the first mandate of the Assembly.

He was a very diligent and committed public representative and, when working with him, I found him to be an individual of great integrity. It is very sad, and an awful shock, that a man of such young years has passed away. As well as my personal condolences, I offer condolences on behalf of Sinn Féin to John's extended family.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I should like to associate the members of the DUP with the remarks that have been made by the SDLP and Sinn Féin. Death comes to us all, and is often sudden. It is a reminder that we are not here for ever, and it is good, in the whirl of our lives, to be reminded that there are more important things — those of eternity.

Mr Kennedy: I join with others in the House in expressing my profound sympathy to Mrs Collette Fee, to John's mother Mrs Deirdre Fee, and to the Fee family. In his time, John was able and outstanding,

both as a representative of Newry and Armagh constituency and as a member of the Newry and Mourne District Council. I am profoundly saddened by his premature death. He was a man of intellect, ability and, most of all, integrity, and for that he will long be remembered in South Armagh.

Mr Neeson: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I express sympathy to John Fee's family on his untimely death. John was only 43, yet in that short life, he made a major contribution to his local community and to politics in Northern Ireland. He was a man of the highest integrity. We know that, at times, he faced major difficulties head on, and he will be sadly missed by all in Northern Ireland.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pensions Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I beg to introduce the Pensions Bill [NIA7/07], which is a Bill to make provision about pensions and other benefits payable to persons in connection with bereavement or by reference to pensionable age; to make provision about the functions of the Personal Accounts Delivery Authority; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker: That constitutes the Bill's First Stage, and it shall now be printed. The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I beg to move

That the Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (SR 2007/354) be approved.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I shall outline the background to the Order and the reasons for its introduction.

The pig production development committee is an executive, non-departmental public body, sponsored by my Department. It is funded by statutory levy and its functions are the provision of services to the pig sector, mainly genetic testing and research and development. It comprises eight members, and the posts are unpaid.

One recommendation of the review of public administration (RPA), which concluded in March 2006, was that the functions of the committee be transferred to the Livestock and Meat Commission. Following extensive consultation on the outcome of the RPA, and with those specific stakeholders involved in the proposal, the committee and the wider pig industry rejected the merger, on the grounds that it was against the best interests of the pig sector. Moreover, those consulted did not wish to see the pig levy used for any other purpose, such as funding the overheads and administration of the larger body.

Accordingly, the committee recommended to the Department that it be wound up, as its parent legislation entitles it to do, and undertook to explore alternative voluntary arrangements that would better serve the pig industry. This course of action has the support of stakeholders and will ultimately provide the new body with the flexibility to collect and disburse a voluntary levy. It also meets the primary aim of the RPA, in that the number of public bodies will be reduced.

The proposals have been seen by Ministers, who are content with this course of action. My Department undertook to ensure that any new voluntary body is properly constituted and that appropriate safeguards are in place, with an assurance that the new arrangements will be suitably robust and sustainable. The industry is aware that there will be no reinstatement of the present arrangements should the alternative fail. A new body, Pig ReGen Ltd, has been incorporated with the appropriate memorandum and articles of association.

The Order before the House provides for the dissolution of the pig production development committee, with effect from 31 March 2008 and the transfer of its assets to Pig ReGen Ltd. It deals with the property, rights and liabilities of the committee in connection with its dissolution, with the discharge of the committee's liabilities during the winding-up period, and with any legal proceedings to which the committee is party prior

to the dissolution date. It sets out the manner in which contracts or agreements made by the committee, which are still in force at the time of dissolution, are to be dealt with, along with the committee's records. It provides for the final report and accounts of the committee and specifies the action to be taken by its creditors.

There are no human-rights or equality issues arising from the Order, and it has no impact on business, charities, voluntary bodies or the public sector. There are no financial implications, as the committee posts are unpaid, and any savings to my Department will be minimal.

A separate Order is being made to revoke the Pig Production Development (Levy) Order (Northern Ireland) 1996, also with effect from 31 March 2008. The primary legislation — the Pig Production Development Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 — will effectively become redundant, and will be removed from the statute book at the earliest opportunity.

In bringing forward this legislation to assist the pig sector by allowing for the formation of a voluntary body, which is not bound by legislative constraints, I am aware that the industry is experiencing difficulties at this time. I am working directly with the industry and the unions on this matter. I am aware that the Ulster Pork and Bacon Forum is doing a great job in difficult circumstances, and I fully support it in doing so. Recently, I met the senior management team of a leading pork processor to learn at first hand about the difficulties that it faces. I have also written to every supermarket in the North about rising costs for producers due to high feed prices.

I am aware that the increased cost of feed has placed additional pressure on producers, but that is a market issue, and Government cannot intervene. The situation is not confined to the North; producers across these islands are facing similar problems. I fully intend to do all that I can to support the local industry at that time. I commend the Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): On behalf of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, I support the motion.

The Department brought its proposed legislation to the Committee in June, and we had the opportunity to put questions to departmental officials. The Committee has accepted that it is necessary to wind up the existing organisation, and is satisfied that the best way forward is to transfer its assets and functions to a new company, Pig ReGen Ltd. I believe that the directors of the new company will be drawn from three categories of pig producers, with a representative from the Ulster Farmers' Union. On 4 September, my Committee formally recorded that it had no objection to the rule's being made.

I hope that no one in this House is under any illusion as to the current state of the pig industry in Northern Ireland. In October, we had a defining report from the red meat task force, setting out the hard facts of the future for the beef industry in Northern Ireland. If that was bad news, it does not start to describe the state of the pig industry. Just over a year ago, producers were receiving a reasonable farmgate price for finished pigs, and there was a certain confidence about the future.

Unfortunately, since then, farmgate prices have fallen by 15%, while grain and feed costs have risen by more than 20%. That situation cannot be sustained.

12.15 pm

The pig-farming community is under tremendous pressure. Urgent action from the Department, from processors and from retailers is needed, or else there will not be an industry for us to support. It is a case of simple economics rather than of farmers complaining when times get tough. A business that costs more money than it makes cannot and will not survive. Therefore, the Department and the Minister must take urgent action, because when crises have hit the pig industry in the past, other European countries — those considered the great Europeans — were very active in supporting their industries. Our Government, however, were unwilling to give our industry any financial support.

I wish Pig ReGen Ltd well. I hope that it will make good use of the pig production development committee's assets and its income through the levy to take the pig industry forward. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee have already raised most of the relevant points. I support the legislative change, as do the farming organisations. It will benefit them in their attempts to support the industry. The legislation is also consistent with the RPA's intentions.

However, for most of those in the industry, the dissolution of the pig production development committee and the transfer of its assets to Pig ReGen Ltd are not as important as the position in which the pig industry finds itself. It is a local industry, so we must support anything that can help it. The pig industry is under massive pressure, as the Chairperson has mentioned.

The Minister has been very active in writing to all those bodies that can make a difference. Processors, and supermarkets in particular, must realise that, if they want there to be local food production — in this sector and in the red-meat sector — they must play their part. They must do something other than, as they have been doing for years, simply listen and sit on the sidelines.

Just as has happened to the steel industry, and other industries, we risk local pig production's coming to an end. That would not be to the good of anyone, as it

would mean the quality and safety of food would suffer. I must commend the Minister for her personal efforts to ensure that everyone be made aware of the situation. We must apply pressure in order to do something on behalf of the people.

Prices have been rising worldwide. The price of ordinary food in shops and supermarkets is also increasing, but retailers tend to make up for that elsewhere. Feed is one of the single biggest costs in pig production. The cost of feed is severe, having almost doubled in the past year.

Therefore, the pig industry is finding it particularly difficult to continue to survive, even though those involved in it have always been under great pressure. Peaks and troughs have been the nature of the pig industry for many years. It has always been a matter of surviving until the next downward trend occurred. Farmers in every part of Ireland have always been diligent; they work with the industry and take account of price trends. Nevertheless, worldwide trends and the manner in which food is produced have led to their experiencing a very difficult time. There is no longer room for flexibility. If something is not done, we may lose the pig industry entirely, and we do not want that to happen.

The Order will be beneficial. The legislative change is something that everyone supports, so it causes no great difficulty. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Savage: I support the motion and the subsequent approval of the Order. The Order ensures the dissolution of the pig production development committee and that its assets and funds will be transferred to Pig ReGen Ltd for the benefit of all those who are involved in the industry.

At a time when pig meat is being bought for very low prices at the farm gate, the news that money will be recouped from the winding-up of the pig production development committee is good because that will benefit pig producers ultimately. Quite frankly, pig producers could do with being given a lot more money.

I support the motion and welcome the Order. I hope that this will open new doors, and that the pork industry can be established as an important niche market.

Mr P J Bradley: The SDLP supports the winding up of the pig production development committee and, like other Members who have spoken, my party wishes Pig ReGen Ltd every success. Its role is tough, and I am sure that it would welcome any assistance the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development could provide. The industry is going through a very tough time.

Ms Gildernew: I am grateful to the Members who have contributed to the debate. I concur with what has been said. The pig industry has come through many changes since I was a child. Thirty years ago, a lot of farms would have kept a few pigs. However, the industry came through some very bad difficulties in the

1990s and has restructured itself, trying to become more competitive. It is a resilient part of our industry and must be respected for that. The Department wants to do all that it can to support the industry in maintaining local pork and bacon products. None of us could conceive of not having local ham with our turkey at Christmas. Indeed, given the way in which grain prices are moving, having turkey at Christmas might be in jeopardy in a few years' time.

I accept the stress and difficulties being experienced by pig producers, and I will continue to work closely with the industry to do all in my power to help it through this difficult time. I thank Members for their support, and I wish Pig ReGen Ltd every success in these challenging times. It is hoped that the industry will become stronger and more profitable in the years to come. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pig Production Development Committee (Winding Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/354) be approved.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week in the House, a Member accused the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety of misleading the Assembly. Will you give a ruling on whether that accusation was unparliamentary, and whether it should be withdrawn and an apology be given to the Minister by the Member concerned?

Mr Speaker: I intend to make a ruling on the matter. However, I can do so only when the Member concerned is in her place. I ask Members not to pre-empt that ruling.

Dr W McCrea: Further to that point of order. I draw the Speaker's attention to another House — one that is superior to this House in parliamentary terms. A similar situation occurred there involving the Prime Minister and it was ruled that the language used was not unparliamentary.

Mr Speaker: I hear and appreciate what Dr McCrea has said. I do not want to develop further in responding to this point of order what I will say in the House when I give my ruling. I ask Members to leave the matter at this point.

Mr McNarry: I appreciate and accept what you are saying, Mr Speaker. My question relates to your powers to ensure that the Member in question will be in the House in order to hear your ruling. It would appear to me that if you do not have such powers when you wish to make a ruling, Members could disrespect you and your position as Speaker. I hope that when you are in a position to give your ruling, you will use whatever power is necessary to ensure that the Member is in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I note what the Member has said. I have nothing to add to what I have already said on the matter.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Road Deaths

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. Two amendments have been received and have been 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 P J Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appeal to the proposers of the motion and of the amendments to try not to divide the House on this matter —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr Boylan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for an all-Ireland summit to tackle the crisis on our roads, and for the integration of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority, to deal with the issue of road safety on an all-Ireland basis.

Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate. I am pleased to have the opportunity to propose the motion.

At the outset, I ask Members and interested parties outside the Chamber to put their fears aside in respect of the mention of the term "all-Ireland" in the motion. Death and serious injury that result from road accidents do not recognise a border drawn on a map. Whether such deaths occur in County Cork or County Antrim, the waste of life and the pain and grief that are left behind are the same, and do not distinguish between religions, colour, ethnic background or gender.

Sinn Féin believes that the island of Ireland should have a single strategy for road safety. We are dealing with the same road-safety issues, and there is a large number of accidents and casualties on many of the roads that are shared between the North and the South.

This year, up to 8 November, there have been 89 road deaths in the North, and 280 in the South — a total of 369 tragically lost lives. Last year, a total of 493 people were killed on Ireland's roads, and a substantial percentage of those deaths took place in the border areas of Donegal, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Derry, Monaghan, Louth, Armagh and Down. Of the 89 deaths so far this year on the North's roads, 46 have occurred in the border areas — just over 50%. That highlights the importance of a comprehensive strategy to deal with road safety on an all-island basis.

I have read the North of Ireland's 'Road Safety Strategy 2002-2012', and I acknowledge that a target has been set to reduce deaths and serious injuries on

our roads by 33% and that, within that overall target, a further target has been set of a 50% reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured. I believe that we are making progress towards meeting those targets, but we should be aiming higher. I also acknowledge the publication in Dublin of the South's 'Road Safety Strategy 2007-2012,' but I believe that those two documents are largely cosmetic exercises.

Examples of co-operation include the possibility of reciprocal recognition of penalty points that have been issued on either side of the border, and continued North/South co-operation on road-safety awareness campaigns. I agree that the TV advertisement campaigns have been very effective, but there are opportunities for further co-operation. Areas for further co-operation include an agreement on the implementation of the EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications, and the publication of a consultation document on vocational driver training, in line with EU directives. The road-safety strategies make no mention of harmonisation on serious issues such as alcohol limits, ways to tackle speeding or cross-border educational initiatives.

After a recent incident in the South, public opinion on alcohol limits has veered towards zero tolerance. Sinn Féin has called for zero tolerance, not only in the Twenty-six Counties, but across Ireland. Anyone who is travelling North or South with a pint on them could be dealt with in the same way, North and South, if there were one set of measures. We believe that there should be zero tolerance of drink-driving throughout Ireland, but that that will be possible only if we harmonise legislation on an all-Ireland basis.

Road signs that indicate speed limits should state those limits in miles per hour and in kilometres per hour to highlight the difference. Speed is the main contributing factor in road accidents on this island.

We should also consider reducing speed limits not only in and around schools, as we are currently trying to do, but on rural roads where many of those accidents take place.

12.30 pm

Not enough is being done to educate young people, North or South, about road safety. Any summit that takes place should take a comprehensive look at what can be done in that area, especially in the 17- to 24-year old bracket. Most accidents involve people in that age group — as, sadly, do most of the tragedies. The list of issues that a summit could address is not endless — pedestrians, driver training, safety of children in and out of vehicles, older drivers, enforcement. All of those matters could be examined to try to improve road safety and ultimately reduce deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

There should also be increased North/South ministerial co-operation to look at the following: a single road

safety authority; a harmonisation of speed limits and road signs; an all-Ireland licensing system; a common penalty points system; the fitting of safety-compliant speed inhibitors on all new cars; increased provision of night-time public transportation; full-time posts for road safety and road education officers throughout the island. Some measures can be simple such as a feasibility study to look at the practice in other European countries of making it compulsory to drive with headlights on all day in order to increase vehicle visibility. It should be compulsory for driving lessons to be carried out in various weather and traffic conditions, in busy traffic on motorways and in urban and rural areas.

Mr P Ramsey: Given the importance of the issue and the number of deaths that the Member outlined, it would be rather unfortunate if the House were to divide. As someone who represents a constituency close to Donegal, which has the highest figures for road fatalities, I ask the Member to consider not allowing this matter to be put to a vote and so achieving consensus in the Chamber. The public would then understand that the Assembly wants an end to deaths on the road and the continuation of discussion on the themes that the Member mentioned at the road safety conference.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for the intervention.

We have been elected by our communities; therefore we must act. We must educate, legislate and eradicate. Recently I saw an analogy that stated that if we take a very conservative view that 10 people are affected emotionally and mentally by a death in a road accident, already in the North this year, 890 people are grieving and suffering a great sense of loss. Throughout the island that number rises to 3,690. If the total for last year is added, that makes over 8,500 people affected, not to mention the concern and suffering of others in those communities. It must be remembered that 10 is a conservative figure. If the number of people who have been affected over the last 10 years is taken into account, it is frightening.

Any all-Ireland road safety strategy will have to look at providing proper support services to anyone affected by the death of a loved one in a road accident. Those people are usually forgotten about because the trauma is not recognised to the same extent that it is in the case of other tragic deaths.

I call on all Members who are available and who wish to do so to attend an interdenominational remembrance service in Newry Cathedral on Sunday 18 November 2007 at 3.00 pm to show the Assembly's support for those who have been affected by death or injury due to road traffic accidents. I am sure that everyone here has cause to know someone or has visited the family of someone who has been injured or killed on the roads.

I hope that Members will agree that the carnage on our roads throughout this island is something that knows no boundaries and that a common-sense attitude is required. I trust that they will show common sense today and support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Mr Weir: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the existing level of cooperation between the road safety authorities in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic of Ireland; further notes that a review of Northern Ireland's road safety strategy is currently under way which can draw on experience from other countries; and calls for further measures to be taken to ensure that the current progress on improving road safety is sustained and increased."

I agree with the last comments of the Member when he said that a common-sense approach must be taken. That is why the DUP has tabled this amendment.

A road death is a tragedy, wherever it occurs. It is a sad indictment that throughout the many years of the Troubles, with the exception of one year in the 1970s, the number of road fatalities was always greater than the number of people who died through terrorist action.

That shows the scale of the problem that must be tackled. Therefore, it is timely for the House to be debating a motion on road deaths.

Unfortunately, however, the scope of the motion is limited and is focused in the wrong direction, and I will explain later the reason that that is the case. First, it is important that we recognise, as our amendment does, that a great deal of good work is being carried out to combat road deaths. Indeed, I am glad to say that some progress has been made on that front. The Minister of the Environment is pushing a review of the road safety strategy, and we believe that that will be of benefit. Year on year we have seen how hard people in various Departments and bodies have worked to ensure that road deaths are reduced.

The statistics for 2006 show that approximately 1,300 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads. That is a reduction of around 24% on the 1996-2000 average. In 2006, a total of 126 people were killed on the roads, which was the lowest figure for 60 years. By 12 November 2006, 107 people had been killed on our roads, and, until that date this year, fewer than 100 people have been killed on our roads. I acknowledge that 126 road deaths are 126 too many; however, we must recognise the hard work that many people in various Departments have done to reduce that figure. We must also recognise that a strategy exists that is starting to pay dividends, and the year-on-year reduction in fatalities illustrates that.

The motion would have more merit if a lack of co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland existed. However, a great deal of co-operative work is being carried out on the ground.

The motion calls for “an all-Ireland summit”, but we need to move away from Reagan/Gorbachev-style summits and develop something that actually delivers for people. Department of the Environment officials and representatives from the Road Safety Authority recently jointly chaired an all-Ireland conference on road safety. Therefore, in that sense, an all-Ireland conference has taken place. Several initiatives have also been implemented; for example, there have been publicity and advertising campaigns on the matter, and the British Government and that of the Republic of Ireland have mutually agreed to recognise UK and Irish driving disqualifications and initiatives such as penalty-points systems. Indeed, the regulations that will give effect to that arrangement have also been agreed by both Governments. I understand that the Minister of the Environment will introduce those regulations.

Additionally, a scoping exercise has taken place on lesser infringements of road-traffic laws, the results of which will be brought to the House. A cross-border co-operation team has existed for the past 15 years. That is a multi-agency steering committee that is involved in increasing road safety in the border counties. Therefore, a range of initiatives has been implemented, and work on them is ongoing.

It is not true to say that there is a lack of co-operation on road safety. It is perhaps unfortunate that the call in the motion to integrate the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland and the Road Safety Authority shows a lack of understanding of those two bodies. One is a small voluntary group that was established and is sponsored by the Department of the Environment, and the other is a large state authority. Merging the two is the equivalent of the developer of a set of apartments merging their project with the Housing Executive: it is not comparing like with like. In applying a common-sense solution to the problem, we should consider issues that work on the ground.

I acknowledge the Alliance Party's amendment, but although we strongly support finding the maximum level of productive co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, we must look beyond these shores. The Public Accounts Committee has examined road safety closely, and its 'Report on Northern Ireland's Road Safety Strategy' was published last week. That report highlighted that it has become abundantly clear that international comparisons and those with other parts of the British Isles show that both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland lag behind.

We are not having the same level of success with regard to road safety. Instead of trying to co-operate across the island, we must approach the issue from a broader perspective and with a wider scope.

Mr P Ramsey: I ask the Member a question similar to that which I asked earlier: does he not accept that it

would be better for the House to reach a consensus today, rather than to divide on an issue that is so important to so many people across Northern Ireland and the border counties? That would enable the Assembly working group on road safety to note all the issues that are raised in the motion and the amendments. Would the Assembly working group not be able to examine the issue to a greater degree?

Mr Weir: The DUP is keen to see consensus. My colleague Jeffrey Donaldson, who is a member of the road-safety group, will sum up the debate on the DUP's amendment and will make my party's position clear.

We wish to see practical co-operation, which is why our amendment tried to encompass every angle. It is right to acknowledge North/South co-operation, not only in the work that has been done, but in looking further afield. The House should be able to unite around our amendment. I understand the Member's concerns and, if it were possible to avoid dividing the House, I would like to see such consensus, because this issue is very important.

A range of issues must be examined, some of which were highlighted by the Public Accounts Committee report. For example, driving standards must be reviewed to ensure that they are pitched at the appropriate level. We must also look at why, although there has been a massive reduction in the number of road deaths involving motor cars, the statistics on accidents involving motorcycles are much worse than those in other parts of the British Isles.

We must examine quality-control issues and the roll-out of the Roadwise programme, and we must consider the matter of graduated licensing, which was identified in the Public Accounts Committee's report, to ensure the maximum level of protection.

In particular, we must examine the levels of compulsory basic training for motorcyclists. They have not always been afforded the same level of regulation as drivers, and that is one of the factors that have led to many deaths.

We must also consider ways to achieve increased detection rates and enforcement. I am aware that, ahead of the debate and the road-safety review, the Department has introduced a range of additional offences, which will have the immediate effect of ensuring increased road safety. However, we must look, for example, at the safety-camera programme that has been rolling out since 2003. Some of us might be critical of the safety-camera programme and wonder whether it was designed to boost finances rather than to achieve road safety. However, if used effectively, cameras can produce a mechanism to ensure the proper screening of speed, which is one of the major killers on our roads.

Above all, we must consider education and ensure that the driving culture changes in Northern Ireland.

People might say that that is an impossible task, but we have only to look at how attitudes have changed since 30 or 40 years ago, when people had a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to wearing seat belts. It was common — particularly for children in the back seats — not to wear a seat belt. Now, that would be regarded as utterly irresponsible.

Unfortunately, people are still dying as a result of drink-driving. However, there have been changes in social attitudes towards drink-driving over the last 30 years. Perhaps 30 years ago, some people might have thought that it was OK to drive home after having a few drinks, but that attitude has greatly changed.

By focusing on education and a wider remit, we can start to tackle the problem of road deaths effectively. Co-operation is important, but we must go beyond the North/South outlook and draw lessons from around the world.

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“notes the cooperation between the Department of Transport in the Republic of Ireland and the Department of the Environment, as well as the rapid progress made by the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland in the past year; and calls for increased cooperation between it and the Road Safety Council in Northern Ireland to promote best practice in road safety education and enforcement across the island, including bilateral conferences not less than once a year.”

On behalf of my group, I welcome the fact that this issue is being debated, and I thank Cathal Boylan for proposing the motion.

12.45 pm

I also pass on apologies on behalf of Naomi Long, who is secretary of the all-party group on road safety. She is unwell and is therefore unable to take part in the debate.

I make it clear that our amendment is designed to make more concrete the actions of the House in tackling the levels of fatalities and casualties on our roads. It has been pointed out that although those levels are reducing, they are still far too high.

Mr Weir pointed out that fatalities have reduced. The baseline fatality figures for each million people in 2005 were: 56 in the United Kingdom and 80 in Northern Ireland, which is almost 50% higher than the UK figure. The average for the 15 EU member states was even higher at 86, and the Republic was higher still at 97. Mr Weir has beaten me to the observation that those figures may lead people to look for best practice beyond these shores. It is clear that lessons are to be learnt from elsewhere, particularly from across the water. I accept that that is a fair point.

However, we must also be realistic about another point that Mr Weir highlighted: the culture of people's behaviour in cars. There is a significant and serious problem in driving attitudes in Ireland as a whole, but

specifically along the border. Pat Ramsey pointed out the kinds of events that occur virtually every weekend on the Derry and Donegal border and in other parts of that area.

Some 40% of in-vehicle victims of fatal accidents are males who are under the age of 24. That is a huge percentage, considering the overall proportion of drivers that that age group comprises. We all know that the age of drivers is a significant factor in events that occur every weekend.

It is important to be realistic. That is why we must consider introducing a significant and serious cross-border strategy to deal with the problem. Although it is true that we can learn from other places, simply stating that fact does not realistically assess the cultural, educational and, in some cases, road-maintenance problems that both jurisdictions on this island face.

In an attempt to recognise the need for useful co-operation, by recommending more regular cross-border co-operation, our amendment addresses how that should be done. It also clearly states that it is time for action, not words. That action must begin in this Assembly through ministerial deeds and through legislation.

We have already heard about the Road Safety Council's recent annual general meeting, which was held in my constituency. A number of experts in the field of road safety spoke, including the new chief executive officer of the Road Safety Authority of the Republic, who has worked with Kent County Council. In effect, that meeting was the cross-border summit that the motion calls for. The meeting represented North and South speaking together about matters of mutual interest, and it clearly demonstrated that the cross-border co-operation that exists between the relevant authorities is alive and well.

However, what role does this Assembly have? Does it have a responsibility to pass legislation and to take action that is based on all the evidence that we have gained from such co-operation? It is clear that there are limitations to what has been done so far. Mr Brett, the chief executive officer of the Road Safety Authority in the Republic, highlighted issues such as driver-licensing reform, improved road-worthiness testing, and increasing the number of garda. All those issues may or may not have relevance north of the border. He also stated that a Cabinet subcommittee on road safety, in which three Ministers are involved, has been established in the Oireachtas. Surely we can draw a direct and important lesson from that.

The Government in the Republic have recently made great strides in addressing their huge road-safety problem. The Road Safety Authority is now a transformed organisation. In many senses, it is playing catch up. However, the fact that there is a drive to

address the issue, with Government Ministers being involved at a key level, shows that they are treating the issue seriously. That same seriousness is not yet apparent in the workings of this Assembly.

There should be co-operation on issues such as testing for drug-driving, reducing the drink-driving limit and enforcing speed limits, especially in border areas. It is a matter of deep regret that a great deal of time has been spent recently on harmonising driving penalties — penalty points in particular — across the EU, when much greater progress could and should have been made under direct rule to harmonise the only cross-border issue that has direct relevance to the vast majority of drivers in Northern Ireland: what happens across the Irish border, rather than what happens across the border between Bulgaria and Romania.

This is a matter that needs to be addressed. If full harmonisation of the legislation cannot be achieved, we should strive for maximum harmonisation on this island.

Northern Ireland should recognise areas in which the Republic is well ahead. The Road Safety Authority is already considering development of separate strategies — for example, for motorcyclists, cyclists and pedestrians — because there are differences in the nature of their involvement in accidents. The authority recently updated 'Rules of the Road' — the Republic's equivalent of 'The Official Highway Code' — and delivered a copy to every house in the Republic. Most Members will have read 'The Highway Code' in the week or two before they sat their driving tests. I suspect that most of us, except those who have had the privilege of sitting beside their children as they learnt to drive, have not looked at 'The Highway Code' since that day. Reading that is, perhaps, something that we should institute as an example, to ensure that 'The Highway Code' is followed. That would help to educate our people in that respect.

In the Republic, the key achievement of the Road Safety Authority has been the establishment of a Cabinet subcommittee on road safety. Three Government Ministers attend it, providing direct answers to questions and clear lines of accountability. The formation of an all-party Assembly group is a welcome step forward, but it is a long way short of the establishment of a Cabinet subcommittee with direct responsibility. We need to ensure that we get those sorts of ideas and promote co-operation to the highest extent.

We have to consider the different aspects of road safety promotion: education, engineering and enforcement. In the context of the Assembly, there would be a role, not just for the Minister of the Environment, who is present, but also for the Minister of Education, the Minister for Regional Development and, as we await the possible devolution of justice, perhaps junior Ministers in OFMDFM as well. Can we have a commitment from

the Executive as a whole, rather than just from the Environment Minister, that those Ministers will attend meetings of the all-party group, take road safety seriously in the Assembly and answer questions from the all-party group to ensure that there is action? The most effective form of cross-border co-operation is noting things that our neighbours are doing right and effectively and implementing them in Northern Ireland without delay. Most of all, Members should consider what they can do in the Assembly, rather than demand that others take action.

Mr Weir has already highlighted the difference between the two bodies, North and South. In Northern Ireland, the Road Safety Council and the all-party group in the Assembly are voluntary groups, whereas, in the Republic, the Road Safety Authority is a statutory body with full powers. It is not realistic to talk about integration; however, we should strive to ensure the fullest possible co-operation.

The Alliance Party's difficulty with the DUP amendment is that it does not recognise that a key factor is the culture of driving, North and South, on this island. Nothing in my party's amendment obviates the learning of lessons — whether from GB, the Netherlands, Canada or wherever. We have to face the clear cultural issue of the way that people drive on this island. That is why the Alliance Party's amendment serves to strengthen the motion, to regularise co-operation — rather than holding a one-off summit — and to ensure that lines of co-operation between the authorities, North and South, are effective. There is no point in summits, integration or co-operation if Members, and particularly those with ministerial responsibility, are not prepared to act on the outcomes.

I had left myself time to respond to Mr Ramsey's intervention: however, he has not chosen to make it to me.

We should be seeking the maximum possible level of co-operation and agreement on this vital issue. I believe that the amendment which stands in my name would be the best way of bringing the House together. However, I will listen with interest to what other Members say.

Mr Armstrong: No sensible person would oppose any practical measure to reduce the horrific toll of death and injury on our roads. In 2006, 126 people lost their lives on the roads. That statistic is appalling, yet it represents an improvement — if it can be called that — on each of the previous eight years. The equivalent figure for the Republic was 368.

Those are not mere numbers: each one represents a human being, a loved one who can never be replaced, and a family circle that will be diminished for ever.

The difficulty with the motion is that it appears to indicate that a perceived lack of North/South co-operation on road safety is part of the problem. As a

result, I am happy to support the amendment. Cross-border co-operation on matters of shared concern in order to achieve mutual benefit should be supported. There is no question that the loss of life caused by the carnage on roads in Northern Ireland and in the South of Ireland is a major problem facing the authorities and wider society in both jurisdictions.

Mr Weir: The Member said that he had problems with the motion but supported the amendment. As there are two amendments, will he clarify which one he supports?

Mr Armstrong: If the Member listens, he will have no problem figuring out which amendment I support.

The motion appears to ignore the significant amount of cross-border road safety co-operation that has already taken place. By April 2007, there had been 12 cross-border road safety campaigns commissioned jointly by the Road Safety Authority and the Department of the Environment. Furthermore, in July 2007, it was agreed at the British-Irish Council meeting that from 2008, drivers who were disqualified from driving in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom would be banned from driving in the Republic. That decision followed the emergence of the fact that one sixth of drivers caught speeding in the Republic last year escaped penalty points because they were registered in Northern Ireland.

Existing cross-border initiatives include an anti-drink driving campaign, which was launched in November 2005. In April 2007, the Road Safety Authority launched 'Mess', a sixty-second, hard-hitting, anti-speed television advertisement.

Members may be interested to learn that in 2006, a partnership arrangement called Co-operation and Working Together, which facilitates collaborative working between health and social care organisations and staff on a cross-border basis, published findings from the Steering to Safety project. That study researched road traffic collisions in the border region of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and produced interesting results. The study demonstrated that there were marked differences between the numbers and types of accidents in counties North and South of the border, and fatal collisions in particular.

The fact is that there are two separate jurisdictions on this island, with consequential differences between legal systems and penalties. In addition, the functions and remits of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority are markedly different. Therefore, a merger is more easily said than done.

Rather than pursue an exclusively all-island agenda, as suggested in the motion, it would be preferable to remain within the United Kingdom's road safety strategy, seek to work closely with our Southern counterparts, and apply best practice and new ideas from wherever they are found.

Most importantly, we must constantly seek measures that will help to reduce the toll of tragedy on our roads and try our best to limit the number of families who suffer the heartbreak of losing loved ones in such a way.

Mr Gallagher: I commend Cathal Boylan and Raymond McCartney for tabling the motion, which highlights an important issue. The contributions from those who support the amendments, including UUP Member Billy Armstrong, make it clear that we all share key concerns. We are at one as regards collisions on our roads across this island. It is unacceptable that hundreds of people still die every year. Thousands of families and loved ones are left damaged, broken and traumatised.

I am sure that one would be hard pressed to find a community anywhere in the country that has not, at one time or another, been traumatised and numbed by the death of a local person in a road tragedy.

1.00 pm

Members have heard comments from my party colleague Pat Ramsey, who is totally committed to the improvement of road safety. If there is a failure to reach a compromise, the SDLP will support the motion, because my party is particularly supportive of the notion of an all-Ireland summit that would focus attention on the problem and move it much higher up the agenda. However, an-Ireland summit should not, in any way, be qualified by the integration of one body or another. The summit must happen first; then, whatever the summit decides must be developed.

I want to acknowledge the high level of co-operation and good work that takes place both North and South on the part of all those who have responsibility for road safety, who strive to reduce the statistics for road death and injury and to make the roads safer for everyone. The vast majority of people support co-operation among the PSNI and the gardaí, the two relevant Government Departments and the road safety authorities, which work closely to combat the major problems of people who speed or drive while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Recently, the North/South Ministerial Council carried out work to develop mutual enforcement of driving bans, which will come into force soon. It is hoped that, before long, penalty points will also be mutually recognised in the law of both jurisdictions.

An all-Ireland summit would provide the opportunity to highlight some of the serious problems that drivers encounter regularly. Speed is one of the main causes of accidents. It is wrong to assume that all drivers on the island would easily be able to synchronise the speedometers on their cars with the speed limits that they are warned about when they cross the border. Some drivers do not understand metric conversions. Much more work must be done to make information available that is clearly displayed for drivers when they cross the

border — drivers who not only come from here or from the South, but who, these days, could be workers from Poland, Portugal, Latvia, and so on, or some of the thousands of others who visit every year from all around the globe. Their safety must also be considered.

Different rules that exist North and South — for example, about the use of hard shoulders — pose problems for road safety that must be dealt with. When one drives in the Republic of Ireland, the road verge is tarmacked and smooth. A driver can pull in and allow another driver who is behind him or her to pass out safely. Once drivers cross the border, however, that is not the case. The hard shoulder usually has a poor surface and is, often, a gully or a drain. There are no signs or warnings about the risks to safety. That is a key issue; another is that of provision for learner drivers, which has been mentioned. Driving tests, North and South of the border, are outdated. They must be revised, renewed and made fit for purpose. It is time that the Assembly got down to solving those problems.

Mr I McCrea: I want to make it abundantly clear to Sinn Féin, and any other party, that their desire for an all-Ireland agenda is only a dream, and will remain so. Any misconceptions that they might hold will never become reality so long as the DUP is in the Assembly.

The DUP welcomes the debate. I welcome my colleague, the Environment Minister, Arlene Foster, who will respond on the serious matter of road deaths, which affects people throughout Northern Ireland.

Any life that is lost on our roads is a tragedy. There are so many road deaths, and each is a great loss to the family involved.

It is a disgrace that, once again, Sinn Féin is playing politics — through an all-Ireland agenda — with road safety. If that party was seriously interested in tackling road safety, it would work with the Department of the Environment to strengthen its role, rather than trying to weaken it, which is what it is trying to.

Road safety must be high on our agenda, and I welcome the Minister's announcement, early in the Assembly's current mandate, that it is an issue that is high on her agenda too. Her recent statements have proven that to be the case. I remind Members that a number of cross-border works and joint campaigns are already taking place. I ask the Minister, when she is responding, to confirm the detail of those and to say whether she feels that they have been worthwhile. There is a vast difference between cross-border co-operation and an all-Ireland road safety body. The latter would be of no benefit to Northern Ireland. It would involve two separate jurisdictions, two separate legal systems, and different laws and restrictions. Those differences alone would result in there being too many hurdles to cross in trying to find and bring to justice someone who

was at fault or had caused an accident on the roads, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Boylan said that Members are elected to legislate. That is what we are here to do. We are here to legislate and to make decisions for the people of Northern Ireland, in co-operation. I do not think that anyone objects to learning from other countries about the benefits of measures that they might have taken with regard to road safety. We are here to make decisions, not to reduce our powers and pass decision-making over to another jurisdiction. We are here to strengthen those powers and to take any action necessary to reduce road deaths in Northern Ireland.

I said that any accident on our roads is a tragedy. I do not believe that going down the all-Ireland route is of benefit to Northern Ireland. We can learn from the Republic of Ireland without the need to pass any of our decision-making powers to it, or vice-versa. Therefore, I support the amendment in my name and those of Mr Donaldson and Mr Weir.

Mr T Clarke: I welcome the debate and support the DUP amendment. Without making the issue a parochial one, I would like to mention one of the most recent deaths in my constituency and extend my condolences to the Devlin family on the loss of their 17-year-old son.

David Ford suggested how wonderfully well the Republic of Ireland is doing on the matter of road safety. I did a few sums while others were speaking. I notice, from the figures, that there is only a 9% decrease in road deaths — just the same as in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is not faring any better than we are in Northern Ireland.

One of the problems that we have in Northern Ireland — and with which most Members are familiar — is that of the 30 mph speed limit in built-up areas. I have been contacted at my constituency office about that matter, and its implications for safety, on numerous occasions. However, when we ask the Department to undertake surveys, it cites statistics based on averages. Unfortunately, on some estates, there are speeds of up to 46 mph. That is something that I urge the Minister to consider.

Dr McCrea and I met the Minister for Regional Development to discuss the new A6 road. We were sorely disappointed when we read the Department's response on the safety of the road, which will stretch from Randalstown to Toome and will run alongside Lough Neagh. Some 18,500 vehicles will travel on the road daily, and the Department said that there would be only momentary vision problems.

I am calling into question what the Department for Regional Development is doing. Today's motion is about tackling road deaths, and here we have a situation in which 18,500 vehicles will be travelling on a proposed new road every day, and although the Department

recognises that there is a problem, that problem has just been passed over. That point was a concern for Dr McCrea and me at that meeting.

Most of my points have already been covered by other Members, so there is no point in my repeating them. I support the amendment.

(The Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair)

Mr McCartney: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the motion.

Seo ár seans leis an rogha ceart agus an rud ceart a dhéanamh. The motion deals with a matter that affects us all. Hardly a day passes without road safety featuring in the media; and scarcely a week goes by without the call for more to be done to raise public awareness on road use, speed and other aspects of road safety.

One could roll out statistics that are all too familiar. However, I want to avoid that and instead zero in on the core issues. Great strides have been made in raising public awareness about road safety, and, as a result, the number of deaths on our roads has been reduced. However, we must accept that much more can and needs to be done.

The purpose of the motion is to help to confront the complacent attitude that road deaths are an unavoidable consequence of road use — they are not. Road deaths can be avoided, and it is worth noting that the World Health Organization has enshrined the concept that road injuries and deaths are not the inevitable consequences of increased road use. When I use the word “avoided”, I mean that very practical and straightforward measures can often be put in place to reduce the number of collisions and, therefore, the numbers of injuries and deaths.

Today, no one has spoken against the need for a proper and co-ordinated strategy to tackle the problem. The Minister of the Environment and her Department are currently conducting a major review of road safety, and I welcome her presence here today. Her initiative came in the immediate aftermath of a fatal road collision, and perhaps the findings of her work will provide some indication about a proposed structure that will deal with road safety across the island. No one in the Chamber today can, or will, disagree that it is a fact of life that people from Derry have died in road accidents in Donegal and vice versa. Such experiences are common in all our counties, North and South, and they highlight the need for co-operation among the agencies involved and the need to implement measures to combat that phenomenon.

I acknowledge that co-operation already exists and has had beneficial and proven results. However, now that the Assembly has been re-established, perhaps this is an appropriate time to adopt an all-Ireland approach and to take co-operation to an even higher and more qualitative level. I contend that many recommendations

in the Public Accounts Committee’s report on road safety point to the need for such an initiative. Indeed, I welcome Peter Weir’s observation that the Minister has already chaired an all-Ireland meeting. In many ways, such an approach is neither a principle nor a dream but a reality.

Another means of achieving greater co-operation would be through the integration of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority, as the motion proposes. Such a body could be tasked with carrying out a safety audit of road networks on an island-wide basis, with particular emphasis on what are often called the border counties. There should be a focus on that central issue.

There was an instinctive reaction to any suggestion of an all-Ireland approach — that is the predictable reaction to such an approach in almost anything. However, I urge everyone to move beyond instinct and reflect on this question: if the agencies tasked with road safety on the island work together in a co-ordinated and collective way, would that improve their ability to deliver their objectives? In posing the question, I do not wish to detract from, or question, the great work that has been carried out to date by any agency working in this field, North or South. Such an approach would not detract from their ability to deliver in the future; indeed, it is my contention that it would assist delivery.

1.15 pm

Great work is already being done in Ireland, North and South, to highlight the correlations among speed, alcohol, poor driving skills and the incidence of accidents. International experience and programmes have been called on in the past and, no doubt, will be employed in the future, simply because they are beneficial in reducing death and injury. That should be the only criterion on which such decisions are made.

Having a framework within which to co-ordinate the work of both road-safety agencies, which will impact on each others’ work and improve it, can only be viewed as a positive step. Do not allow the usual instincts to stand in the way of logic or good sense. The integration of the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority would be a logical step in improving public awareness of road safety matters and in reducing death and injuries on the roads of Ireland. A LeasCheann Comhairle, I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I support the DUP amendment. There can be no doubt that road safety must be a priority in Northern Ireland. That also appears to be the case for our neighbours in the South. Road safety is unquestionably one area on which the two Governments can work in tandem, targeting scarce financial resources for the Assembly and making a difference by reducing deaths and injuries.

The two jurisdictions have shared road-safety campaigns for several years. Some of the hardest-hitting TV advertisements ever seen on Northern Ireland screens came about as a result of those campaigns. The Minister of the Environment has already assured me in an answer to a written question that another tough Christmas and New Year message is planned to run between 20 November 2007 and 6 January 2008. That is a joint campaign, which I welcome.

Taking everything into consideration, the motion calls for something that is already a reality; therefore, it makes no sense. The motion calls for something that would put Northern Ireland into reverse gear. The DUP amendment calls for the continuation and strengthening of current measures. Northern Ireland must have an increased, sustained and adaptable attitude to road safety. A review aimed at achieving those objectives is already under way, which will lead to the adaptable strategy that I envision.

The one area in which there is, perhaps, a need for greater concentration is that of other EU nationals. Particularly, eastern European nationals appear to be at greater risk. The Minister of the Environment has stated on several occasions that literature on driving and the law is available in a number of languages. However, special attention must be paid to this issue. Doubtless, that will be an integral part of the road-safety strategy that will result from the current review.

We all take our road-safety responsibilities most seriously. Therefore, I ask all Members to support the DUP amendment, which supports the Minister and provides for a proactive vision for the future.

Mr P J Bradley: Time is short, so I shall be brief.

In July 2006, I met Ursula Quinn as she began a walk from Lurgan to Ballybrittas, County Laois — the scene of the death of her only daughter, who was killed in a road accident on the way to her first day at university in Cork. I walked some of the way with Ursula, and invited her and the group that she had set up, 'Driving Kills' — later renamed 'Hidden Victims' — to the Assembly. In October 2006, Ursula came to Stormont and gave an excellent presentation about the work of the group and what it was trying to achieve. At the end of the debate, Jeffrey Donaldson proposed the establishment of an all-party group or an Ad Hoc Committee to identify areas where we could make progress. Everyone was happy with that and, at the next meeting, Jeffrey was elected chairperson of the new working group, and Mr Boylan and I took the deputy chairperson positions. I must also pay tribute to Naomi Long, who is not present today, who became the group's secretary.

The working group has been very active, and I am proud to be a member of it. In its short lifetime, it has met several agencies, such as the PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service and driving

instructors, among others. It is for that reason that I attempted to intervene at the beginning of the debate. I do not want the House to divide, because this issue is too important to become a political football. Most people would agree with that.

However, I am concerned, because I do not know whether the motion is intended to pre-empt the all-party group's work or whether there was a different agenda behind the motion. I would be happy if the matter were left for the working group to deal with in the future. The working group has no powers and could be seen as toothless, but, with the co-operation of the Minister of the Environment and the Executive, its members can progress the issue in the interests of the people whom they represent. The aim is to reduce road deaths and to show some understanding to people who have suffered in the past. I appeal to the Members who have proposed the motion — and to those who have tabled the two amendments — to consider not dividing the House and instead reaching some form of agreement.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I also welcome the opportunity to debate this issue. The debate gives me the chance to restate my personal commitment to road safety and to doing everything in my power to reduce the number of people who are killed or seriously injured on Northern Ireland's roads. I have said before that road safety is a subject that is close to my heart, and since becoming the Minister of the Environment, I have become even more acutely aware of the senseless carnage on our roads. I ask the House to remember that a commitment to reduce deaths by one third by 2011 is reflected in the draft Programme for Government, which was debated in the House on 25 October.

The number of people who have been killed or seriously injured on our roads has fallen substantially over the past 30 years. In the 1970s, twice as many people died or were seriously injured. The 126 road deaths in Northern Ireland in 2006 constituted the lowest total for almost 60 years. The nine child deaths constituted the lowest total on record.

I am sure that the House is also interested in the latest comparisons of the positions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In 2006, the road death rate per 100,000 people in Northern Ireland was 7.2; in the Republic of Ireland the rate was 8.7. My friend Mr Trevor Clarke stated that there was a 9% reduction in road deaths in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In fact, there have been 90 deaths on Northern Ireland roads in 2007, compared with 107 this time last year, which is a reduction of almost 16%. There have been 284 road deaths in the Republic of Ireland, compared with 318 this time last year. That is a reduction of just over 10%.

However, it is easy to get caught up in statistics. I regard every death or serious injury as a tragedy. I have had the privilege of meeting many victims and their families, and I feel my responsibility intensely for trying to prevent others from facing the same pain.

The review of road safety in Northern Ireland, which was announced shortly after I came into office, is ongoing. I will continue to ensure that my Department and its road-safety partners work tirelessly on measures to complement those that are currently saving lives on our roads. The fact that there is a review of the strategy does not mean that my Department will sit back. Members will know that some announcements that were made in the summer are being implemented.

I now move to the thrust of today's motion. I have no plans to establish a single road safety authority for Ireland, and, if I did, the Government of the Republic of Ireland might have something to say about that. The motion proposes to integrate the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland with the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland to try to deal with road safety on an all-Ireland basis. I found the motion somewhat surprising, because the Road Safety Authority and the Road Safety Council are not comparable organisations in their structure, background or roles. The Road Safety Council is a voluntary-sector body and is funded by my Department to support its activities by promoting road-safety messages in the community. It promotes voluntary activity, organises competitions and other events and encourages local participation. Funding for the Road Safety Council is £160,000 a year, and it has one full-time and one part-time employee.

I commend the work of the Road Safety Council. I had the privilege of attending its annual general meeting last month, which was an extremely worthwhile event. I also commend the work of the Assembly's all-party working group on road safety. Despite being a new group, it is doing good work.

In contrast, the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland has an annual budget of about €38 million and employs more than 300 people. It is a statutory body created by the Republic of Ireland's Road Safety Authority Act 2006, which transferred functions to it from the Department of Transport, the National Roads Authority, and the National Safety Council. The Road Safety Authority is responsible for many, but not all, of the road-safety functions that my Department undertakes, such as promotion, research, driver and vehicle testing and standards and licensing.

Putting aside the two organisations in question; even if I wished to do so, the creation of a single authority with responsibility for road safety across two separate EU member states would be incredibly complex, if not impossible. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have distinct legal frameworks, statutes, penalties,

enforcement operations and policies. Mr Boylan called for harmonisation on all of those, but that simply could not be done — it is not an option. I noted my friend Mr Weir's comparison of an all-island summit to the Reagan-Gorbachev summits. I welcome his likening of me to a Hollywood superstar.

Mr Weir: I did not say to which of the two I likened the Minister.

Mrs Foster: I would rather be a Hollywood superstar than a bald Russian.

I take Mr Weir's point about having a summit for the sake of being seen to do so. I strongly feel that road-safety outcomes are what matter, not window dressing. I have often said that I am happy to continue to work according to the established arrangements of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council, both of which consider areas of co-operation that affect Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I am happy to meet my counterparts from the Republic of Ireland to discuss issues of mutual interest. I have already met Noel Brett, the chief executive of the Road Safety Authority, to whom Mr Ford referred. Officials are drafting regulations on the mutual recognition of UK and Irish driver disqualifications, with a view to laying them in Westminster and the Assembly in 2008.

I noted Mr Ford's comments on progressing the same practices in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I simply cannot introduce a measure to part of an EU member state.

Mr Ford: I take the Minister's point. I thought that I had referred to the United Kingdom and the Republic, given the particular difficulties between Northern Ireland and the Republic, rather than waiting for the rest of the EU.

Mrs Foster: I am glad to have that clarification. I thought that Mr Ford meant moving towards mutual recognition only in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Progress is being made, and I will meet my counterparts from the Republic of Ireland and GB in early 2008 to discuss proposals on mutual recognition of the lesser road traffic infringements that incur penalty points, etc.

As for the future of road safety in Northern Ireland, I have stated that the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland will be included in my current consultations. My officials are considering holding several safety events next year, and counterparts from the Republic of Ireland will be invited to attend.

Publicity and advertising are, perhaps, the best-known areas of ongoing operational co-operation with the Republic of Ireland. In response to Ian McCrea's request for details, 12 cross-border road-safety campaigns have been commissioned jointly by the Department of the Environment and the Road Safety Authority in the

Republic of Ireland. Mr Ford made a point on the need for cultural change. The advertising campaigns have done more than anything else to tackle that issue. The percentage of people who wear seatbelts, to which Mr Weir referred, is up to 95%. Given the much lower rates of compliance in the 1970s and 1980s, that is a tremendous achievement. Cultural change will not be achieved by institutionalising road safety, but through the continuation of those highly effective road-safety campaigns.

Mr Ford mentioned the subcommittee that was set up in the Republic of Ireland following some difficult days of road deaths. He said that we should have a similar committee to deal with education, engineering and enforcement. We do have a useful body, which is taking forward my road-safety strategy; and the Minister for Regional Development, a high-ranking officer of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and I sit on that committee. Although Mr Ford will probably say that that is not a formal Executive subcommittee, it is an effective tool.

Road-safety education is a matter for me. Mr Boylan referred to the fact that 17- to 24-year-olds are not being educated about road safety, and I have to ask myself why that group is not being reached. Part of the problem is that many of them are not in formal education, so we cannot target them through that area. Therefore, how will we target that group?

1.30 pm

I have had some good meetings with representatives from sporting organisations about how to address the problem. I met with representatives from the GAA, who said that they will help me to get the message to the 17- to 24-year-olds who use their facilities. Therefore, a lot of work is ongoing to educate young people, but not in the area of formal education.

The Department for Transport in Great Britain is considering improvements to the driving test, and my officials are liaising with their counterparts in London to consider whether those proposals can be brought to Northern Ireland. The driving test must be looked at again. A few weeks ago, I announced changes to the motorcycle driving test, which will be introduced next year. Compulsory basic training for motorcyclists will be introduced, and Members should welcome that.

Therefore, a high level of co-operation on road safety is ongoing between the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland and my Department. Mr Boylan said that that co-operation was cosmetic, but I do not accept that. We are doing a lot of work, and that work will continue. I have not even touched on the co-operation on engineering and enforcement that the Minister for Regional Development is engaged in; and the Police Service of Northern Ireland is doing a lot of work with the police in the South on other issues.

I am content to continue with the successful working relationship that is helping to make a real difference on our roads. I appeal to Members to listen to the voices of Pat Ramsey and P J Bradley and try to achieve consensus on an issue that, thankfully, is not party political and should not be dealt with in such a way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are experiencing considerable interference with the audio system because Members are insisting on having their phones switched on. I ask Members to switch off their mobile phones. Do not put them on silent mode. Switch them off; and the word “off” should be easily recognised. I call Trevor Lunn to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Mr Lunn: Primarily, it is for Members to deliver an improved environment for road safety in Northern Ireland. To do that, we must work with the legislation in our jurisdiction, and over which we have direct authority. However, it also makes sense to learn good practice from other places, particularly when they are on our doorstep. From that point of view, I commend the proposer and seconder for bringing the motion before the House. The issue is important and topical. I have never listened to a debate before in which there has been so much agreement. In fact, there has been little disagreement in the debate.

As soon the words “all-Ireland problem” are mentioned, people’s hackles rise. However, this problem is common to the whole of Ireland. The same problem exists in Limerick as does in Lisburn — or Canterbury. Mr Weir referred to the Public Accounts Committee’s report on the road-safety strategy. I recommend it to anyone who has not yet read it. It is a good, incisive report that was launched on Friday 9 November 2007.

Much of what he referred to is addressed in that report, particularly the section on motorcycles. I was glad to hear the Minister state that compulsory basic training is finally to be introduced in Northern Ireland for motorcyclists, albeit 17 years after it was introduced in England. There is a culture and attitude of carelessness on the roads in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Ireland is one of the few places where there is still motorcycle road racing, which encourages our 17- to 24-year-olds to ride motorcycles at very high speeds, with inevitable outcomes. Outside Parliament Buildings, on the grounds of the Stormont estate, one can see the evidence of the enjoyable mayhem that will take place on Thursday evening. That too points to the culture of car driving.

We must try to convince our youngsters, North and South, that reckless behaviour on the roads is not acceptable. It is a question of hearts and minds and attitudes.

There is such a degree of unanimity that it would be a pity if the House were to divide, and I add my voice to the others who have indicated that that is not necessary.

We have expressed ourselves; now let us leave it to the Minister to carry on the necessary work.

I noticed that Mr Gallagher of the SDLP said that he would support a summit, but presumably not the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party, which urges annual bilateral conferences with ministerial input. If there is a difference between that and a summit, I would like to know what it is. As soon as the word "summit" is used, some people's hackles rise.

The Minister and others said that the Road Safety Council and the Road Safety Authority are incompatible, because one has a huge budget and the other does not; one is a state-led authority and the other is not. That is no reason why some type of all-Ireland body, with a high level of co-operation, could not be established to deal with road safety. Ian McCrea rather starkly expressed why the DUP is not, for the time being, ready for that.

Mr Weir: Never.

Mr Lunn: Never. *[Laughter.]*

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland represent a special case in Europe when it comes to driving, because we have the worst imaginable driving record, and we have had it for donkey's years. We will continue to have such a record until people's attitudes and hearts and minds are changed. From that point of view, there is much merit in cross-border co-operation and in learning from each other. That makes good sense, and poses no threat, because this issue is about lives, and we should be able to co-operate.

I also hope that Members can co-operate today and not force the matter to a division. However, I am still supporting the Alliance Party amendment. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: There have been several references to Hollywood superstars. I remind Members that Lassie was a Hollywood superstar.

Mr Donaldson: We are all trying to work out the link between Lassie and the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Lunn. I am sure that that will become clear eventually.

The DUP welcomes the opportunity to debate this issue. As chairman of the all-party Assembly group on road safety, I want to see this issue given the priority that it deserves, and I welcome the comments of my colleague the Minister of the Environment. Shortly after coming to office, she initiated a review of the road-safety strategy for Northern Ireland, and that indicates that this issue is a priority at both Executive and departmental level.

Therefore, I say to the Member who moved the motion and to Mr Ford that this issue is being treated with the seriousness that it deserves.

However, we must make sure that we get it right. I add my voice to those of Members from the SDLP and the Alliance Party who said earlier that the motion is

potentially divisive. That is unfortunate. I say to my deputy chairperson Mr Boylan that it would have been better to bring the matter before the all-party group on road safety first. The group could have had a good discussion, might have identified areas of consensus on co-operation between both parts of this island with regard to road safety and, as an all-party group, might have brought proposals to the Assembly.

There is, however, no consensus, because the motion is not acceptable, either to my party or to the Alliance Party. That, too, is unfortunate because — as other Members said — we do not want to turn the issue into a political football. For that reason, the all-party group was the way to achieve consensus.

Although people try to paint them in various colours at certain times, roads in Northern Ireland are neither orange nor green. They are used by everyone, regardless of religious, political, cultural or ethnic persuasion. Members, therefore, must ensure that the issue does not become a political football.

Before the end of the debate, I hope that the motion's proposers consider withdrawing it. If not, our amendment stands, because the DUP believes that it is wrong to talk about harmonisation and integration while the Northern Ireland road-safety strategy is under review. Our priority is to consider what can be done to improve that strategy, and going down a road of harmonisation and integration deflects us from the task at hand. For that reason, I repeat that Sinn Féin should consider withdrawing the motion.

The motion should be discussed in the all-party road-safety group. The DUP supports the existing level of co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and notes that in its amendment. The DUP is happy to draw on the experience of the Road Safety Authority. I met Senator John Ellis, who chairs the equivalent of the Assembly's all-party group on road safety in the Irish Parliament. I am keen to see those two groups working together to explore fully how co-operation can be achieved. Surely that is the right way to advance the issue, rather than with a politically motivated motion that does not help us to arrive at that consensus.

To Mr Boylan and his colleagues, I say that we should sit down and discuss the issue in the all-party group. Let us meet our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland; let us look at areas where co-operation can be enhanced; and let us talk to the Minister, the Department, the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland, and to all interested parties.

Finally, I remind Members that the public launch of the all-party Assembly group by the Minister takes place on 11 December in the Long Gallery. Would it not be good for the group to be launched on the basis of consensus?

The motion detracts from that aim and I hope that it is withdrawn. If not, the DUP amendment stands.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the work that the Minister has done so far on road safety, and the work of the Assembly's road-safety group. As David Ford said, that group is voluntary and has met three times since its inception, but the Assembly must go much further than that. Sinn Féin does not want to see the House divided. The role of the Assembly is to legislate, and that is how affirmative action on this issue will be achieved. In the broad sense, the motion is not political; instead, it is practical and makes sense with regard to improving road safety. The amendment tabled by the Alliance Party reflects the common-sense approach that we seek, and Sinn Féin supports it. That is a compromise, and it demonstrates that the House need not divide on the matter.

1.45 pm

Peter Weir said that Members must recognise the hard work that statutory bodies are doing to reduce the number of road deaths. Appropriate legislation must be implemented to ensure that those bodies do the best job possible. David Ford stressed the need to recognise that all-island co-operation is the way forward in reducing the number of road deaths, particularly in so-called border areas. Billy Armstrong said that the statistics in respect of road deaths are appalling; the Minister said that those figures have improved in recent years, but obviously a lot more can be done. As my colleague Raymond McCartney said, road deaths are not inevitable, and that is the basis on which we should move forward.

Mr Donaldson: The DUP has no difficulty with the spirit of the Alliance Party's amendment, but we are concerned that the Road Safety Council is a non-statutory body, and to ask a non-statutory body to take forward enforcement issues, for instance — which it has no power and authority to do — alongside an authority that is a statutory body, is inappropriate. The DUP is open to exploring with all parties ways to tackle the issue, but our concern is a technical one. That is why it would be more beneficial to find consensus on the issue in the Committee for the Environment and bring forward a proposal to the Assembly for its consideration, rather than put it to a vote today. I ask Mr McKay — and the Alliance Party — to consider that.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: I will certainly give the Member for South Antrim the opportunity to respond.

Mr Ford: I thank Daithí for giving way so that I can respond to Jeffrey. I am not sure whether that is parliamentary, Mr Deputy Speaker, but you have not

pulled me up on it yet. Does Daithí accept that in referring to co-operation to promote best practice in education and enforcement, the purpose of the Alliance Party's amendment is not to suggest that the Road Safety Council has enforcement powers but that it has a duty to promote those ideas, and that it is proper that that be done by two bodies that have different statutory responsibilities?

Mr McKay: I agree with Mr Ford, and, as I said, Sinn Féin will back the Alliance Party's amendment.

Tommy Gallagher said that he supported an all-Ireland summit and that it was important that such a summit take place to push the issue up the political agenda. The number of people killed on the roads over the past 30 or 40 years is abysmal, and road traffic accidents are the biggest killer in society today. Until that is pushed up the political agenda, it is unlikely to be addressed.

Mr Gallagher also mentioned driving tests. I agree that they need to be revised, in the North and in the South. We have a responsibility to ensure that young people are prepared as well as possible for driving on the roads. Research shows that high levels of accompanied practice before licensing for solo driving, involving a variety of driving circumstances, result in lower levels of fatalities. A minimum of 50 hours' pre-licensing practice is recommended, but in one country where 120 hours was required, the number of crashes in the two years following licensing fell by about 40%. Some young people can barely afford driving lessons, and, therefore, try to pass their tests after taking as few driving lessons as possible. The price and affordability of those lessons and the severe lack of post-licensing education for young drivers — mandatory or otherwise — must be looked at.

One key finding in 'Young Drivers: The Road to Safety' was that road safety measures are seldom popular prior to their implementation, so strong political leadership will be required to address the challenge of young driver risk.

Ian McCrea began his contribution by analysing our dreams; I suggest that he wake up to the fact that his party is already involved in all-Ireland bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council. That might be a nightmare for him: I do not know, but it probably is.

In regard to those all-Ireland bodies, the North/South Ministerial Council, and the fact that the DUP —

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not know whether you will class it as a dream for you or a nightmare for me, or vice versa —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr I McCrea: My apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will rephrase that: I do not know whether the Member is in the nightmare or I am in the dream, or vice versa. An all-Ireland agenda is a dream for Sinn Féin, whether it wants to accept that fact. However, as long as my party is involved in the Assembly, that will not be a dream for us.

Mr McKay: The reason for North/South co-operation on this and other matters is quite simple: it is to improve quality of life in the North and the South. In this case, such co-operation is designed to reduce the loss of life on our roads. It is a serious issue, and Sinn Féin's motion is practical rather than political.

Trevor Clarke referred to a recent death in his constituency. I have been to the funerals of four or five people in my own locality who died in road-traffic accidents. Indeed, one such funeral took place in my village in the past two weeks. Road-traffic accidents affect all communities on the island, urban and rural. I do not think that any area has not suffered the tragedy of a road death. Road safety is in crisis, and more can be done to improve it. Elected representatives should not be reluctant to make tough decisions in order to prevent further tragedy.

Human error is usually the cause of road-traffic accidents, but speed determines their outcome and whether someone lives or dies. We should face the fact that speeding is a national habit. The Road Safety Authority's website shows that after the speed of drivers on the Galgorm Road in Ballymena was recorded, 94% of them were over the speed limit. I am not isolating drivers in Ballymena; figures were similarly high for other roads in the North that were surveyed. That should not surprise us.

Raymond McCartney rightly said that a co-ordinated approach is needed, not only between Departments, but on an all-Ireland basis. As I said previously, road deaths are not inevitable, and that is the basis on which we should proceed.

The Minister referred to the welcome commitment in the draft Programme for Government to reduce road deaths by one third by 2011. That is an ambitious target, and, if we are to meet it, we should be open to all suggestions for improving road safety. That may mean introducing radical measures, which we should not be reluctant to do. The Minister also said that the matter is complex and that, perhaps, it is not possible to integrate work on road safety on an all-Ireland basis. It is possible: it is a question of having the will to work on that basis to improve road safety where necessary.

The Minister also said quite rightly that 17- to 24-year-olds are not being reached. I welcome the educational work —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. You were very generous in allowing interventions.

Before I put the question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I shall 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 notes the existing level of co-operation between the road safety authorities in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic of Ireland; further notes that a review of Northern Ireland's road safety strategy is currently under way, which can draw on experience from other countries; and calls for further measures to be taken to ensure that the current progress on improving road safety is sustained and increased.

Co-Ownership And Shared Equity

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 a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Gardiner: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to at least 10% of the overall housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options available to first-time homebuyers.

I welcome the Minister for Social Development to the House to respond to the debate.

The issue of affordable housing has occupied a good deal of the Assembly's time, just as it occupies a good many column inches in newspapers and is a frequent news item on broadcast media. It is a matter of deep and immediate concern to every family in Northern Ireland, and it is a fitting subject to occupy the Assembly's time. In a sense, all housing problems are related; the general level of house prices has an impact on the number of homes available for purchase, which, in turn, has an impact on the affordable housing stock.

Two problems lie at the heart of the affordable housing issue: one is the price of the house in question; and the second is the prospective purchaser's ability to pay for it. Many solutions have been suggested to adjust the price of houses downward. I do not intend to dwell on those issues today, other than to say that some of the solutions that have been proposed are self-defeating. It is always dangerous to interfere with the operation of a free market, as it often has unintended consequences.

The price of property in the apartment and town-house market, which is the type of housing that first-time buyers find manageable, has been driven up relentlessly by the operation of buy-to-let mortgages. Such mortgages have created a level of demand that has led to inevitable rises in house prices. We must end buy-to-let mortgages that allow speculators to speculate on the cheap. People who invest in the buy-to-let market should borrow money at normal commercial bank rates. That would leave the apartment and town-house market open to first-time buyers without that disproportionate level of competition. We should also regard apartments as suitable first-time homes, much as is the case on the Continent. Every day, Northern Ireland becomes more and more like the rest of Europe.

It is unreasonable that self-interested pressure groups prevent first-time buyers from getting homes by restricting infill development in urban areas. Although some areas have settled characters that are worth preserving, many others are not worth preserving. Some of our housing

stock is in a sorry state, and it must be upgraded with modern, high-standard buildings.

New developments will revitalise our towns and town centres with an influx of young first-time buyers into areas that are ageing and sometimes dying. I am not against some restrictions on infill development, but I totally oppose blanket bans on such development. The Assembly must protect the interests of first-time buyers against self-interested groups that want to stop all building. If we cannot build in the country or the town, where is left?

I want to turn to the core issue behind the motion. The second main problem behind the affordable housing issue is how the prospective purchaser will pay for the house he or she hopes to buy.

Shared ownership is the most obvious solution to that problem; however, it is one that has not been adequately or properly explored in Northern Ireland.

2.00 pm

I want to see an increase in the range and diversity of options available. The issue of what is on offer must be tackled. Affordability, in the last resort, is determined by the mortgages available, and the best way to expand those is by widening the range of shared equity options. At present in Northern Ireland a shared equity home-owner will own between 40% and 75% of his or her home and pay rent for the remainder. In Great Britain, it ranges from 25% to 75%. That additional range at the lower end of the scale, from 40% down to 25%, makes an enormous difference to the number of people who qualify for the scheme and can use shared equity as a step on the ladder to home ownership. Those people could own 25% of the equity in their homes and pay rent on the rest. That could become a major weapon in our armoury in tackling the affordable housing crisis.

The average house in Northern Ireland costs between £180,000 in Londonderry and Strabane and £260,000 in Lisburn. In my Upper Bann constituency, the average price is £222,000. Across Northern Ireland, the average price for a terraced house is £177,000 and for an apartment, £183,000. Taking these as the entry points for first-time buyers, with an average price of £180,000, the difference between a 40% and 25% level of equity is £27,000 — the difference between a first-time buyer's having to find £72,000 or £45,000. That great difference of 40% in the base amount would be of enormous assistance to those who aspire to home ownership. The affordable housing landscape would be transformed in one easy and achievable move.

There are good reasons why this is the right time to take action on shared equity. Shared ownership, together with an end to buy-to-let mortgages, is the mechanism to make that happen.

Miss McIlveen: Sustained rises in housing prices over several years have favoured those with multiple properties, and have had the Chancellor of the Exchequer rubbing his hands in glee at the prospect of income from inheritance tax and capital gains tax. It comes as a welcome relief to those who are not on the property ladder that growth has halted, and that there is some evidence that prices are decreasing.

The fact remains, however, that first-time buyers are still at a significant disadvantage. The UK average house price is almost £200,000, and given that the average Northern Ireland wage is £402 a week, or £20,904 a year, it is clear that anyone applying for a mortgage without the benefit of the equity from a previous purchase faces significant difficulties.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) states that mortgage lenders traditionally lend up to 3.5 times an applicant's pre-tax salary; therefore, in an ideal world, the maximum loan to someone on an average salary should be £73,164. However, sometimes those eligible to self-certify their incomes overstate them, leaving themselves with considerable difficulty in repaying the loans and open to prosecution for mortgage fraud.

Mortgage lenders are also sometimes prepared to lend more than three-and-a-half times the applicant's pre-tax salary. That again leaves the homeowner working just to pay off the loan.

In Northern Ireland we have only one shared-equity scheme, run by the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association (NICHA or Co-Ownership Housing), which has assisted in the provision of 20,000 homes in Northern Ireland since its inception 30 years ago. In the rest of the UK there has been a considerable expansion of shared-equity schemes, such as HomeBuy in England and Wales and Homestake in Scotland. One of the arguments against the investment of public money in such schemes has been expressed by housing charity Shelter, which said at the time of the Chancellor's announcement establishing the HomeBuy scheme:

"We are talking about subsidy being directed away from providing housing for the poorest, in favour of enabling people who very often already have adequate housing to profit out of home ownership. We question whether it's a legitimate priority to subsidise people to acquire wealth."

I think, however, that it is a legitimate priority to assist people in this way. By investing in people we are giving them an opportunity to improve themselves, rather than to waste money in the rented sector and receive no tangible benefit after 20 or 30 years of spending.

Entering into a shared-equity scheme such as that run by NICHA means that a mortgage becomes affordable. Equity increases with house-price rises, so that the homeowner can pay a lump sum towards the cost of his or her new home. A further advantage of such a scheme is that the profit made through the increase in

house prices is split between the homeowner and the scheme provider. That means that after resale, the full amount of the money loaned plus a share of the profit made is repaid to the Government. According to NICHA, it has received £84 million in grants and returned £16 million over and above that. That return can go towards housing for the poorest in society, who are not able to purchase a house or even be eligible for a shared-equity scheme.

Clearly, we do not want to encourage people to burden themselves with unmanageable debt, but the repossession rate for homes purchased under the scheme stands at around 0.01%. The scheme provides an extra layer of scrutiny to ensure that prospective homeowners do not get in over their heads. Such schemes need to be expanded in today's market, given the rapid increase in property values. As I said, the average house price is around £200,000, but the property-value limit for NICHA is £225,000. In other council areas in Northern Ireland, it can be as low as £180,000.

Expanding the scheme to cater for at least 10% of the housing market would require considerable investment. However, such an investment would provide substantial benefits to all the partners — homeowners, the banking sector and the public purse. For those reasons, I support the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Téann an rún seo go díreach go croí cheist na tithíochta. In many ways, this motion goes to the heart of the housing debate — namely, what exactly constitutes an affordable housing sector. I was at a conference in England last week, and some of the submissions said that, five years ago, the issue of affordability rarely surfaced in the housing debate. However, they went on to say that, in recent surveys, housing affordability has featured third in order of priority among people's concerns, after the economy and the environment. That gives an idea of where this issue sits in people's minds.

Any debate in this Chamber on housing shows the level of concern that people have about the issue. This motion concerns me in that it is asking us to put all of our eggs into one basket. I know that quite a lot of people have gone down the road of co-ownership and are quite happy with what it delivered to them. However, there are those who say that co-ownership created problems for them. A television news item some months ago raised some of the difficulties that people faced, and I have dealt with people who have had the same difficulties.

Ní hé sin an cheist ar maidin, ach caithfimid í a chur san áireamh. That is not the issue at hand this morning, but it does need to be taken into consideration. It would be wrong to ask this Assembly to pass a motion without knowing all the consequences or having all the facts.

I was reading the website of Co-Ownership Housing last night. That body is obviously pushing out its boat in relation to the overall affordability debate; it says that it is ready and able to scale up rapidly to meet the escalating housing demand — subject to funding — and that it wants to play a key role in article 40 planning agreements.

Were the association to do that, we would be pre-empting a fundamental question that the Semple Review will attempt to answer: how do we develop an affordable sector? A number of recommendations may come from the Semple Review. I have previously argued in the Chamber that, were land made available for housing, an affordable sector could be kick-started. Moreover, we must consider vacant dwellings and options that deal with land prices, as well as the many other suggestions on the development of an affordable sector — not least, article 40 of The Planning Order 1991, which will compel developers to set aside land for affordable and social housing.

Co-ownership, shared equity and shared ownership will also be discussed in the review, but we must be clear that many options are available, not just those. To vote in favour of the motion would be to do an injustice to those who expect us to come up with answers to the many problems that are faced by those constituents who are in need of social and affordable housing. I appeal to the proposers of the motion that, rather than pursue it, they allow discussion and debate to continue in a manner that allows all options to be considered and does not simply seek out one option to solve what is a huge social problem. Let us see whether a cocktail of measures can be developed that deals with the question of affordability.

To that end, I propose that we await the outcome of the Semple Review. I believe that the team's recommendations are expected in the coming weeks. When armed with that information, we will surely be in a better position to look at real solutions to the affordability problem, instead of taking the premature decision of committing the Assembly to a call for 10% of the housing market to be taken up by one association or another.

Let us not set a figure. Sinn Féin is not opposed to co-ownership in itself. However, we should wait for the affordability review's recommendations before we commit ourselves to it.

Mar gheall air sin, beidh Sinn Féin ag staonadh ar an mholadh seo. For that reason, we in Sinn Féin will abstain from the vote, purely because we believe it to be premature to commit ourselves to a particular course of action. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burns: I support the motion. I need not say much by way of introduction other than to restate that we now find ourselves in the midst of a housing crisis.

Although the problem is complex and multi-dimensional, we all knew that one existed. However, it

was allowed to grow unchecked. Under direct rule, there was little that we could do about the problem, so we now find ourselves in a somewhat desperate situation.

The problem was not of our making, but, thankfully, the solution can be. An increase in co-ownership can be part of that solution. It genuinely saddens me that many thousands of people out there with good jobs, who work very hard to get on in life, and who earn what most people would consider a good wage, simply cannot afford to buy their own home. In the current climate, those on average wages, let alone those on low incomes, have no chance of owning their own home. As I have said, it fills me with regret that so many people in our society cannot achieve their ambition. No matter how hard they work, they cannot afford their own home.

Co-ownership has proved popular because the scheme is credible and has a strong track record. The scheme meets the needs of the wide range of people who face affordability problems. Simply put, co-ownership is a good way in which to get a foot on the property ladder. It is for that reason that I support that part of the motion that calls for an increase in co-ownership, whether that be to 10% of the overall housing market or to another increased figure.

I suggest that most people think of co-ownership as a buy-half/rent-half deal.

In fact, some variation in shared equity — from 40% to 75% — is already available. Although that offers some flexibility, Co-Ownership Housing outlined in its strategy document that it wants an expanded range of co-ownership purchase options that could be individually tailored to buyers' needs. If the organisation believes that that would be a good thing, then I am happy to offer my support.

2.15 pm

The current maximum purchase-price limits, which restrict co-ownership buyers to the lower end of the market — apartments or small houses — are not fair. I support the review of upper limits. However, I offer some words of caution. Although the market has been rising in the past few years, we have witnessed a slowdown recently, which suggests that some houses are overvalued. I do not want people to enter into co-ownership arrangements in the hope of purchasing affordable homes and then to find that the value of their houses drops. Co-ownership must be considered to be an attractive investment, and people must get a good return on their outlay.

I urge Members to keep in mind the many hard-working people who cannot afford to purchase their homes. The Assembly can contribute and make a real difference to the housing crisis, and I hope that we can seize this opportunity to affect those people's lives for the better.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. There is no disputing the fact that there is a crisis in affordable housing in Northern Ireland. According to the Semple Report, property values have increased by 165% in the past five years. House prices here are above the UK average, although wages are significantly below average. There is a huge gap between incomes and house prices. Subsequently, too many people are being priced out of the Northern Ireland housing market. In particular, it is hard for young people to find a home — even at the bottom of the housing stock. I have spoken out about that problem, which is particularly acute in my constituency of South Belfast. It will not be solved unless there is more affordable housing.

The Semple Report made various recommendations relating to co-ownership schemes. Such schemes can provide the means through which people can bridge the gap. Co-ownership provides people with a better long-term option than short-term rented accommodation, in which tenants feel no sense of ownership or security. However, I was surprised to read in Co-Ownership Housing literature that in the past 30 years only 20,000 homes have been provided by the association for low-income households. There must be many more such facilities for people who desire to be owner-occupiers.

The Semple Report recommended the abolition of the current property-value limits, about which other Members spoke earlier; reducing the level of rent charged on the equity retained by Co-Ownership Housing; and reducing the initial minimum equity stake from 40% to 25%. Members also spoke about that. I agree with the recommendations, and their implementation would be welcomed by low-income households.

Many more of them will be able to participate, thereby increasing the demand for co-ownership homes and ensuring the sustainability of such schemes.

A more flexible approach will enable people to purchase bigger or better properties in more attractive areas rather than houses at the lowest end of the market. On the other hand, it may contribute to regeneration in areas of low demand.

More people buying their own homes will have an impact on reducing the current lengthy social-housing waiting lists. There are resource implications from a rise in the limits, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel has not been generous to the affordable housing sector in his so-called people's Budget. However, co-ownership is a well-proven, cost-effective policy, without which ordinary people will be priced out of housing in much of greater Belfast, and an unhealthy divide will grow between the haves and the have-nots.

The affordable housing crisis is one of the toughest challenges facing the Executive. Therefore, I urge the Minister and the interdepartmental affordability review implementation group to examine how co-ownership is working across Northern Ireland and to use it to its full potential.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I am only too aware of the pressures on first-time buyers who are trying to secure their first homes. The debate on co-ownership is increasingly relevant for first-time buyers in today's market. If the Assembly does not get the balance correct on the issue, it will be catastrophic not only for co-ownership but will put more pressure on other aspects of the housing market such as social housing.

There is massive interest in the co-ownership scheme Province-wide. The fact that there have been over 100,000 hits on the website so far demonstrates the clear interest in the scheme. One positive aspect of the scheme is the fact that all grants for co-ownership properties are subsequently paid back. In many instances, there is surplus funding, which, in turn, is recycled for making future purchases.

Over the past 10 years, co-ownership has received £84 million in housing grants. That money enabled the purchase of homes worth £390 million, which is a grant input of some 45%. At the same time, co-ownership returned £16 million to the Government over and above the grant that was paid out.

As a Member for Lagan Valley, it is only right and proper that I focus on the benefits of the co-ownership scheme to some of my constituents in their attempts to get onto the property ladder. As was pointed out earlier, the average house price in Lagan Valley is approximately £260,000, and it is difficult to see how many of my constituents will get onto the property ladder at all. That is why co-ownership has a vital role to play in offering a path into the housing market for first-time buyers, and it is one reason that the Assembly should make funding available to build on the success of co-ownership and, in turn, give many first-time buyers the real possibility of purchasing homes.

In Lagan Valley, over 1,600 homes have been purchased through the co-ownership scheme. Thirty homes have been purchased so far this year at a value of £5.5 million, and another 80 applications are pending in the Lisburn area. That makes Lagan Valley one of the top five places in Northern Ireland for using the scheme, and some £14.5 million worth of homes are waiting in the pipeline to be purchased.

The Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association is currently processing six applications in Lisburn, with an average price of £175,000. Considering that the average income for the people who are making those applications is £16,500 a year, the scheme is clearly helping low earners to enter the property market.

Despite all those positive outcomes, and the money that was well spent over the past 10 years, concern remains over the level of future funding, and, in particular, funding for the coming year. That must be considered urgently.

Co-ownership Housing has stated that, if it gets the £55 million that it requested for 2008-09, and the £60 million that it requested for 2009-10, it will fund the purchase of 800 homes annually.

There are chronic waiting lists for social housing. If schemes such as co-ownership are not made available to more people, those waiting lists will become ever increasing.

As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I will work with the Minister to make the issue a priority for the Assembly. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that Members take their ease until then.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the way in which the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland is dealing with infrastructure matters, in comparison to the work of the previous Executive. (AQO 791/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The previous Executive's financial planning looked mainly at the year ahead, and included capital investment in infrastructure. For the first time, the Executive has developed a 10-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which will cover the period 2008-18. The new approach sets a new course for infrastructure investment planning — one that is fully aligned with the Budget and the Executive's priorities, as set out in the Programme for Government. Future investment and infrastructure will be targeted to provide an essential platform on which to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society, in which everyone can enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the years to come.

The new draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland adopts a sustainable-development approach, ensuring that the key priority of growing a dynamic and innovative economy will be delivered in ways that promote positive social outcomes and enhance our environment and natural resources.

We are also taking steps to improve programme management to ensure that we keep a firm focus on delivery.

Ms Anderson: Will the investment strategy address regional disparity in infrastructure? I am particularly concerned about the Foyle constituency and the city of Derry, from which I come.

The First Minister: My answer is absolutely in the affirmative. We intend to do exactly that. I visited Foyle recently and I was struck by the wonderful potential there. Belfast will have to pull up its socks to keep in tune with Londonderry — and, in saying that, I intend no reference to a party tune.

Mr K Robinson: The draft investment strategy refers to a step change in the pace of infrastructural

investment, with a 25% increase on the previous three years. To deliver that, the Executive has identified a spend of £3,567 million, of which £400 million is identified as “additional funds”. That is some 10% of the total spend. With efficiency savings of, at most, 5% from the Departments, will the First Minister explain from where the Executive envisage that £400 million will come?

The First Minister: I am glad that the honourable Member has made a study of the matter and has acquainted himself with what we hope to achieve. There are cross-cutting objectives in economic, societal and environmental spheres, and we look forward to accelerating economic growth in all those aspects to improve the competitiveness of business. Investment in infrastructure to promote equality of opportunity and good relations will promote regional balance in future development and will tackle areas of social disadvantage. Environmental investment in infrastructure will protect and enhance our environment, and in particular, it will address areas affected by EU directives. Those objectives can be mutually reinforcing and can help to ensure that development is sustainable. The objectives influence both programme selection and delivery to maximise returns.

Mr Durkan: Will the First Minister agree that as the Treasury has made the capital allocation available to Northern Ireland over a 10-year period, it makes sense to have a 10-year plan? The SDLP welcomes the broad purposes and priorities of the 10-year investment strategy, having conceived of the idea of a joined-up investment strategy during the life of the previous Executive.

That Executive envisaged an investment strategy that would be planned and agreed on a basis of social partnership, and a strategic investment body composed on the same basis. Have the current Executive plans to make that a reality?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for his remarks about what we are attempting to do, and what I believe we will do. I am glad that he realises that we are in a new situation, which demands a different outlook. The fact that we are looking into the future to meet its challenges is a good sign, and I congratulate myself as one of the evangelists who helped to convert him to that view.

Investment Conference, Spring 2008

2. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps it is taking to prepare for the investment conference planned for spring 2008. (AQO 785/08)

The First Minister: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Nigel Dodds, is leading preparations for the conference through his Department and Invest

Northern Ireland. Where it is appropriate, the deputy First Minister and I work with Minister Dodds in order to ensure that the fullest preparations are in place for the conference and that maximum benefits for Northern Ireland are achieved as a result of the conference.

On 16 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I hosted a lunch event for an inward mission of 17 US companies, led by the US ambassador to London, Mr Tuttle, and his counterpart in Dublin, Mr Foley. That event provided an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of US investment to the development of the economy and to demonstrate that we are open for business in preparation for the US economic investment conference to be held in Belfast in spring 2008.

Next month, when the deputy First Minister and I visit the United States, we will take the opportunity to promote the conference and encourage senior company representatives to travel to Northern Ireland. We are glad to accept the invitation from the President to meet him in the White House on that occasion. In addition, the US Administration has plans to send a further inward delegation to Northern Ireland, a visit for which arrangements have been finalised. Minister Dodds is in talks with the United States special envoy, Paula Dobriansky, and the US Consul General in Northern Ireland, Susan Elliott, about the composition of the delegation.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for that extensive reply. In light of the forthcoming closure of the Seagate Technology operations plant in Limavady, which will happen in the same time frame as the investment conference through no fault of anyone in this House or in the Executive, will the First Minister assure me that counteracting the regional disparity in equality of opportunity will be a key priority of that investment conference?

The First Minister: Absolutely. Jobs are put at risk when other parts of the world offer to do the same work at a far cheaper rate; therefore all the jobs in Northern Ireland that are in that category are in danger. Steps must be taken to avoid that. An injection of outside finance is needed to revolutionise the outlook of the business community and to change it from being publicly to privately financed, and to work towards the best possible target, which is to have jobs situated in Northern Ireland that cannot be done anywhere else in the world and which are, therefore, not subject to pressure from outside.

Miss McIlveen: Will the First Minister assure Members that when he travels to the United States, the economic development and promotion of Northern Ireland will be his priorities while he is there?

The First Minister: Yes; the economy will come first. I believe that the deputy First Minister and I will start to write a success story for the Province.

Dr Farry: In the past, inward investment in Northern Ireland has been towards the low-added-value end of the market, with low-sustainability jobs and has been based upon such limited tools as selective financial assistance through grant-making. In the absence of fiscal measures such as tax-varying powers, what fresh thinking will the Executive bring to the table to attract high-value-added jobs that have long-term sustainability?

The First Minister: I suggest that it would do the honourable Member good to read 'Building a Better Future: Draft Development Strategy 2008-2018'. I will not delay the gentlemen with a Genesis to Malachi reading of that particular document.

Sustainable Development

3. **Mr Weir** asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to outline how it intends to progress and promote sustainable development across all Departments. (AQO 775/08)

The First Minister: Sustainable development is a cross-cutting theme of the draft Programme for Government for Northern Ireland. Building a sustainable future is a key requirement for the office's economic, social and environmental politics and programme. That approach is supported by a public-service agreement that aims at promoting sustainable development across the public sector, business and wider society by using the guiding principles of the sustainable development strategy as the basis for governmental policy.

The deputy First Minister and I also plan to publish a new sustainable-development implementation plan that will set out in more detail the Executive's approach to sustainable development between 2008 and 2011.

Mr Weir: I thank the First Minister for his response. Will the First Minister give the House more details on the new implementation plan for sustainable development?

The First Minister: Since May, the deputy First Minister and I have continued to progress the sustainable development strategy and implementation plan. Departments are making progress in delivering the plan, which was launched in November 2006. Several of its targets and associated actions have been achieved or almost achieved. Of course, the deputy First Minister and I recognise that although that represents progress, there is still much work to be done.

That is why sustainable development is included in a public service agreement and as a cross-cutting theme in our Programme for Government. OFMDFM has taken forward work across a range of areas, including the introduction of a new statutory duty legislation that imposes a requirement on all public bodies to take

account of sustainability in the exercise of those functions. Others are the development of a high-level, overarching indicator set to monitor and measure progress towards sustainable development; the preparation of a communication strategy; the publication of departmental action plans for 10 Departments; and the hosting of a reception, at which junior Ministers — Mr Paisley Jnr and Mr G Kelly — welcomed the sustainable development commissioners to our Province.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister tell me how many times the sustainable development champions have met?

The First Minister: I regret that I do not have that information to hand. I will provide it in a letter to the Member.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the First Minister indicate whether there has been any progress on furthering a tidal electricity generation facility near Rathlin Island, which the Sustainable Development Commission claims will produce 10% of Northern Ireland's energy needs? Does he think that it will damage in any way the tourist potential of that great tourist area?

The First Minister: As the representative — in another place — of that island, I have made representations on the matter and will continue to do so. There should be such a supply of electricity to Rathlin Island. When I was first elected as MP for the island, there were no public toilets there, and no new houses had been built during a 40-year period. Although there were no roads, the people on the island still had to pay tax on their motor cars. I am proud, with others who worked so hard, that prospects in the island have improved so much, and I hope that they will improve even more. I would like to see that supply of electricity bringing light and power to the island.

2.45 pm

Ministers' Interests

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what procedures are in place in the Executive Committee to protect the interests of individual Ministers from those parties with the fewest members in the Executive. (AQO 729/08)

The First Minister: I am grateful for the Member's question. However, I am surprised that he — apparently — thinks that the Executive needs protection from the parties with fewest Members. I assume that he actually meant to ask about protection in the Executive of the position of smaller parties. He was so eager to set the question down that he did not explain it properly. In that regard, I assure all Members that, since the inception

of the present Executive, my co-Chairperson and I have been very careful to observe fully all provisions of the ministerial code, including those on decision-making in the Executive.

I want to make it absolutely clear that, in taking forward the Executive's business, we are committed to reaching decisions by consensus at every possible opportunity, thus protecting the interests of all Members. However, there will be specific circumstances — which, I hope, are rare — where full consensus cannot be obtained. In those circumstances, we are bound by the provisions of the ministerial code that was agreed, prior to devolution, by the four parties who are now Members of the Executive.

Of course, the honourable Member belongs to one of those parties.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the First Minister for his response, and I hope to provide sufficient clarity in my supplementary question.

Will he assure the Assembly that the Executive, which he jointly heads, operate — as per the Belfast Agreement and St Andrews Agreement — on the basis of consensus, given that they are a mandatory coalition as opposed to a coalition of choice? What steps is he taking to ensure that that Executive can be more democratically accountable to the Assembly?

The First Minister: The Executive are democratically accountable to the Assembly; no thanks to his party's representation at the talks but to mine.

Some Members: Hear, hear. *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: There is an old story that when one pours the water of heaven on the fire of hell, there is a hissing noise. *[Laughter.]* We are experiencing that at the moment.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Those Members should hiss off. *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister: The ministerial code, to which the Member's party agreed and signed up, stated that:

"It is the duty of the Chairmen of the Executive Committee to seek to secure that decisions of the Executive Committee are reached by consensus wherever possible: if consensus cannot be reached, a vote may be taken".

That is what the Member signed up to; and that is what I signed up to. I find no burden in that: he evidently does and wants to have it changed.

That section of the ministerial code also provides for such a vote, if required, to be taken on a cross-community basis. It should be said that the honourable Member's party is as much a party of the Executive as my party is, and as the other parties are. There is supposed to be a coalition, but sometimes when one looks at the Executive, one does not see much coalescing from certain Members — the reason being that they are no

longer in power and thus can no longer dictate to the real representatives of the people of this Province.

In view of the concerns expressed by ministerial colleagues and the wider public interest following the Minister for Social Development's statement to the Assembly on 16 October, it was our agreed view that seeking to adopt on 18 October the minutes of the previous meeting was of fundamental importance, and thus we took that decision. As regards how many votes have been taken in the Executive between our first meeting on 10 May and the meeting of the 25 October, during that time the Executive have considered 105 items of business, and there have been only three occasions when full consensus has not been obtained. That is a record, certainly for Northern Ireland. The record speaks for itself. Instead of denigrating this Assembly, the honourable Member would be far better to pay tribute to it and to work a bit harder to see that it is successful.

Mr Ford: I realise that by asking questions from these Benches, one is merely laying oneself open to abuse. However, I will give it a try.

Given the recent debacles over funding for health and social services and the conflict transformation initiative, will the First Minister give us any evidence to suggest that this Executive operates under the principle of collective responsibility?

The First Minister: The answer that I gave the honourable Member some time ago in this House remains the same. I am sorry that when he does not get it the way he likes it, he considers it abuse. I have never abused the honourable Member; if I had, he would not be sitting in his place today. *[Laughter.]* I assure him that I will not abuse him in the future. I would simply say to him that he would be far better using his vast talents to help the Assembly to succeed.

When I say that, I do so with a feeling of truthfulness in my heart.

Mr Donaldson: Does the First Minister agree that the procedures that he has described that allow and provide for ministerial accountability in the Executive, and for consensus to be arrived at, were put in place as a result of political negotiations? Although some parties in the Assembly may try to pretend otherwise, they are every bit as much a part of the Government as my party is. Therefore, as an integral part of the Government, it is time that they started to work with us instead of trying to work against us.

The First Minister: I agree with my honourable friend. This House should give the people of Northern Ireland a lead, instead of joining sides to run down the democracy that we have achieved. That was achieved through very hard bargaining, and although other Members offered nothing but criticism, we worked hard at this job, and we have produced not the perfect

remedy, but a remedy that can give every man and woman a right to speak his or her mind and know that, if there is truth in what he or she is saying, it will be listened to by the Assembly.

More people are visiting this Building than ever did before, and I have worked in this Building for many years. I am glad that the ordinary people of Ulster are taking an interest in the Assembly and coming here to see how we are doing. All Members should add with energy to the strength of this Building and the work that happens here, which will mean that we have pure democracy for this part of this island.

North/South Ministerial Council

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the means through which an individual or an MLA can influence the subject matter for consideration at future North/South Ministerial Council meetings. (AQO 776/08)

The First Minister: The memorandum of understanding on procedure in respect of the operation of the North/South Ministerial Council states that the agenda for each meeting will be settled by express agreement in advance by relevant Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, through the NSMC's joint secretariat. Individuals or MLAs may influence the subject matter for consideration at North/South Ministerial Council meetings by raising issues of concern with the Northern Ireland Executive Minister who holds responsibility for that subject.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his answer. I asked the question because it has not been terribly clear to individual Assembly Members how to secure an item on a North/South Ministerial Council agenda when it meets in sectoral format. Will the First Minister consider the adoption of the mechanism used by Departments in Dublin, through the appointment of North/South unit co-ordinators? If I want to speak to the Education or Health Departments in Dublin to influence the inclusion of a matter on an agenda, I can speak to a North/South unit co-ordinator. I would greatly appreciate the help of the First Minister in this matter.

The First Minister: If the Member would speak in the English language when he speaks to me, I would at least get the substance of his message. The way in which the matter would be dealt with was agreed. I do not know whether the Member has attempted to put a proposal to anyone. He could, of course, make representations to his own party leader, who would, I am sure, be happy to help him to see that such a proposal is made.

There would be no guarantee that the Member would get his way. If it were a plea for more Dublin involvement

in our affairs, I would say no; if it were a plea for the United Kingdom link to be strengthened, I would say yes.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural Wages Board

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her proposals in relation to the implementation of the Assembly's resolution on the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board.

(AQO 763/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Following the debate on 22 October, I reflected both on its outcome and on Members' concerns. Having considered the case for the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB), I remain of the view that the national minimum wage structure does not offer farm workers the same level of protection that the board affords, particularly where wage rates are concerned. Although wage costs are slightly higher, that must be balanced against the need to retain suitably skilled agricultural-wages workers in the North. The level of bureaucracy that is associated with the board's rate is not significant and is no different in the North than anywhere else in these islands.

Additionally, the board is also a valuable forum where wage negotiations take place, and, importantly, it is used as a benchmark for the wider agrifood industry and other rural occupations. I do not believe that it is in the interests of the agriculture industry to allow the North to become, as has been suggested by the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU), the sweatshop for agricultural workers on these islands. Abolition of the board would place agricultural workers here at a disadvantage when compared to workers elsewhere on these islands.

In the absence of an alternative mechanism to protect the rights of agricultural employees in line with the equality agenda, I remain of the view that the board should not be abolished. My decision is in the interests of sustainable farming; it protects the rights and continued availability of farm workers, including migrant workers, in the North. Finally, I do not propose to implement the Assembly's resolution to introduce legislation that will abolish the AWB.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her eloquent explanation of the reason that she takes no notice of what happens in the Assembly. I note that in any other legislature in these islands, at least 70% of business

comes from the Executive, but in this Assembly, at least 85% of business comes from Back-Benchers and is then ignored by Ministers from all parties. Is it not about time that the Executive started to produce some real legislation in order that votes in the House can have effect?

Ms Gildernew: I acknowledge that in the debate on the motion that called for me to introduce the required legislation to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board, unionists voted primarily in favour of abolition and nationalists voted against. I repeat that I have decided to retain the board. I am not prepared to undermine the rights of farm workers or to dispense with the board's work. I am not prepared to sacrifice the rights of low-paid workers or the protection of migrants because of the lobbying of employers, or because of the partisan position of Members. I am the Minister, and it is my responsibility to do the right thing. I make my decisions based on the evidence of what is best for everyone who lives and works in the rural community. Five thousand pounds a year is a small price to pay for the protection of workers' rights. Those who disagree with that must explain their position to vulnerable farm workers. I reject the call to abolish the board, and I stand by my decision.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister's answer is completely unacceptable. A decision was made by the Assembly. Why does the Minister believe that an additional financial burden that is not placed upon other prosperous businesses throughout Northern Ireland should be placed upon a crippled and suffering farming industry? If the Minister does not wise up on this issue, it may fall to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development to introduce legislation according to the mind of the Assembly.

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what I am responding to as there was no question in that outburst. *[Interruption.]*

What was the question? I ask the Member to repeat the question. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Burns: During the debate on the Agricultural Wages Board on 22 October, I recall that the Minister expressed concern that some migrant workers would be at a disadvantage were the board to be abolished.

Will the Minister inform the Assembly which sectors of the agriculture industry she has identified as taking advantage of migrant workers?

Ms Gildernew: I am not suggesting that any sector takes advantage of workers; I was talking about the protection of all workers, including migrant workers. The board sets rates for all sectors of agriculture to provide protection for every worker.

Reducing Red Tape and Bureaucracy

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her Department's

progress in reducing red tape and bureaucracy.

(AQO 796/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. In June, I announced a review of the regulatory controls, applied by DARD and DOE, to the agrifood sector, particularly farmers. An independent panel will conduct the review, the terms of reference of which were agreed with the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Foster, as was the make-up of the panel.

The panel comprises a chairperson and two other members who have the range of skills required to balance the different governance, agricultural, environmental and legal interests. My Department took responsibility for identifying suitable candidates to represent governance and agricultural interests, and the DOE was responsible for environmental and legal interests.

Although the process is taking longer than I had hoped, I am pleased to inform the Member that the final make-up of the panel has been agreed with Mrs Foster and appointments have been made. The panel's first meeting will be on 22 November, at which point the review will be under way. The review's output will be a simplification plan to make it easier for everyone involved in the agrifood industry to comply with the relevant regulations and to reduce the costs of doing so.

On the one hand, I want to improve the way in which the regulations are delivered and enforced through having the appropriate organisations and regulations in place; on the other, I want as much as possible to reduce the administrative burden and, therefore, the cost to the industry of compliance with regulations.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I thank the Minister for her answer and for announcing to the House the establishment of the panel. Has she any further information —

Dr W McCrea: The Member should ask his question.

Mr McCartney: If the Member bides his time, he will hear me ask a question, unlike him. Could — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCartney: Will the Minister share with the Assembly any appropriate information on the make-up of the panel?

Ms Gildernew: The agreed panel will be chaired by Michael Dowling, a former secretary general of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; David Graham, a retired chief executive of the Fane Valley Co-operative Society; and Brian Jack, a law lecturer at Queen's University, Belfast, who has a particular interest in environmental law. I wish the panel luck in its deliberations, and I have no doubt that the review's outcome will be a simplification plan in the best interests of the industry.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister tell Members what targets have been set to save money by reducing staff and bureaucracy? What savings will be passed on to benefit the agriculture industry? Will she detail the additional funding that will be available to assist the farming community, the agriculture industry and rural development?

Ms Gildernew: I cannot pre-empt the findings of the review panel: its three highly experienced members will consider what can be done to help the industry. No targets relating to the Member's question have been set; however, there are targets for the reduction of bureaucracy. Ultimately, I want a reduction of at least 25% in the cost of the administrative burden on farmers by 2013, and DARD's public service agreement sets an interim target of a 10% reduction by 2010. My Department will strive to eliminate all unnecessary red tape and to use the budget to achieve the most value for money and the best value for the farming industry.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister mentioned targets for 2011 and 2013. What is she doing in the short term to reduce red tape and bureaucracy for farmers?

Ms Gildernew: The panel has been set up to consider ways of reducing bureaucracy. I am sorry, but I did not catch the first part of the Member's question. Does that answer his question?

Mr T Clarke: No, it does not.

Ms Gildernew: I am sorry, I — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Gildernew: I am not the best person to decide how we should reduce bureaucracy — I have to ask the experts. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to answer the question.

Ms Gildernew: I am setting up the panel, in conjunction with the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, to examine how we can reduce bureaucracy. We are consulting the industry on the issue, but we are limited by some European regulations. We are also pressing to find out what can be done from a European point of view to reduce bureaucracy and red tape for farmers. We have a big job ahead, but we are intent on doing the best for the industry.

Mournes and Slieve Croob Area

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the concerns of the agriculture community about the designation of the Mournes and Slieve Croob area as a National Park. (AQO 742/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am aware of all the issues and sensitivities around the idea of a national park in the Mournes and Slieve Croob area. I appreciate that such a proposal would be contentious and could be strongly opposed by many farmers in the area. However, there is support for a national park from some people in the local tourism industry and in the rural business community. The Minister of the Environment has referred the report of the Mourne national park working party to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Committee for the Environment before making any decision on the way forward. Therefore, it is not yet appropriate for me to meet the Minister of the Environment on the issue.

However, officials from my Department have had an advisory role on a national park policy and legislation interdepartmental working group since 2004. They have been alert to the potential effects on local agriculture, fisheries and forestry interests. Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have also sat as observers on the Mourne national park working party. It is important to stress that the working party has not recommended progress towards setting up a national park while the concerns of the agriculture community remain unresolved.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her reply, but I wish to develop it. Does the Minister have any plans to meet farmers from the Mournes and Slieve Croob area on their own patch? If not, will she accept an invitation from them to do so?

Ms Gildernew: I have spoken to some people in the Mournes and Slieve Croob area, and I am prepared to talk to anyone on the issue. I am aware that there are contentious opinions around the idea of a national park, and it has been strongly opposed by many farmers in the area. Local people are worried about restrictions on farming practice, liability risks from increased access to private land, risks of environmental damage due to increased visitor numbers, and possible limits on rural housing that could threaten to break up rural communities. Any proposal for a national park in the Mournes and Slieve Croob area must address those widely held concerns. Although the Minister of the Environment will ultimately make the decision, it is incumbent on me to ensure that she understands the views of farmers in the area. I am prepared to listen and to talk to anyone about the issue.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the creation of a national park would bring enormous economic benefit to the entire community of the Mournes? Does she also accept that the working party tackled, head-on, issues such as insurance, footpaths and compulsory purchases? In many people's opinion, it bent over backwards to meet the needs of the farming community. Will the Minister accept that although a couple of issues

are outstanding, the best thing for South Down and for the Mourne area generally is to find some way of pushing forward the idea of a national park that will keep everyone, including the farming community, on board?

Ms Gildernew: Absolutely. Finding a solution that everyone is happy with would be the best outcome. Any proposal for setting up a national park in the Mourne area will be unable to progress while the concerns of the agriculture community remain unresolved. I will consider the views in the working party's report, and its recommendations, at the appropriate time. However, ultimately, the deciding factor on any proposed national park should be the views of the people from the area.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Having consulted many farmers in South Down, I have found that the vast majority have major concerns in relation to the creation of a national park. Is the Minister aware of those concerns?

3.15 pm

Ms Gildernew: Yes, I am aware of them. I appreciate that farmers are concerned about possible restrictions on their farming activities. However, the Mourne national park working party was clear that there should be no new or compulsory restrictions on farming activities. The working-party report recommends that any change to farming practices should be voluntary and appropriately compensated. It is worth noting that many farmers in the Mourne area are already voluntarily participating in DARD agrienvironment schemes and are farming in an environmentally sensitive way. More than 19,000 hectares — two thirds of the eligible land in the Mourne area — is designated as an environmentally sensitive area and is currently farmed under agrienvironment-scheme agreements. Therefore, farmers in the Mourne area are largely farming in a manner that enhances the Mourne area and the beauty of that part of the world. Farmers will be very much an integral part of the outcome of the working party's report.

Fuel Prices

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken to assess the impact on rural areas and, in particular, agricultural businesses of rising fuel prices.

(AQO 770/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Department does not have any data on the general impact of rising fuel prices on rural areas. Agricultural businesses estimated that expenditure on heating fuel, machinery fuel and oils increased from £27.8 million in 2002 to £37.9 million in 2006. Despite the increase, those costs account for only 5% of gross input costs for agriculture, and, therefore, the direct impact from rising fuel prices is relatively modest.

However, increased fuel prices also impact on the cost of other inputs, notably feed and fertiliser, which account for a much greater proportion of inputs. It is not possible to quantify the increase in the cost of other outputs that is attributable to rises in fuel prices.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister may not have precise details, but perhaps she could tell the House how many farmers have been prosecuted for illegal-fuel offences, including ones that may have been committed in the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Gildernew: I do not have the detail of that information here, but I will try to find that out and respond to the Member in writing.

Mr Gallagher: The Minister, like everyone else, must be aware that as a result of the closure of small filling stations, as well as the loss of thousands of jobs largely due to the supply of laundered fuels, rural communities have become more impoverished than ever in recent years. What message does the Minister have for those who still engage in the supply or purchase of illegal fuels?

Ms Gildernew: That issue is clearly outside my remit, so I am not sure what response the Member seeks.

However, this is a good time to remind the House that the Department is doing everything in its power to militate against further costs to farmers, to help them with supply-chain development and to ensure that they are profitable.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is not involved with tax. That is a matter for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, I will obviously highlight the impact on agriculture should the Assembly discuss the issue.

Mr Irwin: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has put a considerable amount of resources towards the growing of willows. Will the Minister tell the House how much money DARD has put towards the growing of willows, and does she believe that that money is a good use of departmental resources?

Ms Gildernew: DARD promotes the growing of crops for use as biofuels under the EU energy-crop aid scheme. Aid of €45 per hectare is payable for all crops that are used for the production of energy products, with the exception of those grown on set-aside land. Under the scheme, crops that may be used in the production of biofuels include oilseed rape, cereals and hemp.

The Department is also working in conjunction with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the Carbon Trust, which commissioned a study of the energy use of agricultural and horticultural primary-producer businesses. The findings of that study were presented at a renewables open day at CAFRE's Loughry campus in August 2007. To facilitate improvements in energy efficiency, CAFRE is designing

a series of contextualised energy-efficiency training programmes, with delivery commencing early in 2008.

Local Agricultural Produce

5. Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to promote the purchase of local agricultural produce in Northern Ireland. (AQO 768/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I fully support the promotion and purchase of local food, and my Department has carried out a range of actions to underpin that. For example, my Department administers the regional food programme, which aims to promote quality regional food. Under that programme, assistance is available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets by encouraging better co-operation and communication between all sectors of the food industry. That programme complements the work that my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have been doing to implement the recommendations of the 'Fit for Market: Report of the Food Strategy Group: July 2004'.

I fully support the work of the newly formed Food Promotion Northern Ireland Limited (FPNI Ltd), an industry group representing a range of sectors that are taking forward and funding a domestic marketing campaign. FPNI Ltd aims to provide the highest levels of transparency for customers and consumers in identifying food and drink products. The funding made available under the processing and marketing grants will also provide better capacity.

The Livestock and Meat Commission is responsible for providing support to various sectors of the livestock industry, which is primarily achieved through strategic marketing initiatives that are complementary to the activities of the commercial operators in the sector — the Love Beef campaign was one of the most recent examples.

My Department is also contributing to the success of the renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFEAL) project, which aims to encourage local authentic food producers to develop new markets and thereby help to promote the use of local food as a firm foundation for public health, as well as ensuring that local food is brought to the attention of consumers.

I also intend to write to public-procurement bodies in the North, reminding them of the high animal welfare and productivity standards of locally produced food. I continue to stress the benefits of the local food supply to the major retailers.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her brief answer. I note that there were some heckles from the

vegetarian in the DUP — I do not want to name him, but we all know him as Mr Wells. *[Laughter.]*

Will the Minister clarify that all food products sourced and used by DARD are produced in Northern Ireland? I mean those products that can be produced here — I know that the pineapple season in Fermanagh and South Tyrone was hit by the wet summer. *[Laughter.]* Will the Minister assure the House that all products purchased by DARD are — as far possible — produced locally? She will remember that that was one of the Ulster Farmers' Union's five recommendations, and we do not want another one to slip off the list.

Ms Gildernew: Thank you, John. That supplementary question was nearly as long as my answer *[Laughter.]* Only the best for you, John. *[Laughter.]*

EU legislation prevents the procurement of food by public-sector bodies being based solely on local supply. Therefore, the challenge is to work with suppliers to help them to compete more successfully. DARD staff continue to provide technical support and advice to individual farmers or processors, producer groups or co-operatives, large and small, to help them to engage in public-sector contracts.

I have approved a new processing and marketing scheme under the rural development programme. Staff from the Loughrey campus of CAFRE have supported the central procurement directorate by providing advice on the specifications for public-food contracts. In addition, they have had an input into the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Fit for Future initiative, which aims to improve the nutritional quality of food in hospitals.

The short answer to the Member's question is yes; I am doing all that I can to ensure that all Departments — particularly those with the big spending power, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — engage in widespread public procurement wherever possible. I have written to the Health Minister and the Education Minister to encourage them to do that. My Department wants to see local produce on the menu, whether it is in Departments, Civil Service buildings, our hospitals or our schools. As the Member stated, that is one of the UFU's five recommendations, and I assure him that it has not slipped off the list.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister give the House an update on her efforts to promote Northern Ireland produce in mainland Europe?

Ms Gildernew: There are fairly strict Government rules about what can be done. However, I recently attended the Anuga trade fair for food and beverages in Cologne in support of the local red meat industry, and our local meat-processing companies used that fair to meet current overseas customers and many potential importers. It was important to attend that fair in order to send the clear message to international buyers that

our food and produce are high quality and that we are ready for business and to promote our produce on the European and world stage.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister provide additional detail on the RAFAEL project and the impact that it may have had on the agrifood sector west of the Bann?

Ms Gildernew: The RAFAEL project is funded by INTERREG III and is aimed at encouraging local authentic food producers to develop new markets. The main focus of our project, which was centred in the west, is to encourage and support local food producers and processors to develop and compete successfully for business in the public sector, particularly in hospitals and schools. Figures from Age Concern show that many people are suffering from malnutrition before they go into hospital, so it is important that the food that they receive in hospital is of the highest quality in order to help them through their convalescence. In that respect, the lack of food miles in those products — as well as the support that the RAFAEL project provided to the local food industry — is important, and I want it to be rolled out across the Six Counties.

Electronic Identification: Cattle

6. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will provide an update on progress on the electronic identification system for cattle. (AQO 755/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development provides technical input and advice to an industry-led working group on cattle electronic identification, which aims to have a voluntary electronic identification system in place on farms, cattle markets and meat plants during 2008. The system will work in parallel with existing statutory provisions and is expected to introduce efficiencies in the recording of animal details in those locations. It may also improve the effectiveness of the system of cattle identification, registration and movement by reducing the scope for human error in recording and transcribing information.

Mr Armstrong: Can the Minister provide the House with an estimate of the financial cost to the agriculture industry of the establishment and running of an electronic identification system for cattle?

Ms Gildernew: Electronic tags are between 60p and £1 more expensive than sheep or cattle tags, but it is anticipated that the price differential will decrease — perhaps to under 50p for a pair of cattle tags — when large volumes begin to be used. The benefits of fewer reading errors and mistakes when entering existing tag details into a computer — along with the ease of recording animals during inspections or tests, or at markets or abattoirs — will greatly outweigh any slight additional cost to the farmer.

Red Meat Task Force

7. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her assessment is of the response required to the report of the red meat task force. (AQO 797/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. The task force report clearly shows the serious challenges facing the red-meat sector and provides a clear view on the choices that have to be made by each farmer. DARD will play its part, but it is an issue for all stakeholders. Everyone involved has a pivotal role to play, and everyone must move forward in partnership to secure the future sustainability of our red-meat sector and wider rural communities. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will continue to support those who want to remain in the industry, and I will ensure that Government resources are focused and targeted on viable production options. We will help farmers who want to diversify or leave the industry and provide them with a range of reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

My Department will continue to play an active role in the work of the task force in developing more constructive relationships in the supply chain, and I will continue to engage fully with all parts of that chain. The continuation of the task force's work is vital in developing a cohesive plan for the future sustainability of our industry.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member may ask a brief supplementary question.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What specific measures are being taken to respond to the report?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for a brief response.

Ms Gildernew: That will certainly be difficult, given the amount of detail that I have in my file.

My Department will help everyone who wants to stay in the industry and will encourage involvement in benchmarking initiatives. I will ensure that Government resources are focused and targeted on viable production options. The task force report identifies models of production that could form the basis of sustainable production. We will work closely with the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) to devise a blueprint on one of those models — that is, producing beef from the dairy herd. We will also look at running a pilot scheme on that model, as it is likely to offer the best chance of providing a return to farmers.

There is a lot of detail, given the nature of the supplementary question, and I will provide the Member with further information in writing.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Culture, Arts and Leisure Projects

1. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to develop specific funding packages for culture, arts and leisure projects in areas of high social need. (AQO 734/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, through its non-departmental public bodies, is involved in a range of projects aimed at areas of high social need. Several projects are currently managed by Sport Northern Ireland in areas of special social need, including the Sport in Our Community programme and the Building Sport programme. Those funding streams represent a total investment of approximately £6.5 million in revenue in areas of high social need for the period 2005-10.

The 2012 Olympics present a wide range of opportunities for sporting developments across the Northern Ireland community, and those are captured in the strategic intention of the document, 'The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2007-2017', which I published recently for consultation. The strategy proposes a series of high-level targets and interventions aimed at increasing participation in sport and physical recreation in areas of high social need. The Department has provided funding of £500,000 per annum in 2006-07 and 2007-08 for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Re-imaging Communities programme. The main aim of the programme is to improve the physical environment of our communities through the replacement of paramilitary murals and other divisive symbols.

Although the programme is open to all communities in Northern Ireland, some of the projects have been funded in areas of high social need. Some examples of projects that have been funded in areas of high social need include the Rathcoole Residents Association, which was awarded £8,910 to replace one of the notorious murals in the Newtownabbey area. The community is keen to see the area represented in a new, more positive way.

The Greater Shankill Community Council has been awarded £30,890 for a community garden in the Black Mountain Grove. Paramilitary murals will be removed as part of that project, aiding good community relations.

The Upper Springfield Development Trust has been awarded £8,950 for the base alley mural. The base alley is a busy meeting place for young people, and the project aims to remove offensive graffiti and turn the alley into an art feature.

In addition, in the arts sector there are projects such as STart UP, which is specifically aimed at communities that have not previously received funding of any kind

from the Arts Council. The STart UP project is aimed at strengthening arts activity in the community and at making a real difference to groups that have not previously engaged in the arts.

The policy framework document 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' recommends a public library service to develop innovative measures targeted at disadvantaged communities, and 10% of library resources are skewed towards such areas and their needs. My Department has encouraged the service to participate fully in cross-departmental initiatives such as neighbourhood renewal.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister agree that programmes and initiatives such as the midnight soccer leagues, which took place in different areas of Belfast and in the Lisburn area, benefit the social well-being and health of those areas? He said that there would be a cross-departmental approach, and that is important. Is the Minister willing to look at pilot schemes to reduce anti-social behaviour in areas of high social need, as that would enhance the health and social well-being of many of the citizens of those areas?

Mr Poots: Midnight soccer has been a useful tool in reaching out to younger people in the community. It has helped to reduce antisocial behaviour in some areas, and the PSNI have been closely involved in its delivery. Part of the sports strategy is to identify funding streams to provide more coaches. That may be one way of ensuring that midnight soccer plays a greater role.

Ms Lo: Given that the proposed £4.25 million increase in arts funding is not enough to cover the shortfall caused by the raid on lottery money, and that Northern Ireland's per capita spend on the arts is only 51% of that in Scotland and 49% of that in the Republic, how does the Minister propose to deliver the goods to match his fine rhetoric?

Mr Poots: In the first place, the Member should get her figures right. Over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, the spending increase will be £6.75 million, which will more than outweigh the amount of money that will be lost as a consequence of the lottery reduction. Obviously, we need more money for the arts, and we will consider how to deliver further efficiency savings to fund the arts directly. Furthermore, I aim to raise greater arts contributions from the private sector and local government. That funding issue is not exclusive to central Government. If it were, we would fail.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's response on initiatives such as midnight football, and I compliment the PSNI on its work with communities.

Will the Minister give an undertaking to meet the Ulster-Scots Agency to explore projects that might

develop the cultural and artistic talents of young people in areas of social deprivation and high social need?

Mr Poots: I have met the Ulster-Scots Agency on a number of occasions, and to progress the wider community's interests, I will continue to meet with all the relevant people that my Department serves. Obviously, if we had more funding, we could deliver more. Perhaps, the Member who said that 48% of the overall Budget for one Department was not enough might consider giving more money to my Department in order to keep more people out of hospitals by engaging in sport and the arts, which are beneficial for people's mental health.

Irish-language Legislation

2. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain why there was no direct communication between himself and the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure about his statement on the Irish-language legislation consultation process prior to 16 October 2007. (AQO 784/08)

10. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain why there was no formal communication with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure prior to his statement on the Irish-language legislation consultation process. (AQO 783/08)

Mr Poots: I will take questions 2 and 10 together. Prior to the 16 October plenary session, I provided all Members and, specifically, members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure with copies of my statement. Furthermore, my statement took on board the views of those groups and individuals — including those of the Committee — who responded to the consultation on the proposed Irish language Act. Interestingly, the Committee's written response failed to show consensus on that issue, and Members should note that.

Mr Brolly: Will the Minister give an undertaking that, in the future, he will properly consult with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee about key policy statements that emanate from his Department? Does he regard his failure, prior to his Irish language Act announcement, to meet the Chairman of the Committee to have been a discourtesy to the Committee and its Chairman?

Mr Poots: On that occasion, the Minister observed all the relevant protocols, gave the requisite notice to both the Assembly and the Committee, and, prior to his statement, based his conclusions on the Committee's written responses.

Mr F McCann: Given his responsibility to the Committee, does the Minister understand the protocols? Considering the way in which he acted on that occasion,

does he agree that members of the Committee felt insulted and undermined by his behaviour?

Mr Poots: In the absence of the Member's identification of any protocols that have been broken, I take it that, perhaps, I understand the protocols better than he does.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister agree that, given the serious financial constraints on his Department, had the Irish language Act proceeded, it would have had a detrimental impact on other areas, such as the arts, sport and culture?

Mr Poots: On Thursday night, I was advised by a member of the Dáil Éireann that I should go ahead with the Irish language Act and that I should find the money in my Department to do so. Therefore, I look forward to Members identifying which aspects of sport, the arts or culture do not need money, because everyone seems to think that they all require more money. I cannot manufacture money, so I must use it wisely. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Simpson: Does the Minister agree that, given that responsibility for the Irish language is a devolved matter, and given the absence in the Westminster legislation of any requirement on him to bring forward an Irish language Act, Mr Brolly's question and Sinn Féin's whole stance on the issue are more about covering their own backs than about any genuine concern for the Irish language?

Mr Poots: I do not know whether it would be appropriate for me to comment on Sinn Féin's negotiations at St Andrews and what it got included in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, which established this Assembly and Administration and the terms that govern them. The absence of any cover on Irish-language legislation is pretty glaring at this point.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the arrangements that are in place in relation to responsibility for personnel issues in the Fisheries Conservancy Board, in the absence of a deputy chief executive. (AQO 732/08)

Mr Poots: Personnel management in the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) is the responsibility of the support manager, who is a member of the senior management team, reporting to the chief executive. The responsibility of the deputy chief executive for personnel issues is limited to those issues implicit in his role as line manager of the FCB field staff.

In his absence, the direction of the field staff is being undertaken by the chief executive and the support

manager. Overall organisational arrangements in relation to responsibilities for personnel issues in the FCB are, therefore, unaffected by the absence of the deputy chief executive.

Mr McNarry: I am indebted to the Minister for his reply. However, I am sure that the issue is being raised as a direct result of absenteeism.

Does the Minister agree that equipment, particularly boats, is being neglected, and, therefore, will he carry out an inventory to identify whether all boats owned by the FCB can be accounted for? Can he tell the House why one boat has been left for safekeeping on someone else's property, because the board could not find a suitable place in which to keep it?

Mr Poots: The FCB's auditors are carrying out an audit of the board's assets, including boats, and my Department will assess the condition of equipment and whether it needs to be upgraded when that audit is complete.

I will ask officials whether any boats are not being kept on FCB property and, if so, why that should be the case. I will respond to the Member in due course when I have the relevant information.

Irish-language Legislation

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain how he will gain the confidence of all sections of the community, in relation to his decision not to introduce Irish-language legislation, given that 65% of responses to the consultation process were in favour of the introduction of such legislation.

(AQO 787/08)

Mr Poots: In my statement to the House on 16 October, I acknowledged that there are those in the Northern Ireland community who have a close affinity with the Irish language and have legitimate aspirations to secure official recognition and protection for it. I also stated that it was my assessment that the legislative approach for the protection and development of the Irish language was a disproportionately costly route, and I outlined my reasons in that regard.

I continue to hold the view that the duty on the Executive to adopt a strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language offers a more cost-effective and proportionate approach to achieving tangible outcomes for the provision of public services through the medium of Irish.

3.45 pm

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister highlighted the duty to enhance and promote the Irish language. Following the Minister's announcement that his Department will not fund an Irish language Act, does he have any plans to meet representatives of the

Irish-language community so that this issue can be taken forward?

Mr Poots: Subsequent to the announcement that I made, I met my counterpart from the Irish Republic, Mr Ó Cuív, at the North/South Ministerial Council language sectoral meeting; representatives of Foras na Gaeilge were also present. I will continue to have discussions with Foras na Gaeilge as the lead Irish-language body. I will also take opportunities to speak to groups such as Pobal, and any others who may seek meetings with me on the matter.

Although most respondents to the consultation were in favour of an Irish language Act, the legislation that flowed from the Belfast Agreement and, subsequently, the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, requires cross-community support for novel or contentious issues. This issue could certainly be described as contentious. Therefore cross-community support to implement an Irish language Act is required.

The Member said that an Irish language Act should proceed because a majority of respondents to the consultation exercise supported such an Act, and she and her party leader may want to press the issue. If they want majority rule in Northern Ireland, the Members on these Benches will be happy to oblige.

Mr Shannon: Subsequent to his statement on an Irish language Act, has the Minister had any correspondence from the Human Rights Commissioner?

Mr Poots: I have had no correspondence from the Human Rights Commissioner subsequent to my statement. I am aware of speculation that correspondence was sent to the Secretary of State; however, it has not been forwarded to me. If the Human Rights Commissioner wants to do things in order, it would be right and proper that she communicate with me on the issue.

Mr Speaker: Question No 5 has been withdrawn.

National Stadium

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether a business plan has been prepared for the national stadium at the Maze site.

(AQO 750/08)

13. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the proposed national stadium.

(AQO 764/08)

Mr Poots: I will take questions No 6 and 13 together. My Department, in conjunction with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), has been actively working to develop a modern, operationally viable, fit-for-purpose stadium that will provide suitable flexibilities to be used by the three main ball sports in Northern Ireland.

The three sports — football, Gaelic games and rugby — have agreed in principle to the provision of such a stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site, and are fully co-operating with the Department and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in progressing the main issues associated with its development. That includes the production, by independent consultants, of a robust business plan against which the project can move forward.

A draft of that business plan has already been issued to the three sports' governing bodies for their consideration. The Irish Football Association has formally responded positively, and similar positive responses are expected shortly from the governing bodies of the other two sports.

The consultants will finalise the business plan once all comments have been received. That, together with the work of the design team, will enable an outline business case to be finalised, which will be subject to normal scrutiny and approval procedures. Following that action, I will be in a position to make a recommendation to the Executive.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Cree for a supplementary question.

Mr Cree: My supplementary question has been answered in the Minister's response.

Mr McCarthy: What conclusions should the Assembly draw from the absence of any direct reference to the sports stadium in the draft investment strategy, as outlined by the Minister last week?

Mr Poots: If the Member scrutinises all the documents that were released on that day, he will see, in the Budget papers, that the requisite funding has been set aside for the sports stadium.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister confirm whether the Department is still confident that the stadium project is on schedule for completion in 2010? That would enable some of the Olympic Games' football matches to be played there.

Mr Poots: I confirm that the project will be delivered on schedule. More important than the Olympic Games, however, are the current requirements of association football, in respect of the safety report on Windsor Park, continuing FIFA inspections, and our responsibility to provide a stadium that is fit for international football to ensure that Northern Ireland home matches are not played outside the Province.

Mr Campbell: The Minister is aware of the emerging consensus against a stadium that would incorporate controversial elements of the Maze site. Will he take account of those views when he presents his proposal to the Executive?

Mr Poots: I will. Any proposal that includes the development of a shrine — or anything akin to a shrine

— is unacceptable. Development at that site must be inclusive, constructive, positive and capable of buy-in by all sections of the community.

BBC Coverage

7. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with BBC Northern Ireland about the coverage and programming of the commemorative events of 12 July, 12 August and Black Saturday in 2008. (AQO 728/08)

Mr Poots: I have held discussions with BBC Northern Ireland and the Loyal Orders on a wide range of issues, including cultural programming. The particular matter that the Member mentioned has not been raised.

Mr Burnside: If the matter has not been raised, will the Minister give a commitment to the House that he will raise it with the BBC? I also include UTV in that; however, the BBC is a public broadcasting corporation, financed by taxpayers' money. It is very important that our British Protestant cultural heritage and way of life be promoted in commemoration of those historic events.

There is much speculation that Her Majesty the Queen might visit Ireland next year and that she might visit Dublin. Might she come north of the border during one of our great loyalist, royalist, traditional celebrations?

Mr Poots: I am happy to raise those issues with the BBC. Other Members can do likewise; such issues do not have to be raised through me. I am unaware that any Member has raised that particular issue with the BBC. If I were to raise it, it would be better if I had support from other Members.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that my question is superfluous. Will the Minister ask the BBC that all major cultural events are given equal airtime? Could he possibly fit in the Pope as well, if he is coming? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Poots: Unusually for Mr Dallat, he is correct: his question is superfluous. I know of no cultural event in Northern Ireland other than the Twelfth that attracts 100,000 people every year.

Lord Morrow: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said. Does he agree that the three dates referred to — 12 July, 12 August and Black Saturday — probably draw the biggest crowds of all Northern Ireland's annual events? Does the Minister recognise the importance of that? Will he reassure the House that he will take up that matter with the BBC, bearing in mind that there is a perception among the unionist and Protestant community that the BBC does not always give fair coverage to those events?

Mr Poots: I recognise the importance of those events because the community recognises the importance of them. That is demonstrated by the numbers that attend

those events. Some have set out to denigrate that aspect of our culture, and that is unfortunate.

As I indicated in my response to the initial question, I have had, and will continue to have, meetings with the Loyal Orders. There is a great opportunity to introduce more tourists to Northern Ireland as a consequence of the marching season, and much can be done to add to the existing colour, music and variety of the event. If we build upon that, much can be done that will be positive for Northern Ireland and its community.

Mr Speaker: The Member who is due to ask question 8 is not in his place.

Proposed Libraries Authority

9. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline what arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the proposed library authority will have a member, or members, of staff with expertise in sourcing external funding. (AQO 740/08)

Mr Poots: External funding is additional to public funding and can be valuable in providing targeted provision in particular areas or for pilot projects. Such funding forges useful partnerships that are for the benefit of the funding provider, the library service, and most importantly library customers. A number of existing library staff already have experience in successfully sourcing external funding and will employ that expertise on their transfer to the library authority.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell the House about the arrangements that will be put in place to ensure that the proposed library authority will have a member, or members of staff, with the expertise to source external funding?

Mr Poots: Existing library staff already have a degree of knowledge about sourcing external funding. We have been successful in obtaining £300,453 from the EU under the Special EU Programmes Body for the inspiring readers project. In addition, the cross-border mobile library will receive £231,539. For the Bookstart project, Peace III funding has been used to cover salary and subsistence costs for an early-years support worker until June 2008. In the Belfast Central Library, the European information point, which is one of only two in Northern Ireland, has received European funding for staff training costs, including staff time and materials.

As far as lottery funding is concerned, we have received £202,000 for information and communication technologies from 2001-04, and the electronic libraries project received £4.5 million. We have also received funding from the British Council, Belfast City Council, Starbucks, W H Smith, Open College Network Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the victims' strategy implementation fund. Therefore, there is a history of success in

sourcing external funding, and the relevant expertise will remain part of the Library Service.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister recognise the sterling work carried out over many years by local councillors on the library committees of the five education and library boards to ensure that local services reflect local needs? Will he ensure that the proposed centralised library authority will have councillor representation in its membership to ensure that the vital reflection of public opinion is retained on that body?

Mr Poots: That issue has been discussed with the Committee for Culture, Arts, and Leisure and it is something of which I am very cognisant. I trust that it will be reflected in the final legislation.

Mr Speaker: I must bring Question Time to a halt as the remaining Members on the list to ask questions are not in the House.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Co-ownership and Shared Equity

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to at least 10% of the overall housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options available to first-time homebuyers. — [Mr Gardiner.]

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The main issue with any house purchasing scheme is affordability to the buyer. One third of younger working households cannot afford to buy. It is possible that many people who rent privately would take advantage of the co-ownership scheme to get on to the property ladder. A number of independent research projects have confirmed the usefulness of co-ownership and its effectiveness as a way of assisting people to buy affordable homes. The scheme can be user-friendly and does focus on the needs of aspiring local homebuyers.

The private-rental sector plays an important role in meeting housing needs. It has been recommended that consideration be given to the merits of assessing all applicants for co-ownership under the common selection scheme in order to ensure that it tackles need and has an impact on waiting lists.

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

4.00 pm

The private-rental sector has grown steadily during the past 10 years. There are now 49,000 privately rented dwellings. That sector plays an important role in meeting housing needs, particularly in areas where there is high demand for social housing. Households have no choice but to turn to the private-rental sector because there is little or no public housing available in areas such as my constituency. At present, there are approximately 37,000 people on the waiting list for public housing. It seems sensible that consideration be given to the merits of assessing all applicants for co-ownership under the common selection scheme in order to ensure that it deals with need and waiting lists.

In recent years, there has been concern over the erratic and uncertain level of funding that is provided for co-ownership. Co-Ownership Housing contributes to the social housing budget. A realistic and sustained level of funding is required to ensure that the scheme continues to develop. However, funding has continued to decrease from £12.9 million to £7.9 million. Projected funding is just over £5 million. The steady decrease in funding means that there has been a decrease in the number of houses that are available.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a report in 2006, which recommended lowering the initial equity stake that eligible applicants can purchase, as was

mentioned earlier. Lowering the initial equity stake that eligible applicants can purchase in order to access the scheme would enable more households to participate. The initial equity stake currently stands at 40%, and could be reduced to a minimum of 25%. Entry to the scheme could be at any 5% interval between 25% and 75%. Those changes would encourage more people to participate in co-ownership.

Co-Ownership Housing must increase awareness of the scheme and encourage more people to participate. As someone who was involved in the advice sector for many years before becoming an MLA, I was struck by the lack of knowledge of co-ownership. The benefits of the scheme are not always recognised. Perhaps public perceptions need to be addressed and changed. The co-ownership scheme can certainly help to alleviate some of the housing problems that exist. Priority must be given to people who are on the social-housing waiting list. The lack of affordable social housing represents a huge crisis.

There is a caveat to the motion, insofar as the Semple Review panel has not yet reported; it is however, due to do so soon. This problem must be dealt with urgently and properly; not by rhetoric, but by positive action.

Mr Shannon: Mr Speaker, A'hm strangely fer this motion accause the reality bes at hit's no exaggeration tae alloo hoo monie fowk ir i a state o' hoosin crisis. I particular yin hes mich cympathy wi' thaim buyin hooses fer the furst tim.

The price o' hooses bes a bag worry fer clatters o' mae constituents acroass Strangford es A houl hit tae bae acroass Norlin Airlan'.

Waefully fer monie fowk the thoct o' ownin' the hame yin bides in hes cum tae bae a fadin' hope fer the price o' hooses aa the mannit maks ownin a hoose impossible.

This hes an' wul cairry oan haein a waefu' effect oan oor society an' hit's social an' economic progress. Action bes needed the noo tae address thon.

Monie noo face intae awffy hannlins in tryin' tae get a fit oan the furst rung o' the hoosin ladder by buyin thair furst hame.

It is no exaggeration to state that many people are facing a housing crisis. Therefore, I am strongly in favour of the motion, particularly because it empathises with the desperate plight of first-time buyers. Housing affordability is a concern for many of my constituents in Strangford and for people throughout the rest of Northern Ireland.

Sadly, for many, the aspiration of owning one's own home has become a fading hope. Current house prices mean that, for those people, homeownership is impossible. That has, and will continue to have, a devastating effect

on society and economic progress. Urgent action is required to address the problem.

Many people now face unprecedented difficulties in attempting to get their foot on the first rung of the housing ladder. I could provide many examples of that. I will cite the example of a young woman, a graduate and a professional who works in Newtownards. She has just got a 40-year mortgage for a small terraced house. Pain is etched on the faces of parents who come to my constituency office and tell me that their children have had to move considerable distances from Newtownards in order to be able to afford their own home. That is unsustainable in the long term.

One does not have to look too far to see the crisis in housing affordability. According to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors — and it should know — in April 2007, house prices rose faster in Northern Ireland than in any other region of the United Kingdom. For the first quarter of 2007, the average cost of a home in Northern Ireland stood at almost £216,000. In my constituency of Strangford, the figure is more than £10,000 in excess of that.

There was a change of 40·1% in the average cost of property in Northern Ireland in the past quarter and a change of 11·9% in the past year. Those may seem to be simply paper figures, but they are much more than that. It is salutary to note that the Council of Mortgage Lenders has noted a sharp slowdown in mortgage lending in the UK for September 2007 — a dip of 12%. We must acknowledge that that is a disaster for first-time buyers. We must address urgently the social, family and economic challenges that house prices present. Research indicates that the cost of housing has led to many couples delaying having a family — with all the implications that that has for our ageing population.

Affording a mortgage has led to many families having to rely on two incomes — just to get by — which has an impact on family life. If we do not take action now — and we must take action now — how many of the key workers in our society, such as nurses, will find it impossible to live, work and own their homes in their local areas? Many schemes, such as the Living over the Shop town centre initiative, can help. We need to allocate land specifically for social housing. Co-ownership is clearly part of the solution and must be part of long-term strategic housing planning. Co-ownership allows people to have a home without having to raise the entire mortgage. If a person can raise 50% of the mortgage, he or she can rent the remaining 50%. If the person's financial position improves, he or she can acquire more of the mortgage on the property — perhaps 75%. Eventually, he or she can gain total ownership of the property.

We need to expand the co-ownership scheme to alleviate housing stress. Evidence across the UK

indicates that it is increasingly difficult to access co-ownership and that there are lengthening waiting lists. We can all say amen to that. Affordable housing assists in building strong communities. Health, education and the core of family life improves with better social housing.

Across Members' constituencies, we all understand and appreciate the needs and aspirations of families in relation to housing. In supporting the motion, I seek to have a healthy, affordable, and — above all — sustainable property market that has the capacity to meet those identified needs. I support the motion.

Mr Kennedy: I apologise to the House because I failed, until now, to declare and register an interest in the motion, given that I have a married relative who is an employee of the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association Ltd. I now place that on the record.

The issue of affordability cannot be approached simply from the point of view of housing supply. At the heart of affordability lies the purchaser's ability to buy. That is the core issue that today's motion addresses. There is a need for more flexible financial instruments that would enable that to happen. Those adjustments could be put in place without the need for legislation in what is already an over-regulated market. We have only one vehicle for shared ownership in Northern Ireland — the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association Ltd. That compares with 101 shared-ownership housing associations across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Wales has 10 shared-ownership housing associations; the south-west of England has 15; the Midlands has 12; London and the south-east has 43; the north-east, with a population of 2·5 million, has eight; and the north-west has 12. Interestingly, in Scotland, where house-price rises are considerably slower than they are here, there is, just like here, only one shared-ownership association. The national average indicates that there is one housing association for every 500,000 people.

However, I do not believe that the answer lies in a greater number of agencies or housing associations offering shared ownership mortgages. Rather, the answer lies in widening the range of options that are available through shared ownership.

I make it clear that the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association deserves our praise for its work — it has done a very good job. A recent analysis by Professors McGreal, Berry and Adair on behalf of the Department for Social Development noted, and confirmed, the ability of the co-ownership scheme to bring an appreciable number of households into the owner-occupied sector over the past 25 years. That was achieved at a relatively low cost, and, indeed, the association has been a net contributor of funds to Government over the past 10 years.

A recent study concluded that the co-ownership scheme had been a highly cost-effective initiative for the public purse. However, we should be concerned about the first-time buyer, not just the public purse. The housing market is driven in part by population growth. Northern Ireland's population has grown by 75,000 in the past eight years, which, apart from the economic catch-up factor after the end of the so-called Troubles, is one of the main drivers of house prices here. It is a mistake to see Northern Ireland's house-price market as merely a subset of the national UK housing market.

Apart from all those factors, which may see Northern Ireland's housing market improving on national averages, one grim reality lies behind all affordability issues — the interest rate. That interest rate will make mortgages either possible or impossible for first-time buyers. Having said that, widening the equity spread that is taken by shared-ownership housing associations from 40%-75% to 25%-75% would have a considerable impact on affordability.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. He talked about the importance of young people getting on the property ladder. Does he also accept that in Northern Ireland there is a severe shortage of suitable housing for senior citizens, who also sometimes find that they are unable to afford mortgage payments? There is an opportunity to create a co-ownership scheme that is similar to those that operate in many parts of mainland GB for that area of the housing market in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I largely agree with the Member's point. It would be a far better financial option for young people — and, indeed, for older people — and particularly first-time buyers, to own a stake in the home that they live in, rather than simply pay rent. At least they would then have a part share in an appreciating asset. For such individuals, rent money is dead money.

Home ownership is therefore the dream to which people aspire, and we must help them to realise their aspirations in a property-owning and prosperous democracy. It must never become a case of them and us, with the public sector against the private sector. That is the road to nowhere. We, for our part, must ensure that this Assembly provides the mechanism through which that can happen. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: Much has been said that does not bear repetition at this point, so I will make a few general points. Given the house-price hyperinflation, as it were, of the past two or more years, everyone in the House recognises that it is clear that we have an affordability crisis.

4.15 pm

However, in the margins at least, we have a mechanism for dealing with that, which is co-ownership. It is clear

that the model and the organisation that we have are admired by others outside this jurisdiction. Some years ago, when at the University of Ulster, I had the benefit of being a student of Alan Murie, who is an expert on housing. In 'A Home of My Own', the report of the Government's low-cost ownership task force, he remarked that Northern Ireland's co-ownership scheme was a real success. He said that:

"The problems with shared ownership in England are partly to do with the diversity of providers"

— which Mr Kennedy referred to —

"and the complexity with detailed differences between different providers. In this sense again Northern Ireland has a great advantage in having a single co-ownership scheme which is tried and tested and presents no problems to lenders and others. It also appears to have been successfully targeted and can be used to achieve mobility within the social rented sector."

That is praise indeed. In our current difficulties it is a useful tool. Furthermore, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2003-04 also praised the co-ownership scheme and the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association. It is important to remember, however, that it warned the then direct rule Government thus:

"We are concerned at the erratic and uncertain level of funding provided for co-ownership over recent years. In view of its success, and given the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association's contention that it is a net contributor to the social housing budget, we find this approach difficult to understand. We recommend that a realistic and sustained level of funding is provided to ensure that the co-ownership scheme can continue to develop."

I hope that the Minister for Social Development will take that point on board, as it is important that the co-ownership scheme be properly funded. Reserves can be used, but Government must, nonetheless, play their part in supporting co-ownership.

The Semple Report on affordable housing made several recommendations for the improvement of the co-ownership sector. First, the abolition of current property value limits and a move to an eligibility system, which is an important change in the way that the scheme should develop; secondly, a rolling property portfolio should be introduced, using a proportion of resources to provide for co-ownership; and a reduction in rents charged on equity retained by co-ownership to 2%. That is important, because it will ease the burden on people in that sector. Other Members mentioned the reduction in the initial equity stake from 40% to a minimum of 25%, and entry levels increasing by 5% thereafter on a "staircasing" structure. The Semple Report recommended the abolition of stamp duty or a waiver of land tax. I hope that the Minister for Social Development can influence the Chancellor of the Exchequer in that regard. Sir John Semple also recommended the streamlining of application processes and renewed marketing campaigns with lenders; in other words, engagement with the private

sector. That will provide an imaginative and innovative way of dealing with the co-ownership sector.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion because it furthers the debate on the difficulties that people face in trying to access affordable housing.

However, that is not what all of the motion is about. Sinn Féin has some difficulties with the 10% figure. We have all raised the issue of affordability and how difficult it is, particularly for young people, to get on the first rung of the ladder. According to Advice NI, one young person commented that the property ladder does not even have a first rung. Everyone accepts that there are difficulties.

As a member of the Committee for Social Development, and as a Member of the House, I know that Minister Ritchie has made housing a priority. She has been unequivocal about that, and that has been welcome. Co-ownership is one option on the route to accessibility. However, the figure of 10% could be problematic. Sinn Féin does not want the Assembly to impose that at this stage. The Committee for Social Development has plenty of opportunity to make the argument. In addition, there is an interdepartmental group, chaired by the Minister and advised by a panel of experts on such issues. Both groups use the Semple Report as their reference point.

I will quote from the Semple Report, which I read in research for the debate, as it is relevant to the figure of 10% that is referred to by the motion. How can the Assembly determine the housing market? It is difficult; changes are occurring. Mr Shannon and Mr Burns made the point, and Sinn Féin agrees, that the housing market is fluid. We are concerned that the target of 10% could be limiting, as we cannot predict the market. The Semple Report is the reference point for all the panels and groups that have been set up, and we should have confidence in those groups. On the housing market, the Semple Report states:

“The relationship between demand and supply for lower value private properties, applications for social housing and take up of the right to buy is complex and has a number of external drivers.”

I recommend that the Assembly have confidence in those groups and that, as my party colleagues Mr McCann and Mr Brady said, the Assembly should wait for the interdepartmental group, having been advised by the panel of experts, to report back. The Assembly would then be better informed.

The motion also refers to the expansion of co-ownership to 10% of the housing market. Sinn Féin is in favour of co-ownership per se, but, as the Semple Report points out, it is important that co-ownership be sustainable. All of those points are being taken into account, as I would hope that they would be, in the review. Sin é, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Sinn Féin will abstain on the motion, but we are in favour of its sentiments. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank every Member who contributed to the debate, and I hope to address all the issues that have been raised. However, if I cannot do that today, I am happy to write to Members about any outstanding matters.

I support the thrust of the motion, and having listened to and reflected on Members' contributions, the one recurrent theme was that there is insufficient affordable and social housing throughout Northern Ireland to meet the need and demand. I have no doubt that the draft Budget provides an inadequate capital resource for my Department over the next three years. However, I am exploring other options to raise private finance.

I hope that my ministerial colleagues and all Assembly Members will support my attempts to secure an adequate budget for the provision of social housing over the next three years. That is required to deal with the extremely difficult area of demand: the 36,000 people who are on social housing lists, many of whom are homeless. I want to set the record straight on that matter.

I have seen at first hand the problems that potential first-time buyers face when they try to get a foot on the housing ladder. I am determined to do all that I can to help those in greatest need. I am keen to act quickly to increase the supply of affordable housing, thereby offering real opportunities to potential first-time buyers who have recently been priced out of the market. I am fully committed to implementing those recommendations of Sir John Semple's report on affordable housing that will increase the supply of homes.

One of Sir John Semple's main recommendations on shared equity is to maintain co-ownership as the only shared ownership scheme in Northern Ireland. The clear benefit of a single scheme is that it is easier to understand and to deliver, and it enjoys considerable support, not least from many members of the expert panel that I established to advise on affordability.

I hope that Members will agree that the existing co-ownership scheme has been a success story over the past 29 years. The simple, flexible model, sponsored by my Department and operated by the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association, meets a range of housing needs. Since 1978, nearly 20,000 households have been helped onto the housing ladder, 16,000 of whom have progressed to full ownership of their homes.

As Members know, co-ownership is a transitional housing tenure scheme that offers first-time buyers a stake in their first home and an opportunity to buy more equity as their circumstances allow. The scheme aims to encourage buyers to progress to full purchase

of their homes, at which point the income generated is recycled to help other first-time buyers.

Property purchases are at a 10-year high, and activity this year is already treble that of 2006. Commitments have been made to purchase some 800 properties that will be occupied in 2007-08. The popularity of co-ownership is likely to continue for some time. I am committed to working with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to increase capacity, but make no mistake: finding the funding to meet the large rise in demand will be challenging. I need everyone's support to ensure that the provision of various types of social and affordable housing remains a number-one priority, which is a clear reflection of the extremely active housing market.

Although there are signs that the market has cooled in certain areas in the past few months, many first-time buyers are still unable to afford their first home. Some rent privately or extend the time that they live with parents. Others add to the growing waiting lists in social housing's rented sector. They represent what is known as the intermediate housing market, which describes potential first-time buyers who work and often pay rent, but are unable to buy a house at the lower end of the market. My Department aims to help that group by providing shared-equity solutions.

However, as acknowledged by several experts, including Sir John Semple, determining the size of the intermediate housing market and assessing where best to target assistance to meet the need and demand is no easy task.

Nevertheless, it is clear that action must be taken. I assure Members of my firm commitment to doing all that I can to give potential first-time buyers a foot on the housing ladder. My main focus in the short to medium term is to increase the supply of affordable housing and to improve the co-ownership scheme further, in order to ensure that potential first-time buyers who have been priced out of the market receive the necessary help.

4.30 pm

In the Semple Report, recommendations on improving the co-ownership scheme include removing the system of property-price limits and making the scheme easier to access, especially for those on lower incomes. I support the thrust of those proposals, and I am examining carefully their implications.

I am also committed to the introduction of developer contributions, as provided for in article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, as quickly as possible. That will require developers to provide a percentage of their private housing schemes for affordable housing, both social-rented and private equity-shared. I have been heartened by the support from my ministerial colleagues Arlene Foster and Conor Murphy and their departmental officials on the issue. I am meeting

Arlene Foster tomorrow to examine ways in which to speed up the introduction of developer contributions.

I am encouraged by the early signs that affordable housing has been provided on new developments. There is a good example of that in Derry where ILEX, the urban regeneration company, is setting aside a large number of units on the Ebrington site for private affordable housing.

I continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to explore other avenues to increase supply. I saw the benefits of partnership between the Co-Ownership Housing Association and Habitat for Humanity when I visited the Model Farm project in Downpatrick on 15 June and on 20 October. Such projects will play an important role in delivering community self-build houses for lower-income households. Habitat for Humanity has other schemes in Northern Ireland. I am encouraging the Co-Ownership Housing Association to develop proposals for other pilots and initiatives, including closer working relationships with other housing associations and private-sector developers.

Funding is always an issue, and we must find new and innovative ways in which to lever more private finance into the housing arena. To that end, I am working with Baroness Ford, the chairperson of English Partnerships, to identify opportunities and to learn from experiences elsewhere. My officials have been in discussions with the Council of Mortgage Lenders, and I will host a seminar in Belfast on 28 November on making best use of private finance. The Council of Mortgage Lenders is bringing across eight members of financial institutions that are not currently involved in lending to affordable housing schemes in Northern Ireland. All housing associations, including the Co-Ownership Housing Association, the Housing Executive and other key stakeholders, such as the Northern Ireland Housing Council and the Semple panel of experts, have been invited. I look forward to an interesting and, I hope, fruitful day.

I acknowledge the recent success of Fold, Clanmil and BIH housing associations, who together recently negotiated a good deal with Barclays Bank for their borrowing for the next three years. That is a great example of housing associations working together to procure services for the benefit of a group. It augurs well for the introduction of my Department's procurement strategy, which requires all housing associations to come together in groups to negotiate better services and management for the whole movement.

Mr Gardiner referred to changes in the level of equity to be purchased initially. The Semple Report recommended changes to the co-ownership scheme, including a lower level of equity to be purchased. I am considering those recommendations carefully. Michelle McIlveen asked why there are lower price limits in some

district councils. Again, that is based on market value in given areas. Land and Property Services provides that data.

Fra McCann referred to different schemes to be introduced, and I clearly understand the benefits of one scheme covered in his speech. However, the panel of experts has set up a subgroup to look at the whole co-ownership scheme and whether it needs to be amended to meet different situations. The panel will report back to me before Christmas, and I will reflect on all the recommendations. I assure everyone that I have not just set those committees up for the sake of it. I set them up with a purpose in mind: to provide me with the best possible advice on the way forward.

Anna Lo raised the issue of whether the co-ownership scheme should target areas where the affordability problem is greatest for first-time buyers. There is some evidence to suggest that certain areas suffer greater affordability problems than others. As I work with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to improve the current scheme, I will ask it to develop proposals to market and target the scheme to address that issue.

Ms Lo also asked whether the current price limits would be increased or abolished. The abolition of price limits for the co-ownership scheme is one of the recommendations in the Semple Report, and that will be considered along with other changes to the scheme recommended by the affordability review.

Jonathan Craig referred to future funding and the whole area of the comprehensive spending review. I agreed the Budget on the understanding that it was a draft Budget for consultation, with the final allocations to be agreed by the Executive in early January 2008. I assure the Assembly that I will be pushing for a greater level of funding than that proposed in the draft Budget to meet the important housing challenges that I face, and which I have already outlined.

I do not face the housing challenge on my own; the Executive, the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland also face it, particularly the many young people who have experienced terrible difficulties in accessing the first rung on the property ladder. People experience many other difficulties, such as homelessness and living in houses that do not meet the decent-house standard. We must be able to continually address those issues, and I will be seeking the support of everyone in order to do that, although funding will always be a challenge.

Mickey Brady raised the need to assess all applicants for co-ownership under the common selection scheme, which is the key to the social-housing waiting list and the basis and technique used to allocate houses in the social-rented sector. Shared ownership is aimed at the intermediate housing market, which includes some households on the social-housing waiting list. The

common selection scheme is not an appropriate tool to determine access to co-ownership.

Danny Kennedy raised the issue of whether other registered housing associations are interested in operating co-ownership schemes, and there are a number of registered housing associations that might be able to do that. However, in Northern Ireland, lenders and estate agents prefer to work with one organisation. A few registered housing associations are currently working with the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to provide for affordable housing.

My friend Mr Maginness raised issues and some research that was pointed up by various organisations, including a former lecturer of his at the University of Ulster. Another was raised by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee when it undertook an inquiry into housing in Northern Ireland. I assure Mr Maginness that my officials and I will look into those particular matters, and I will return to him with my findings.

Finally, Claire McGill asked what 10% of the housing market represents. That is difficult to know: 10% of overall new building; 10% of the social-housing development programme; 10% of houses for sale at any time? We could be talking about large numbers, and we need to take that into account.

With the support of my Executive colleagues and of this Assembly, I am confident that we can address affordability problems and increase support for first-time home buyers. Lest we forget, that is the challenge facing the Executive, the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Ulster Unionist Party for proposing the motion, and I also thank the Minister for making the winding-up speech on my behalf — it was very good of her.

The motion is designed to address the issue of affordability. Until now, most of the focus in the debate on house prices has been on the actual price of the homes, the availability of land for housing, the possibility of up to 20% of new buildings being reserved for affordable housing, and public investment in social housing. The consequent debate has been somewhat unbalanced, given that it has not addressed the fundamental question of how those who are seeking to get their feet on the first rung of the ladder — if it exists — can finance that undertaking. The twin pillars of the motion seek to address that problem. The first pillar is a call to end buy-to-let mortgages, and the second seeks an extension to the lower level of equity that an individual must find to obtain a co-ownership or shared-ownership mortgage.

On 5 June, the Council of Mortgage Lenders revealed that the number of first-time buyers had fallen sharply from 18,300 in 2001 to roughly 8,000 in 2006, which is the lowest level in 26 years. The numbers of people getting on the property ladder here fell from 700 in

August 2006 to just 400 for the same period this year. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive stated that the number of new home buyers in the Province has fallen considerably in recent years, with first-time buyers now accounting for less than 30% of the overall market. Between 2000 and 2005, there was a 24% decline in the number of first-time buyers in Northern Ireland, compared to a fall of just 7% in the UK as a whole. First-time buyers make up 31% of the total housing market in Northern Ireland, compared to 36% in GB. Northern Ireland has also witnessed a strong growth in house-price inflation in recent years. It rose from 22% in 2005 to 30% by mid-2006, which is higher than any other region in the UK.

Clearly, there is an acute problem in the Province that will have to be addressed through extraordinary measures. The Council of Mortgage Lenders proposed a wider shared-equity scheme, which is a suggestion that I first made in 2005. In October 2007, I again suggested an extension to the level of co-ownership from the present 4% to about 10%. I also suggested that more flexible shared-equity options should be offered, such as a 25% to 75% option. That would make homes more affordable for more people.

In his report on the review into affordable housing, Sir John Semple stated that there is scope for the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to expand its business and that since its inception in 1978, the association has helped some 19,000 people to enjoy home ownership. Sir John also drew attention to the limits of the scheme, which largely relate to the rise in house prices. He also pointed out that the only action that the Department for Social Development took to address the problem was to raise the qualifying house-price limits for NICHA co-ownership loans to reflect more accurately market conditions by area. Nothing had been done to address the range of shared-equity options that was available to the home buyer. On 2 July 2007, I raised the matter in a supplementary question to the Minister, Margaret Ritchie, and I suggested that a wider range of equity options should be available than exists under the present co-ownership scheme. In reply, she said that she would consider that matter as part of the implementation of the affordability review.

Other countries have developed strategies for dealing with the problems that first-time buyers face. I could refer to strategies in Canada, but, for obvious reasons, I will not refer to those in America. The Assembly must develop strategies that are appropriate to our situation, and it should address causes and circumstances that are particular to us. That is why the twin-track approach is a good idea. It will end the false competition that was introduced into the system by buy-to-let mortgages, and it will widen financing options for first-time buyers in order that they can afford to get at least some equity

on their home. At present, many prospective homeowners are forced to stay in the rental trap, where their money is essentially dead because it earns them no return and never becomes an investment.

I will review those contributions that the Minister has left untouched for me.

In a nutshell, the debate is about need — not greed — in the housing market. The current need has been mentioned by many Members, and I will not go over those issues again, but I remind Sinn Féin Members that the motion calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to “at least 10%” of the overall housing market. We had to decide on a figure, and 10% is the figure that we looked at. It is not set in stone.

4.45 pm

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr K Robinson: No, I will not give way at this time, if the Member does not mind.

We are trying to achieve a consensus to move the issue forward. I am encouraged by what the Minister said in her summary: she is working with the parties. I appeal to Sinn Féin to find a way to move forward with us on this issue. I know that it has decided to abstain from voting, but from what I heard today, I believe that all Members are, more or less, on the same wavelength.

Sam Gardiner mentioned buy-to-let mortgages and how they have contributed to pushing up the property prices. That core issue must be addressed.

Michelle McIlveen talked about the first-time buyer being disadvantaged, and she mentioned the difficulties faced by householders here when one considers the differences in pay between here and Great Britain. She said that in many cases one owner is working to pay off the mortgage, but I suggest that two owners are working to pay it off.

Fra McCann pointed out Sinn Féin's difficulties with the motion, and he referred to article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. The Minister mentioned article 40 in her contribution.

Tommy Burns referred to the housing crisis. I tried not to use that language in my speech, but I know exactly what he means. There is a housing crisis, and we all recognise that.

Anna Lo talked about house prices in her South Belfast constituency in particular, where there are extreme pressures put on some of the housing because it is perceived as being an affluent area of the city. She mentioned the need for more investment in the co-ownership schemes.

Jonathan Craig said that the debate on co-ownership is increasingly relevant, and he referred to the positive impact on the social housing lists that the co-ownership schemes could achieve.

Mickey Brady stated that there are 49,000 people living in private-rented social-sector housing, because insufficient numbers of public housing have been built, and even many of those that have been built are no longer available for public letting.

Jim Shannon talked about clatters of his constituents having worries about the housing situation, and he said that the housing crisis is having a devastating affect on society. He also highlighted the fact that the crisis is breaking up social cohesion, because people have to move a considerable distance out of their area to find an affordable house. Therefore the support mechanisms that they would give in other social settings are also being broken up.

Danny Kennedy talked about widening the options for co-ownership, and he complimented the association in Northern Ireland on being a cost-effective mechanism for the Government and first-time buyers.

Tom Elliott referred to the plight of our senior citizens — compared to those in other parts of the United Kingdom — and their being unable to get access to co-ownership and shared equity schemes, and I think that all Members are aware of that. That will be a growing problem in future years.

Alban Maginness said that our single system is not only helpful in its present form, but is admired outside Northern Ireland. It is not often that that is said about our systems, but he also expressed concern over the erratic levels of funding. The Minister also referred to that, and her winding-up speech contained several commercials for more money.

Claire McGill welcomed the motion for furthering the debate and expressed the Sinn Féin reservations about the 10% figure mentioned in the motion. She also said that there might not currently be a first rung on the property ladder. That was worth listening to.

Minister Ritchie undertook to address the issues concerned. She took up the theme of the lack of affordable housing in areas across Northern Ireland, and she said that her budget is less than adequate, but, as my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety did in Question Time last Monday, she also stressed that it is only a draft Budget. She will explore private finance — which is to be welcomed — and she referred to the support for the existing single co-ownership scheme that has already helped 20,000 people on to the housing ladder and enabled some to progress up it. It is good that the income generated by those schemes can be recycled to help others join them.

The Minister also mentioned funding in that regard, and she was more eloquent in making her case for more funding than I could be. Her comments on article 40 of The Planning (Northern Order) 1991 will help to ease some Sinn Féin concerns, particularly those mentioned by Fra McCann. Developers should provide a greater

input: they should be brought to account on that. The practice of land banking is a scandal, and if the Assembly can bring developers into the loop in order to help in the provision of social housing, it should do so.

The Minister also replied to several other Members, but I will not repeat any of that. I simply reiterate my plea to Sinn Féin to support the motion, so that we can adopt a united approach.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for an expansion of housing co-ownership to at least 10% of the overall housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options available to first-time homebuyers.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 13 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Before we deal with the business on today's Order Paper, I must inform the Assembly that I have been approached by Members from all sides of the House about the tragedy that occurred in Omagh last night. Our thoughts and prayers are with the immediate family circle.

Members have also approached me about the attempted murders of two police officers — one last night in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, and one last week in the Foyle constituency in County Londonderry. I know that the prayers of the whole House are with those two police officers and their families.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My attention is drawn to a point of order that was made during yesterday's proceedings by the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry. His intervention appears to represent an attempt to make an ex-post-facto point of order in respect of a matter that occurred the previous week. Mr Speaker, I do not expect an immediate ruling from you on this matter, but I would appreciate your giving it further consideration.

Mr Speaker, when the event to which the Member referred occurred, you were in the Chair, and any Member could have raised a point of order at the conclusion of Question Time that day. None chose to do so. I wonder to what extent Members can have their researchers trawl through the records of proceedings of this House and, at some later date, ask you to rule on issues.

Mr O'Loan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr P Robinson: I am making a point of order.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must take his seat. Mr Robinson has the Floor.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, if it is permissible, it will give you a volume of work that will, perhaps, be unwelcome. In particular, everyone knows that the Member who raised the point of order is one of the worst-behaved Members. I could find a massive number

of his breaches of Standing Orders. We must know whether these matters can be dealt with ex post facto, or whether they must be dealt with promptly and at the time, as is suggested in Erskine May.

Mr Speaker: This point of order was raised yesterday, and I said to all sides of the House that I would deal with the issue at a later date. Furthermore, I told Members that they should not prejudge my decision on the matter.

I will take points of order from Mr McNarry and from Mr Wilson.

Mr McNarry: My choosing today was not to raise the matter; I have left it to your good offices to respond to the House. I understand that a particular problem is that you cannot refer the matter to the House until the Member who was mentioned yesterday is present. I mentioned that yesterday, and I understand that you are reflecting on it.

If I could say to the Member who has just spoken —

Some Members: No, you cannot.

Mr McNarry: If I may be allowed to finish, I say through you, Mr Speaker, that it ill becomes this House when —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I ask the Member to take his seat. Yesterday, I told all sides of the House that I would deal with the issue, and I will deal with it. I do not intend to say any more about it in the Chamber this morning.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, we need a ruling on how long after an event in the House a point of order can be raised. That was the context of this morning's original point of order. Is the timescale a day, a week, or is it a month?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat. I have already said that I will deal with the issue. I will not deal with it this morning, and I have said that to all sides of the House.

Mr O'Loan: I ask you to consider whether the first point of order raised today was valid. Regarding the reference of the person who raised it, since he was —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us allow the House to move on. I have already dealt with the issue. I will take a different point of order.

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, the matter to which you referred yesterday is completely different to the matter referred to by my Rt Hon friend today. His point has not been raised before; therefore, it is a pertinent point of order on which you have not reflected, and my Rt Hon friend has asked you to do so.

Mr Speaker: I assure the Member that all points of order will be reflected upon — very much so.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Local Government — Review of Public Administration

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed up to two hours for the debate. The Minister will propose the motion, and all other speakers will have five minutes. One amendment has been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: The Member will please take his seat.

The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

I will take the Member's point of order.

Mr B McCrea: I was too quick, Mr Speaker, and I apologise.

Mr Speaker: As this motion relates to local government, I am sure that many Members will want to declare an interest before speaking in the debate, which is important. I am conscious that quite a number of Members are still involved in local authorities in Northern Ireland. It is important that they declare an interest in what might be discussed here this morning.

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

That this Assembly notes the emerging findings of the review of the Review of Public Administration decisions, as they relate to local government, and the initial proposals for the future of local government.

I do not have to declare an interest as I have now left local government.

Before I move to the substantive matter before the House, I want to refer to two other matters. First, I abhor absolutely the attempted murder of a police officer in my constituency last night. I spoke to the district commander then and again this morning, and he told me that he is content with the co-operation that he is receiving from the community. I am pleased about that. However, we must ensure, as leaders in our constituencies, that we are unequivocal in what we say about those issues and that we ensure that the people responsible are brought to justice. As someone who has been the victim of terrorism in the past, I empathise with the officer and his loved ones, and I assure them of my prayers.

Secondly, I turn to the very distressing news from Omagh this morning. It is distressing to listen to the reports, never mind to look at what happened last night. The nightmarish scenes are almost too difficult to take in. All that I and others can say is how much

we sympathise with the family circle. I pray for them at this very difficult and painful time.

I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to debate local government. When I launched the review of the previous Administration's review of public administration (RPA) decisions in relation to local government, I gave a commitment to engage with stakeholders as the review proceeded. The Assembly has a clear interest in the outcome of the review and the Executive's proposals for the way ahead.

Now that the emerging findings of the review, which represent the Executive's initial — and I stress the word "initial" — proposals for the future shape of local government have been published, it is timely for Members to be given an opportunity to express their views. That is particularly relevant as the Executive subcommittee that I chair looks forward to receiving and considering carefully and fully the views of stakeholders as the three strands of the review are drawn together and the final recommendations are considered.

The review of public administration was set up by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2002 to deliver wide-ranging and comprehensive modernisation and reform to the public sector. The full range of RPA decisions was included in two announcements in November 2005 and in March 2006. The decisions of the previous Administration in relation to local government can be summarised as: the creation of seven councils; the transfer of a significant range of functions to the new councils from central Government and other bodies; the development of a new council-led statutory community-planning process; and the power of well-being.

The local government task force, led by the former Minister with responsibility for the Department of the Environment and with representatives from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and from the five main political parties in the Assembly, was established to lead the implementation of the RPA decisions. It also led a parallel and integrated process of modernisation within local government, addressing issues such as governance, finance, estates, shared services, the relationship between central Government and local government, performance management and capacity building.

The task force also produced some very good work, particularly in relation to the modernisation of local government. However, it must be said that four out of the five political parties represented on the task force participated on the basis that they remained fundamentally opposed to the seven-council model that had been agreed by the previous Administration and that their participation was without prejudice to that firmly held position.

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

10.45 am

In addition, although NILGA and the political parties were committed to the development of strong and effective local government, to varying degrees, they expressed concerns about several of the functions that the previous Administration agreed should transfer to local government once seven new councils had been created. They also questioned the adequacy of the economic appraisal that underpinned the previous Administration's decision.

The Transitional Assembly echoed and confirmed that debate, both in the Chamber and in the work of the Programme for Government Committee. That Committee's work on the matter culminated in the publication on 23 January 2007 of its 'Report on Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning'.

Following restoration of devolved Government on 8 May, the Executive reviewed the progress that had been made in implementing the RPA. They considered the strategic direction of the implementation programme, and, in that context, it was agreed that I would implement a review of the previous Administration's decisions on local government. The Executive agreed detailed terms of reference for that review, which was launched on 6 July 2007.

Given the number of councils and functions that we believe will be required, the review is considering what we expect local government to deliver in the context of a fully functioning devolved Assembly and Executive and in the context of the strategic direction of the review of public administration. I remind the House that there are three strands to the review: first, developing a shared vision for local government; secondly, revisiting decisions that were made on the number of councils, while limiting that figure to the three original RPA options of seven, 11 or 15; and thirdly, considering the functions that will transfer to local government — again limiting that to those that were identified for transfer in the final RPA announcements of the previous Administration. We are also considering the previous Administration's decision on the development of a council-led community-planning process and on the complementary power of well-being.

Over the summer months, consultants undertook desk research to establish the characteristics of local government in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, including the other United Kingdom jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland and further afield. The consultants also facilitated several stakeholder interviews and events to test the findings of that research. In parallel, the Executive Committee's subcommittee, which I chair, met three times. That subcommittee comprises me and my ministerial colleagues from the Department

of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). In addition, I also held several bilateral meetings with other Executive colleagues.

That work has culminated in the emerging findings report that I published on 18 October 2007. I will not rehearse the details of that paper, but I assume that Members will raise some of its findings with me. However, I will discuss some of its key points. Our vision is to create local government that will improve quality of life and create communities that are sustainable, vibrant, healthy, prosperous, stable and, above all, people centred. Discussions are continuing on the number and configuration of councils that can best deliver our vision.

However, the issues are complex. A considerable volume of material and commissioned research informs those discussions. Although there is a need for, and benefits to be drawn from, the reduction of some of the existing diversity that lies between councils, there is also a need to balance that reduction by creating local councils that are of a size that allows communities to identify and interact with them.

Proposals for an initial package of functions that should transfer to local government are presented for discussion in the emerging findings report. I know that local government representatives — and others — have expressed concern and disappointment about the scale and nature of the functions that are to be transferred. I understand the reason for that concern.

The process of further stakeholder engagement is not yet complete, and my ministerial colleagues and I will want to hear and consider fully all stakeholders' views on the initial package before we finalise our decisions. We arranged several stakeholders' meetings, and although the meeting in Cookstown was well attended and some forthright views were expressed, I must say that I am disappointed that 15 officials but few councillors attended yesterday's meeting in Armagh. I hope that that situation is not replicated in the meetings that take place later this week.

I stress that the proposals outlined in the emerging findings report mark the beginning of a process of reform and modernisation of local government. Achieving strong, effective and efficient local government is a long-term process that will require sustained effort over a considerable number of years. Based on experience elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and beyond, the delivery of the vision for local government will not be achieved through a single set of reform proposals, no matter how well devised those proposals may be. We must continue to develop the role of local government, as well as the

relationship among the Assembly, the Executive and local government, for many years to come. We cannot, and will not, allow previous direct rule Administrations' wanton neglect of local government to continue.

As I said earlier, the Executive subcommittee, and the Executive as a whole, will wish to consider fully and carefully all stakeholders' views, including those of MLAs, members of the Committee for the Environment and the public, before final decisions are taken on the future shape of local government. I shall discuss those views as they emerge with my colleagues on the Executive subcommittee, with other Executive Ministers through bilateral meetings, and with my colleagues on the Local Government Task Force's strategic leadership board before final recommendations are put to the Executive Committee for discussion and agreement.

It is important to take time to consider all the issues before final recommendations are put to the Executive. It is also important to ensure that we conclude the review process quickly, in order that we can bring an end to the current frustration and uncertainty that exists over local government. Both councillors and staff, for whom I have a great deal of sympathy, are affected by that uncertainty, as is the wider community. I aim to conclude the review and report to the Executive before the end of January 2008 and to make a statement to the Assembly as early as possible in February.

Before I conclude, I should say something about what happens after the review process is completed. We will want to implement an agreed reform and modernisation package as quickly as possible. Our aim will be to implement that agreed package by 2011. I recognise that to do so will require sustained effort and genuine engagement between central Government and local government to ensure that the agreed package is implemented professionally and with care. I want to ensure the smoothest possible transition from our current structures and arrangements to those that we believe will provide stronger, more effective local government for all Northern Ireland's citizens. I look forward to working with my Executive colleagues, the Assembly, the Committee for the Environment and, importantly, colleagues in local government — through the strategic leadership board and other Local Government Task Force elements — in a true spirit of partnership and shared endeavour in order to achieve that transition.

Since I came to office, my engagement with local government has been very positive — at least, I think that it has been. I have very much enjoyed the time that I have been able to share with local government colleagues.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity for the House to consider the motion. I look forward to

hearing Members' views, and I will, I assure you, listen most carefully to what they have to say.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move the following amendment: At end, insert

“; and calls on the Executive to transfer meaningful and significant functions to local government.”

At the outset, I wish to declare two interests, which are already noted in the Register of Members' Interests. I am a member of Lisburn City Council and, because I wish to say a few words on yesterday's events in Dungannon, I should declare that I am a member of the Policing Board.

We tabled the amendment because we were very disappointed about the information that has been provided to date. When the Minister launched the review on 6 July 2007, she promised that its purpose was to ensure that:

“we can deliver the change which will achieve the strong, effective and efficient local government that we all want.”

Therefore, something obviously needs to be done. However, that is not what we have. What we have instead, and I can almost hear Sir Humphrey's Civil Servicespeak, is a mask. A complete U-turn — an about-face — has been performed on what was promised before the Assembly was restored. The review amounts not to a tweak, but to a fundamental review that is taking us nowhere. That is one of the main reasons why we on these Benches are bringing the matter to the Minister's attention.

The Minister also said at the review's launch that she was:

“committed to working in partnership with a range of stakeholders to win consensus”.

If that is the case, we have not got off to a very good start. The Northern Ireland Local Government Association, on which many Members sit, has expressed the utmost dismay about the emerging findings. I will quote from the key findings following the robust meeting in Cookstown, which the Minister mentioned. It states that the feeling:

“was one of disappointment, frustration, concern and, in some cases, anger.”

That does not sound like much of a move towards consensus. One of the major problems emerging at that meeting, which was summarised by PricewaterhouseCoopers, was that there was an:

“implied lack of respect for local government's capacity to deliver.”

That is a slap in the face to all those who work hard in local government.

Linked to that was the suggestion from members of NILGA that there is no point in having a review of public administration if no powers are to be transferred. If 5% of work is already being carried out by

local government, and only 1·5% more work is going to be transferred, why should we bother with the review of public administration? There will be cost inefficiencies should we decide to proceed on that basis. Unless we are going to make a step change, the review is a complete waste of time and an expensive waste of money.

Other items arising at the meeting were that councils were concerned about their lack of clout and that there is definitely an imbalance between local government and central government. How can people be expected to do their work when their views are not taken into account?

The summary also discussed other issues that we were promised would be looked at, such as double-jobbing, and how someone could be in two places at the same time. Is there any conflict of interest involved when people sit in this House and make decisions on matters that impact on councils? The Assembly must deal with that issue, which is a more serious problem than people think. The people of Northern Ireland have a fundamental expectation that politicians should do something — to date, they have done very little, and that leads to statements such as the one I heard last night from one of the political commentators who said that, although there are some problems, the Assembly is fundamentally stable. I beg to differ.

The sinister events in Dungannon last night, and those that occurred previously in Londonderry, threaten to undermine the democratic process in which we are now engaged. It is important that society does not return to the old ways, and to ensure that that does not happen, people need to see action: they need to see us doing something.

I have been here for six months and I have seen nothing but people talking.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes, I will give way: make it your best shot.

Lord Morrow: You can bet your life on that.

The Member has mentioned dual mandates. Will he tell the House, as a relative newcomer to the Assembly and to local government, how he is able to be in two places at once, because I suspect that he is no more superhuman than anyone else in the House? Will he also recognise that in the previous Assembly, when his party was the leading party, the Members on the Benches opposite were allowed to sit in Government while their army was fully armed? His party had no problems in sitting with them in Government on three occasions.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you for that short, sharp intervention. I am at a complete loss to understand why the Member has not addressed the issue of treble-jobbing, given that he is a Member in another place. What gives him the right to criticise me?

The point is that we must address such issues. Five years ago, we were promised a review of public administration. So far, all that has been decided is that we should go back to the drawing board and start again. What kind of progress is that? People look to their councillors to make local decisions; they think that councils have more powers than they actually have.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: No, I will not give way. Lord Morrow has already spoken. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker, is it — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: It is apparent that the dogs of war are straining at their leashes; although perhaps they are the poodles of peace.

11.00 am

This is a serious issue. We need to find a way to engage with local people on local issues. Where better to do that than at council level? We must give them not only the power but the responsibility to make a difference. That is what we are supposed to be doing, what we said we would do, and precisely what we are not doing. That is why my party has brought this amendment to the House.

There is also the issue of how to get other sections of the community involved. That is what this is all about. It is not enough to say that we have the same people in the same place. There are people who have provided sterling service for a long time, but it is also true that we need to find a way of bringing new people — people from different genders and different races — into our democratic process. One of the easier ways to do that would be to bring them in through the councils.

The Minister said that there was not such a good turnout in Armagh — I wonder why. If there is no power, there is no interest. The councillors saw in Cookstown that this was a complete and utter farce and a complete waste of time. Unless we are going to be serious about this, how can we expect people to give their time to go and do things?

We hear these sweet words: the Civil Service is brilliant at bringing them out. However, where is the real vision? Where can we actually get things done?

Mrs Foster: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take great exception to the Member saying that the words I spoke this morning were Civil Service words. They were my words. I take great exception to that, and ask him to withdraw.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. *[Interruption.]*

Order.

Mr B McCrea: It is interesting that those who argued long and hard at the start of this sitting about points of order now appear not to understand the rules.

We are here to debate the issue. The Minister said that she wanted to hear from all of us, but now that we are telling her what we have to say, she does not want to hear any more. These messages are coming loud and clear, not just from these Benches but from NILGA and other interested parties, and she should take them on board.

Where are we now? Dead slow and stop. The people of Northern Ireland will ask what we are for. What is it that we are going to do? You have grabbed control — *[Interruption.]*

It is good to see that there is still a bit of life there. For a minute, I thought that they had gone to sleep.

The key point is that there are people in this House who talk about equality. What we are really talking about is empowerment. We have to empower local representatives to serve the people, do their best for Northern Ireland and make sure that we all go forward in a positive future. That is what this is about, that is what this policy wants to do, and that is why this party has put forward this amendment, which I commend to the House.

Mr Weir: I start by declaring an interest, like Mr McCrea, as a local councillor. I suspect that, given the plethora of declarations of interest that we are going to have, this will resemble the start of an AA meeting more than the Northern Ireland Assembly. I also declare an interest as a vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, which Mr McCrea has referred to, and I welcome my colleagues from NILGA who are here today.

In looking at this issue, we have to ask why we are here in the first place. Mr McCrea has castigated the Executive for starting again. Perhaps he has forgotten one of the principal reasons why we have started again, which is that, under direct rule, a seven-council model was to be imposed. My understanding is that the Ulster Unionist Party was opposed to that model. Perhaps the Member for Lagan Valley has had some sort of Damascene conversion and actually wants to simply put that in place. We made it very clear that we were not prepared to accept that model.

Indeed there are deficiencies in the emerging findings document, which I will address later. My party does not have a problem with the amendment but does have a problem with the UUP, Pontius Pilate-like, washing its hands of the emerging findings. They emanated from an Executive subcommittee, and an Executive, on which all four parties that are in Government are represented, including the party of the proposers of the amendment. When Members castigate the lack of powers being given to local government, they should

remember that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, for example, which comes under the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, is controlled by an Ulster Unionist Minister. We should at least acknowledge the fact that there are deficiencies in the emerging findings.

Mr S Wilson: For clarity's sake, will the Member enlighten the House as to who represented the Ulster Unionist Party so effectively on the Executive subcommittee? That person has quite singularly failed to satisfy the Member for Lagan Valley, and Members need to be aware of the identities of the guilty people on this issue.

Mr Weir: My understanding is that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety represented the Ulster Unionist Party. He also seems to have a problem in agreeing a Budget and subsequently not agreeing it.

I now move on to the substance of the report. Under the emerging findings, you are left —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Mr Weir, please address your remarks through the Chair.

Mr Weir: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to address my remarks through the Chair.

The emerging findings are something of a curate's egg, with some good parts and some bad parts. Some findings have already been welcomed in NILGA's report. I welcome the fact that local councillors will have direct control over the vast bulk of planning issues and local development, which have been a source of major frustration. Community planning powers will allow councillors a greater say in shaping their local areas, and although finance and personnel issues have not been fulfilled, it shows that not all powers are linked to those facets. That will make a difference. The Committee for the Environment has been told that vesting powers will be given to local councils, and there has been a begrudging admission that regeneration powers will also be given. I welcome that fact that councils will have increased economic development and tourism powers.

However, the report falls short in several areas, in that Ministers have been overcautious. The failure to give councils some control over local roads must be re-examined. Roads Service should retain control of strategic direction, but there are advantages to villages, towns and cities having some control over local roads. If local economic development powers are to be increased, perhaps some of Invest NI's land bank might be better used if it were handed over to councils. Control of the Youth Service would fit neatly within local community development powers, as would local libraries, even if they were in some form of unitary structure. Local government could also handle certain public health and housing issues.

When local government seeks control of further areas, it is not simply in order to get its hands on power; rather it is because certain issues are best decided at a local level. The key issue is what is of most benefit to local people. To that end, there is much to welcome in the emerging findings, but they have also been too cautious.

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

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First and foremost, I thank the Minister for tabling the take-note motion. As regards the theatrical introduction of Basil McCrea's amendment, I remind Basil, as other Members have done, that his own party colleague is a member of the Executive subcommittee that produced the emerging findings report.

Sinn Féin shares the sentiment behind the amendment about transferring meaningful power to local government. By the same token, I remind Basil and the other parties that, from day one, Sinn Féin has strenuously argued that it would not support any additional functions being transferred to local government unless firm, statutory equality protections were built into their running and governance.

Throughout the work of the task force, subgroups and so on, Basil's party has steadfastly refused to sign up to meaningful and acceptable governance arrangements. Although that section of the task force's work has never yet been completed, if parties ask Sinn Féin to support the transfer of additional functions — or any changes to local government, because the emerging findings paper does not set anything in stone; it is a work in progress — they must bear in mind that Sinn Féin will not support such changes unless firm, guaranteed equality and protective measures are built into the running and governance of local government. That is the baseline from which Sinn Féin will judge any future discussions on the RPA.

Except for the number of councils, Sinn Féin and the other parties agreed with the previous — albeit direct rule — Administration's findings. All parties were involved in the task force, the nine subgroups and the discussions with other stakeholders, including trade unions, local-government officials and many other sectors with a stake in local government. Although some of those deliberations have yet to be completed, all the parties signed up for that package at that time, except for the number of councils. Therefore, if those parties now prefer change, they must understand that there are consequences. From the outset, Sinn Féin did not advocate a review of the review of public administration. It was prepared to build on the previous discussions in order to finish the task and to complete implementation of the RPA.

Although Sinn Féin was the only political party to support the seven-council model, the only opposition to

the idea came from the other political parties. Of course, that is important; however, every other stakeholder wanted the smallest possible number of councils. During those deliberations, it was easy to attack Sinn Féin and to argue about cantonisation and the polarisation of local government, but not so easy to face the reality that going from a smaller to a larger number of councils would logically mean that Ministers and Departments, not wanting their services fragmented further, would resist. Not only the Ministers and Departments but every other sector in society argued equally forcefully against having a greater number of councils, on the basis that services would be further fragmented, harder to deliver and cost more money — valid reasons that still pertain today.

Other parties that are asking for change might get what they wish for, but not what they want. They should bear in mind that if their choice is for more than seven councils, which they are entitled to argue for and might get, the price to be paid will inevitably be that fewer functions will be transferred to local government.

In the past week, other parties, people involved in NILGA and others have approached Sinn Féin to ask what it will do about this matter. We are saying —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Gallagher: I want to stress the importance of statutory safeguards, about which there is no detail in the Minister's paper. Without those safeguards and protections, the SDLP will not sign up to any changes to local government. When the details have been agreed, they should be subjected to a cross-community vote in the Assembly. That is the only real protection that there can be in order to arrive at equitable arrangements.

11.15 am

The subtitle of the review of local government aspects of the review of public administration report is "emerging findings". That is a misnomer and a contradiction, because very little emerges from the report. That is disappointing, but it is more disappointing that the review team conducted no meaningful engagement with stakeholders, particularly with elected members of councils, who have been kept very much in the dark.

As we have heard from the Minister, the report says nothing specific about council numbers. What does that mean? Does it mean that, despite all the opposition to the seven-council model, the people who are working on the RPA still want to impose an English model of local government that will be totally inappropriate here? Do they think that they will get away with the wholesale closure of council offices west of the Bann and the stripping of more jobs from areas of high deprivation?

Could it be that they are being so guarded about council numbers because they believe that people in rural communities, especially in the west, will accept

civic councils that feed into the deliberations of larger councils?

If that is the hidden agenda, I wish to send out a clear message: ratepayers in rural areas, particularly in the west, will not be conned. They will not accept any second-rate, lower-level arrangements that will leave them powerless and voiceless. People who live in the west have suffered enough of the deprivation and marginalisation that has resulted in poor roads and little investment.

As some Members will know, people in urban as well as rural areas are already worried about increases in their rate bills, not to mention the further burden of water charges.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I will not give way.

Whatever the final number of councils may be, an equal spread of the wealth across all councils and a fair distribution of the rates burden is the very least to which the public are entitled. That requirement is paramount to the SDLP.

For all the supposed commitment to strengthening local government, to improving efficiency and to subsidiarity, it appears from the review paper that, apart from some functions of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department for Social Development, few functions will transfer from central Government. The Departments appear to want to continue to hold on to as much power as possible at the centre.

At least the SDLP Minister, Margaret Ritchie, has made it clear that her Department will transfer urban-regeneration and community-development delivery functions, for which there are significant budgets, to local councils.

The Department of Education, which does not deal well with school transport, among other issues, wants to keep everything. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which certainly does not provide emergency cover very well, wants to hold on to everything. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which does not appear to be dealing at all with trying to achieve a shared future, wants to hold on to everything.

The Department for Regional Development, which had been expected to transfer responsibility for roads back to councils, has failed to invest in road improvement in the west yet wants to retain that power at the centre. DRD has failed to maintain rural roads and provide winter gritting programmes. That is unacceptable. If councils are to play a meaningful role in local economic development, they must have responsibility for local roads.

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

Mr Neeson: I declare an interest: I have been an elected member of Carrickfergus Borough Council for 30 years. In fact, I am the longest-serving member on that council, and I am very proud of the achievements of local government.

However, there is great uncertainty about the future of local government in Northern Ireland, and if reform is to be meaningful, local government must have meaningful powers. The Minister is well aware of recent criticisms about what appears to be a future reduction in the powers of local councils, and greater clarity on that matter is required.

Members are aware of the need for the reform of local government in Northern Ireland — 26 councils are far too many for Northern Ireland. However, it is unfortunate that the reform of local government is taking place in isolation from a review of central government, and I have always been critical of that. Eleven Departments are far too many for Northern Ireland, and Members know that they were created artificially in order to appoint 11 Ministers. That issue needs to be considered also.

The 'Review of Local Government Aspects of the Review of Public Administration: Emerging Findings' report contains interim plans for consultation, and I hope that that consultation is meaningful. The report, which was produced by an Executive subcommittee comprising four Ministers, outlines how they intend to proceed with the review of public administration as it relates to local government. NILGA has responded critically to the report, and the Alliance Party supports NILGA's stance. NILGA's paper must be considered seriously as part of the consultation process.

The Alliance Party supports the rationalisation of health boards; a single education authority with a special duty to promote integrated education, and, believe it or not, a reduction in the number of quangos. We also support the transfer of urban regeneration, minor roads powers and local planning functions to local government. Consideration should be given to the options of having either 11 or 15 councils. Furthermore, we support the Community Relations Council's challenge function regarding decisions made at local level on community investment funds; shared civic offices; weighted-majority voting for key decisions, and a new local government watchdog.

The Alliance Party has three broad concerns about the emerging findings report. First, there is a lack of attention to good corporate governance and how that may be improved through local government reform. Secondly, there is no reference to financing: it makes little sense for councils to have expanded powers and no means of expanding their incomes. Thirdly, there is no clarity about what has been learned from good

practice elsewhere. For example, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of local councils in Denmark; and there have been significant reforms in the Republic of Ireland and across Great Britain. However, there is scant evidence that any account has been taken of those examples.

Regarding economic responsibilities, I am pleased that my own council — Carrickfergus Borough Council — has taken a proactive approach on economic development. If local councils are to have real powers, issues such as the vesting of land must be considered.

Councils throughout Northern Ireland have been proactive in promoting local tourism to great effect. The main priority of the Programme for Government is growing the economy. However, if the economy is to grow, local councils must have the necessary powers.

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

Mr S Wilson: Given the number of contradictions that there have been during this debate, the Minister will have difficulty in responding to the issues raised. Mr Neeson talked about the Alliance Party's desire to do away with quangos. Members know that, when Alliance Party members get together, their favourite game is not 'Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?', but rather "Who wants a quango chair?".

They have had plenty of them; it is their own job-creation scheme that has been scuppered by Mr Neeson.

The SDLP talks about devolving more powers to local councils, yet its Minister is the one who is holding on, as tightly as she can, to such functions as urban regeneration, housing responsibilities and so on. The Ulster Unionist Party has complained about the delay, but it was the party which rightly said, along with the DUP, that the proposed number of councils was unsuitable and that there should be more time to reconsider that issue, along with a whole range of other matters.

So there have been contradictions in the debate —

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Where a Member has a number of mandates — more than a dual mandate — is it correct that he should declare his interests?

Mr Deputy Speaker: At the beginning of the debate, the Speaker said that Members should declare their interests.

Mr S Wilson: I apologise for not declaring my interests. *[Laughter.]*

My interests are declared in the Register of Members' Interests, and, therefore, they were declared before the debate began.

I will make three points in relation to the debate. First of all, time. Some Members have alleged that we are delaying matters further, but this will be a once-in-a-lifetime change for local government. We have

inherited some of this from a direct rule Administration that viewed the RPA through direct rule eyes. Following devolution, certain things need to be looked at in a different way — I will refer to some of those in a moment. Time should be taken over the process, and if that means that we must delay it a little, it is far better to shape it correctly than to rush in and do something on the basis of what the direct rule Ministers said. There is also the issue of building capacity at local government level. That requires work, and it will take time.

Secondly, there needs to be commitment from Ministers to devolve certain functions. I have already mentioned DSD. I could also mention the DUP Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: he should look again at the library function, which, I believe, fits much better at local government level. The Minister of Education should consider whether youth services might be devolved to local councils. Some of the things predicted in our Programme for Government may have to be reconsidered.

Lastly, some imagination is required. Some functions are to be devolved to local government, but that may not mean that they are simply handed down. Earlier in the debate, a Sinn Féin Member said that if there were more units of local government, fewer powers would be devolved to them. That does not necessarily follow. Whereas there might not be the same economies of scale with 11 councils as opposed to seven, there is the option of grouping councils for certain functions, which could provide those economies of scale.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that, with respect to the clustering of councils, the LEADER groups that delivered rural development funding were a key example of local councils working together to deliver for the people, unlike the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which this year had to return millions of pounds to the European Union?

Mr S Wilson: There are already models that show how grouping of councils can work. In some rural areas, the building control function is grouped, and it works well. Let us not run away with the idea that if we step back from the seven-council model, fewer powers will be devolved to local government. There are ways of doing it: it requires a bit of imagination. In some cases, it may be a matter of directly devolving issues, such as the Youth Service or library services.

One model that might be tried is that councils might be given money for roads, for example, but would buy in services from Roads Service. That would avoid the breaking up of responsibility for roads and the loss of economies of scale there. In other cases, councils might liaise with other bodies. In education, they might liaise with the education and skills authority, the Department,

or whatever body emerges from the RPA, to ensure that services delivered locally are delivered properly.

There are many imaginative ways to do it. Let us not simply criticise Ministers: my concern is that local government has not engaged properly. Local government, the Assembly and Ministers must engage equally. If that takes time, we should ignore the bluster of the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea, get down to work, and do the job properly. I would add one word of caution in that the process cannot be delayed interminably because people are worrying about the future; for example, those who are waiting to be recruited into local government. We must ensure that that capacity is not lost.

11.30 am

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin rún. I would like to say a few words on this matter.

I declare an interest as a member of one of the best councils in the North — Armagh City and District Council. I apologise to the Minister that I could not make it to the meeting yesterday.

This is work in progress. Sinn Féin did not ask for this review. However we are prepared to work with, and develop, what was originally proposed, and we expect debate and negotiation between parties to begin in a serious way. Sinn Féin has no interest in giving enhanced powers to councils unless those powers are accompanied by robust checks and balances in order to avoid the discriminatory practices that still exist in many councils. Economies of scale mean that the number of councils proposed must be the optimum number for delivery, and not be cumbersome, unwieldy and impractical. Having more councils means a greater service fragmentation and poorer services for the public.

The key issues emerging from the review of public administration are about governance and equality, which must be delivered. The emerging findings report is disappointing as regards the number of functions to be transferred to local government, and my council is using words such as minimalist. It would appear that some Ministers are intent on watering down the powers to be transferred in order to hold on to those powers themselves. I ask them to explain their position not only to their party colleagues, but to bodies such as NILGA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).

The emerging findings leave a lot to be desired, and we welcome the opportunity to have meaningful debate. At the heart of that debate, Sinn Féin believes that community planning will deliver fair and strong local Government. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the debate as it brings the review of public administration, which has been a cause

of concern for some time, back into focus. Not least, I welcome it because the emerging findings report is one stage in the process of undoing the damage that was outlined in previous review of public administration conclusions. Due to that, I am surprised at the response of the Ulster Unionist Party in the House today. I thought that, like the DUP, they would be opposed to many of the earlier findings of the review of public administration. Their fingerprints are all over this report — their Ministers contributed to it, and signed off on it, so it is surprising to hear their criticisms.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way, because I am going to make a point. I will give way in a moment.

However, as is customary, UUP Members have forgotten their past, and the fact that their fingerprints were also all over the beginning of the review of public administration process. In 2000, Minister Sam Foster initiated the fundamentally flawed process, and what one Minister Foster cocked up, another Minister Foster must correct.

Today's debate is a staging post in getting the review of public administration correct. As my colleague Sammy Wilson said, this is a one-off opportunity to get it right, and such opportunities do not come along frequently.

Mr Campbell: I declare an interest as a member of the city council of Londonderry.

The Member has mentioned disturbing trends that have emerged in the debate. Does he agree that another disturbing trend is that several nationalist Members have talked about the importance of governance arrangements, which should be a paramount consideration for all parties, because the many unionist minorities who have suffered at the hands of nationalist majorities also want to see good governance arrangements in the new RPA?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention. I have noticed that there have been contributions on governance arrangements from the Benches opposite. I must declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council, which I omitted to do at the start of my contribution. In the east of the Province, unionists have large majorities on councils. However, we are mindful that unionists in the west of the Province need protection from nationalist and republican domination. Therefore, I take the Member's point on board.

Much of the discussion has centred on functions that should be transferred to local government. The emerging findings report criticises to some extent the initial RPA decisions. There is scope to examine the prospect of additional powers being transferred to local government. I am glad that the public-realm aspects of local roads have been included in the report. However, other local roads issues remain to be examined.

Youth services would fit neatly with local government, particularly given the amount of work that already takes place between local government and youth services; for example, through community-safety partnerships. That would have a knock-on effect for libraries and youth services, where there would also be a neat fit. Although I do not want to disagree with the process that has been initiated by my colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, a body beneath the single library authority could have input at local government level.

Urban regeneration is an increasingly important area of local government. That is why I, and many others, were disappointed — quite annoyed, in fact — that, although she deemed that she would transfer urban-regeneration powers to local government, Minister Ritchie has done so begrudgingly, criticising what she has called a “narrow skills base” at local government level and saying that those powers would be devolved over time and through a phased approach. It is rich for SDLP Members opposite to complain about how few functions are to be transferred, when their own Minister has held on for grim death to some of her Department’s functions.

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way, because my time is almost up and I have already given way. Minister Ritchie has held on to her powers. She has actually insulted many local government representatives and officials, particularly in places such as Belfast and Londonderry, which have a rich experience of involvement in urban regeneration.

In conclusion, I remind the Minister of the Environment to maintain a focus on efficiency. Although the delivery of strong local government is important, the need to achieve efficiency is equally so. The Assembly must not lose sight of that fact. If that efficiency is not achieved, there is little point in proceeding with the process.

Mr Armstrong: At the outset, I acknowledge the great debt that is owed to local government and to those councillors who served during the darkest days of the Troubles, often at great personal risk. The pattern of the 26 local councils that were established in the early 1970s was intended to operate in tandem with the Administration at Stormont. Sadly, that proved not to be the case.

The review of public administration was originally welcomed. It offered the prospect of a new beginning and had the potential to deliver strong and effective local government, which Northern Ireland has been denied for too long. It was seen as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, because it could determine the pattern of local government for the next 20 or 30 years. Therefore, we cannot afford to get it wrong.

Hopes were high that the review would transfer real powers to local authorities — powers that would bring

them more into line with their counterparts in Great Britain. It was hoped that the review would utilise modern thinking to improve service delivery and provide a template for local government in Northern Ireland in the early twenty-first century. Sadly, because the review took place amid the background of direct rule, many of those hopes were dashed.

Unfortunately, the reviews have too often been run by unaccountable civil servants, or former civil servants, who have usually paid scant attention to the wishes of locally elected politicians — hence the absurd proposal for seven councils, which was supported by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Sinn Féin. That is the very definition of an unholy alliance.

The restoration of a devolved Administration provided us with the hope that the situation would be rescued. However, the RPA emerging findings report received a less than enthusiastic welcome from significant quarters, including the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

I am particularly concerned that the proposals do not go far enough in transferring powers to local government. Rather than letting local government get on with the business of delivering local services — and allowing the Assembly to busy itself with Province-wide strategic and infrastructure projects — I fear that we are in danger of weakening local government by denying it real powers. The Assembly and the Executive are trying to micromanage functions that simply do not need to be the responsibility of central Government. Those fears have been articulated by Alderman Hatch — one of my Ulster Unionist colleagues — who is currently the president of NILGA.

For local government to remain relevant, it must have real powers to affect the lives of citizens. Certain Ministers must resist their natural instincts and temptations to retain as much centralised control as possible, and must trust local government. Among the additional services that NILGA has called for the Executive transfer to local government are planning; community planning; regeneration; local roads; libraries; and youth services.

I respect the vast experience that resides in NILGA, and I have no hesitation in supporting its call for the Executive to consider the proposals contained in the emerging findings report and to return with a set of proposals that will transfer meaningful and significant functions to local government.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister’s contribution. She made some good points about a shared vision and, in particular, about reviewing the number of councils, which are most welcome. Does the Minister also accept that there is a lack of morale and motivation in all local authorities in Northern Ireland due to uncertainty about

their future? We must have clarity about the future and the terms of the proposals.

As for the transfer of functions, I accept that the youth service is an example of a model that should be transferred to local government, bearing in mind the range of joint provisions between the community sector and the youth sector. The social-education programmes that the youth service brings to the table are exemplary, considering the current levels of antisocial behaviour and ill discipline.

The SDLP is disappointed by the limited list of functions that are proposed for transfer. However, more importantly, it is unacceptable that such important issues have been addressed without meaningful engagement with political parties and councils on the detail of functions for transfer, budgets, staff and options for cluster working by councils.

In addition to concerns about the nature of the functions to be transferred, the SDLP remains concerned about the process and implications of transfer. We raised concerns about assets and debts of existing councils, which are still to be addressed. Concerns related to equity arise across a range of issues, an example of which is the redevelopment of local areas. Some towns have benefited from central funding for redevelopment. If powers are transferred, will other towns have access to adequate funding to meet the same standards?

A note has been passed to me to remind me to declare my interest as a member of Derry City Council.

Considering the Department of the Environment's connections with the origins of the conflict, the SDLP is concerned about planning policy. My party wants to see greater influence on local planning by councils, but as part of an overhaul of the planning system, and in the context of effective statutory power-sharing safeguards for new councils. As for the comments of the Member for East Derry Gregory Campbell — who is not in the Chamber, at present — it is a fact that, in nationalist-controlled councils in Northern Ireland, a power-sharing system is in place.

I am sorry that the Member is not in the Chamber, because I want it noted that unionists have 20% of the seats on Derry City Council but hold 30% of committee positions. That is more than would be the case under d'Hondt and power-sharing arrangements.

11.45 am

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member inform his colleagues on Down District Council of that arrangement? The DUP has never held any senior civic position in that council throughout its entire existence, despite maintaining three seats on it.

Mr P Ramsey: I cannot comment on Down District Council. However, I can assure the Member that in

Derry City Council, the SDLP has given up the position of mayor and two deputy mayors as allocated under d'Hondt to ensure that there is shared responsibility and that the unionist position is represented in the two top posts.

The SDLP has called for a full-scale review of the planning system in order to make decision-making more transparent and accountable, and to shorten the planning process. The party believes that stronger planning policies are required, and there should be greater clarity about interpretation. The Planning Appeals Commission is not considered an adequate vehicle through which to hold the system to account. There is also a need for greater connectivity between planning decisions and their impact on other services, which underscores the need for community planning.

Clarity is also required about area plans and new local plans. With an 11-council model, area plans could be difficult to distinguish from local plans. There must be flexibility and responsiveness at a genuinely local level.

The SDLP welcomes the emerging findings, but they are quite vague about the number of councils, with little indication of which of the three options is favoured. That is disappointing, given that there are plans to put a paper to the Executive by December. As set out in the SDLP's responses to earlier phases of consultation, the party is totally opposed to a seven-council model on the basis that it is inadequate to meet the needs of our dispersed rural population. The party believes that it will lead to Balkanisation in Northern Ireland, making power sharing more difficult to establish. It will also lead to reduced democratic accountability and fundamentally undermine the character of local government. Furthermore, it will contribute to centralisation at a time when we should be trying to reverse that trend to ensure that the west of the Province is being supported, as Tommy Gallagher mentioned. We should support the rural economy and rural communities, promote balanced regional development and tackle rural and western disadvantage.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, which is the lead council on this issue. I wish to express my concern about some of the emerging findings. In general, many people, particularly local government representatives, expected that more power would be transferred to local government. I am concerned that a gap is developing between local government and central Government. For years, local government feared that when the Assembly got up and running, Ministers would claw back the powers that they had previously talked about devolving. We need to devolve powers to local government that will make it very powerful and allow it to deliver for communities in the future.

The power of general competency has been talked about again and again, and there has also been a focus on the power of general well-being. However, local government must follow the needs of the area. The present local government structure means that, far too often, local government and councils cannot follow those needs or deliver for the communities that they serve. They have no responsibility for roads or footpaths or for the general well-being of the area. Unfortunately, responsibility for such matters falls between several different stools — local government, Roads Service, the Housing Executive, and so on. That power of general competency is needed to ensure that local government can deliver for its communities.

In the past, local government has been on the edge of involvement in European funding and its delivery, but it has never had any responsibility for it. I welcome the fact that, under the new structures, local government will have a greater role in delivering those funds. That will bring the statutory agencies together, thus ensuring that they deliver on their responsibilities. It will also bring together various community groups that often have good ideas but no particular strategy to facilitate or bring them all together. If local government were to have a more powerful role, we could look forward to the delivery of those strategies.

The role of the Assembly is to legislate for the empowerment of local government and to allow it to deliver on the ground. The local agencies are aware of the needs of communities and can deliver at ground level. It is important that we separate the two situations so that we do not have everybody doing everybody else's job. That will build a better relationship between central Government and local government in the future. Each must carry out its role to the best of its ability, and have the relevant powers to deliver for communities. At the end of the day, that is what we want.

It has been proposed that local government elections be delayed for two years. That is dangerous, because it would render councils dead for two years, and neither staff nor councillors would know what is happening. People would be hanging on, instead of being empowered. An election gives people power to carry on, which is important. It is possible to complete the current strategy within the time left to councils, instead of delaying. Otherwise councils will lose a lot of valuable staff due to the uncertainty, and will have no power to plan for the future because no one will know what their role is going to be.

Mr T Clarke: At what stage will the Member address the number of councils? Is he still of the opinion, shared by the unionist Benches, that seven is not the preferred number?

Mr Molloy: My party has made it clear all along that, whatever about the number of councils or the

powers devolved to them, the issue is that they are meant to deliver fairness and equality and ensure that people are accountable for their actions. Unfortunately, that is where a number of councils currently fall short. There are unionist-controlled councils that could do better in delivering for the communities that they serve, and in ensuring that there is equality, fairness and good governance. Now is the time to show that goodwill. People can take things in good faith and can put legislation in place, but now is the time for unionist-controlled councils to ensure that they can deliver.

We must ensure that we have powerful local government that can deliver for the community. Unfortunately, the council on which I sit has gone down in history as the council that brought local government down because of past discrimination. That led to the civil rights movement and a 40-year campaign to bring about equality and justice. That is where we are today, and it is important to concentrate on how we deliver local government, regardless of the number of councils.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

I support the amendment. Prior to devolution, all parties expressed their support for the transfer of additional responsibilities to local government. However, there now appears to be some considerable backtracking. Is this the outworking of the control freakery of some Stalinist, centrally controlled parties? We must have faith in the elected representatives on the councils and give them the responsibility. Decisions must not always be taken centrally; that is not what democracy is about.

I shall focus largely on planning, because it is hugely significant for local communities and would give greater responsibilities to councils and councillors and enable them to have a much greater impact on their areas. Planning is a key issue for local government, and there has been a significant proposal to backtrack by removing responsibility for area plans from local authorities. Local authorities in the rest of the United Kingdom have that responsibility: why should it not be the case in Northern Ireland? Why is it OK in England, Scotland and Wales, and why should it not happen in Northern Ireland? Is the planning Minister reluctant to lose significant powers from her Department? The responsibility for planning must be devolved to councils.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I may give way later on, but I wish to pursue this issue.

Area plans are not developed in isolation. They must adhere to the regional development strategy; there is an outline that must be followed locally. Local plans are not developed independently, but must follow on from other regionally developed policies. The scale of the current plans will not be hugely different from that which is being proposed.

I know that there is a huge Belfast metropolitan area plan, but that plan could possibly develop through amalgamated plans, which may well be in the interests of council areas that are being developed. However, in the northern part of my constituency of East Antrim, an area plan covering Larne, Antrim and Ballymena is under consideration. I suspect that that would not be much different in area than those of the new councils that are likely to emerge, whether there be 11 or 15 of them. I reiterate my opposition to having seven councils.

Mr Weir: I acknowledge what the Member has said, and I agree that as much planning as possible should go into local government if we are to mirror the arrangements that are in place in other parts of the UK. However, there are no area plans in England, Scotland and Wales.

Mr Beggs: The issue is that decisions should be taken locally by councillors. It is better that councils develop and follow plans for the purposes of transparency. However, decisions should be taken locally by councillors. The proposal will add a third level of bureaucracy, giving councils a third planning level. I suspect that that would lead to increased costs and not reduced costs. Why not give councils full responsibility?

Plans developed at local government level would be subject to an appeals process, public inquiries and scrutiny from the legal system, so there would be protection. Ultimately, the electorate would determine whether it believes that inappropriate decisions are made by local representatives, but I hope that that would never be the case.

I will illustrate further why that is important. There has been much talk about community planning. To give community planning real teeth, councils must be allowed to incorporate it in their area plans. What is the point of giving councils responsibility for community planning without the full teeth to demand that the issues flowing from that responsibility are built into an area plan? Councils will not necessarily be able to do that under the current proposals.

There are significant failings in the existing process. Area plans are determined remotely from councils, and council views are often filtered and eventually lost. In Carrickfergus, for example, a proposal emerged that new houses could be built under high-voltage cables. The council specifically said that that should not happen, but the area in question has now been earmarked for possible housing.

In addition, rather than using additional housing to ensure that spine roads are completed and are developed, gaps are being left. Local councillors would have been aware of the issues and would have driven the process through to completion. The current process is failing, and mistakes are happening. It is important to have faith in local representatives, give them responsi-

bility and allow them to be held accountable to the electorate.

Mrs D Kelly: I declare an interest as a local government councillor for Craigavon. I also mention my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, and I endorse the earlier comments that were made by the Minister about the two PSNI officers who were shot recently in brutal attempts to take their lives. I express the SDLP's sympathy and our hopes for their recovery. We also endorse the comments that were made to the Minister about the horrific events in Omagh.

Many SDLP Members are missing from the Chamber as former Member Mr John Fee is being buried today. Our party sends its sympathies to his wife and family, and the wider family circle.

In her statement, the Minister said that she wanted to listen. We hope that she will take action on many of the concerns that have been raised, understandably, by Members across the Chamber. I have not heard great dissent this morning, once the arguments over the strength of powers that local government should have are distilled.

At the early stages, the SDLP set out its vision of strong and accountable local government, which would encourage and promote participative democracy. The Minister referred to the number of meetings that are being held across the North, and she expressed disappointment at the turnout at some of those meetings. However, I ask the Minister to reflect on her many years as a local councillor. She will acknowledge that, during the early stages of the RPA, local councillors were not allowed to engage in the process. They now feel that they are being consulted at the end, rather than at the outset, of the process. That goes some way towards explaining why councillors believe that they have been excluded.

12.00 noon

The SDLP's major concerns centre on the lack of meaningful engagement with stakeholders, particularly parties and councillors, on the detail of the transfer of functions. That lack of engagement persisted throughout the period of direct rule, and the limited progress achieved in eventually securing policy-development panels on RPA has now been rolled back because those panels have been suspended. During the present exercise, only the most superficial level of detail has been shared.

I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge — as other Members have — the concerns of local government staff about morale, motivation and uncertainty about their futures. The emerging findings paper sets out no detail on where local government headquarters will be located when agreement is finally reached. Many people are concerned about council-owned buildings

and where the centre of authority will be located. Some Members highlighted how councils have come together and delivered well for the people, particularly in areas where they received EU funding, but, disappointingly, no departmental funding.

Community-safety planning and the local strategy partnerships were intended to be vehicles for greater engagement with other stakeholders. When I was a member of a local strategy partnership, from the outset, senior staff from various agencies and Departments attended meetings. However, as time went on, ever more people who attended meetings represented their agency, but had little power to make decisions. Decision-makers must be at the table and if they are to deliver, they must bring a substantial budget with them.

The SDLP strongly supports the principle of retaining the community-planning initiatives that were set out as a vision for local government. That is the best way to address the concerns of, and deliver for, the people. Many Western democracies are experiencing less engagement by voters at the ballot box. Voters feel that they have no stake, because they are not part of the decision-making process. Community planning is one way in which it is hoped to stem the tide of a lack in engagement by members of the public.

Many Members have explained the positions of the various Departments. There is great concern that many Departments have yet to hand over any power, or indicate that they will do so. No information has come from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on how they envisage power being devolved. I am sure that all parties acknowledge the concerns about community relations. Local councils can achieve results in that area.

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

Ms Lo: The RPA is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver a world-class system of local government for the people of Northern Ireland. I am dismayed that the Executive's current plans, as presented in the emerging findings paper, fall well short of the necessary mark. The Executive subcommittee is engaged in a blatant attempt to pass only small amounts of responsibility from each Department to local government. That is the wrong way round: it should be a matter of identifying what local government can and should deliver and, subsequently, how central Government needs to be reformed to take account of that.

Most importantly, local representatives must hold prime responsibility for local community planning. They must have a direct say on all its elements, including economic development, emergency services and transport. Local representatives are closest to local communities, and they offer the most direct accountability to local people. Therefore, they must take the leading role in community planning. Currently, they face

severe restrictions in doing so, because they cannot vest land for economic development, and, in most cases, have no direct say on local emergency services.

Furthermore, local representatives play merely a minor consultative role in dealing with local roads and public transport. In practice, local community planning functions are severely restricted by the fact that responsibility for many functions rests with Departments, agencies and quangos. Therefore, ultimately, although most of the blame is often assigned to local councils, most of the power rests with central Government. It is disappointing that the plans in the emerging findings report pay mere lip service to addressing that matter.

For local community planning to become a reality, that will mean not only the transfer of key functions, such as vesting of land for economic development or libraries, but a new type of local government, with partnership-working on areas such as fire and rescue, local roads and bus services. Local representatives need to be given a meaningful say, and new and fairer financial arrangements must be put in place. Estates management should be transferred to local councils so that they can take the lead in the placement of essential education, emergency and health services, even where those are managed by central Government.

Local community planning will also mean a new approach to good relations. Councils must be bound by best practice in community and race relations, and they must take the lead in ensuring improvements in those areas. However, that is not an excuse for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Departments to shirk their responsibilities. Good relations in this society must be the cornerstone of government at all levels.

Reform of local government to the extent that we want will also mean reform of central Government. That is no bad thing. Devolution of justice powers will require a review of Departments in any case. Therefore, in order to deliver more accountable and efficient government, the opportunity should be taken to reform Departments and quangos. Local government cannot be reformed without reforming the whole structure; therefore, we want to see plans from the Executive for reform of all structures of government.

Our message to the Executive is simple: try again. We want to see local government in charge of local functions, using local finance. Most importantly, that will mean real responsibility and accountability for community planning, and a meaningful say for all its associated functions. Moreover, it will mean reform, not only of local government, but of central Government. This is an opportunity to create a world-class system, and the Executive must not throw away that opportunity. I support the amendment.

Mr Elliott: I declare an interest as a local councillor on Fermanagh District Council. I express my condolences to the family of the victims of the fire in Omagh this morning. The family who died came from my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I also express my sympathy to the family of the police officer in Dungannon on whose life a murder attempt was made. I spent over three hours at the scene last night, and I must say that it was a dastardly act.

I thank the Minister for tabling the motion. Although some of the issues raised may have been controversial at times, I hope that they will prove helpful in developing the process. In the absence of devolved government, local councils were the only show in town for almost three decades. Councils were the only forums in which people had an opportunity to display their political views and to make local politics work in the Province. I reiterate my party's call for as much power as is reasonably possible to be given to councils throughout Northern Ireland, as is the policy employed in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The publication of the emerging findings paper was disappointing and aggravating for those who support more power being devolved to local councils. After the release of the paper, NILGA moved quickly to state that the content of the publication was unsatisfactory in many ways. I agree with that interpretation.

As the majority of Members are aware, over 120 elected representatives and officers from local government expressed their feelings about the emerging findings paper at an event in Cookstown on 24 October 2007. Among the arguments expressed at that meeting, and in subsequent publications by NILGA, was the fear that the proposals will not deliver the previously agreed vision and that they will not support the radical transformation of service delivery or provide the opportunity to reinvigorate local democracy. Those were just a few of the concerns that were expressed — there are, of course, many more.

The need for regional democracy to be supported by the Assembly is of major importance. The joy felt by the majority of people in Northern Ireland after the return of the Assembly earlier this year is not in doubt. However, that does not mean that all local government powers can be held within the Executive or the Assembly. Councillors across Northern Ireland are elected by local people on a localised platform. Those of us who support democracy will agree that those elections afford a reasonable level of accountability to local councils, which brings them closer to the communities that they represent.

Accountability provides the basis for an increased mandate at local council level. I have just read through the emerging findings paper; local councils will be overjoyed to hear that in the transfer of the public-

realm aspects of local road functions, they are regaining control of grass cutting, weed spraying, gully emptying, street lighting, off-street car parking and pedestrian permits. All those issues are sensitive and important for local people. However, they do not go far enough in increasing local accountability.

The vision in the paper states that there should be:

“greater clarity between the roles of central and local government”.

It also states that:

“the interests of the citizen should be at the centre of not only the vision for local government but also all decisions relating to the new arrangements”.

For a number of reasons, that is just not the case.

The paper does not provide any clarity on the number of councils or on the proposed functions for transfer to local government.

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

Mr McFarland: I begin by making the rare declaration that I am not — and never have been — a councillor. The Assembly has heard accusations of rowing back, and I will speak briefly on the issue of dual mandates. When the RPA was first announced, I was greatly encouraged that the issue of Members trying to do two or three jobs at the same time, or be in two or three places at the same time, would be addressed. That was going well; last summer, the Preparation for Government Committee met, with the five member parties agreeing to abolish dual mandates.

I am slightly concerned that in meetings of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee — of which I am a member — DUP representatives, supported by their Sinn Féin counterparts, have begun to say that the new councils will need experience. That ignores the substantial number of councillors who are not MLAs or MPs, and who will presumably continue to sit on those councils. The argument that those Members make is that the new councils are so important that sitting MLAs in their parties are required to continue as councillors after 2011. That is crazy stuff. The House must face the issue of dual mandates early and be honest. People do not expect Members to be on councils, in Westminster or in the House of Lords and still perform their duties here.

I ask the Minister to urge her colleague Jeffrey Donaldson, who chairs the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, to address the issue of dual mandates — and to do so quickly.

12.15 pm

Mr Cree: I remind the House that I am a member of North Down Borough Council and have been so for more years than I care to remember. I thank the Minister for tabling the motion. It is timely and its purpose is to enable Members to discuss the emerging findings of

the RPA review and, hopefully, have changes made to them. It is an important debate, and, as other Members have done, I must mention the poor quality of the initial engagement with the RPA team. Despite that, we hope to have a good outcome.

The debate has been good, although there has been a lot of bluster and blether. Mr Weir dwelt on the pluses of the review, but he admitted that it had shortcomings. He highlighted the economic aspect of the review and said that the land bank from INI should be considered for transfer to the councils, which could do a better job with it. He also commented on the transfer of libraries — which was supported by other Members — and housing, among other things.

Mr Maskey referred to the seven-council model, and he appeared to link the number of councils to the amount of power that they will have. That is an interesting situation. Mr Boylan admitted that the review appeared minimalistic, and Mr Molloy — along with other Members — referred to the clawback by Departments.

Mr Gallagher referred to taking the power back to the centre, and Dolores Kelly made a good point about the poor turnouts at local elections, which she linked to the limited powers that councils have. That is worthy of note, and I think that she was the only Member to mention it. Mr Neeson mentioned the Alliance Party's intention to support the NILGA paper, which many of us do. Sammy Wilson referred to the grouping system, which was one of the success stories of the last revision of local government, and that should be considered again.

The Ulster Unionist Party is disappointed at the limited proposals that form the basis of the emerging findings paper. The review of public administration, as it impacts on local government, has the potential to significantly improve the delivery of services to the public by offering effective, efficient, focused and relevant services at the time and place that they are required. The Ulster Unionist Party does not support change for change's sake, but strongly advocates the transfer of those services where the public can experience a significant improvement to their lives and communities. Most people accept that the transfer of a comprehensive range of services would result in a transformation of service delivery, impacting upon — and improving the quality of life of — everyone in the communities in which they serve.

It is clear that the retraction of key services from the original proposals is at odds with the vision outlined in paragraphs 6 to 10 of the emerging findings paper. The proposal to transfer only 1·2% of the public-sector budget and 0·45% of public-sector jobs is a small change. Many believe that that de minimis approach would jeopardise community planning and call into question the value of reorganising councils, given the significant cost of the change process. The limited

proposal before the House could be carried out by the existing councils without any further cost or disruption. The Ulster Unionist Party supports that assessment, but would go further and suggest that the proposed review of Departments has resulted in a circling of the wagons by Ministers and senior departmental staff.

The lack of a strategic vision — and a desire to keep control of the minutiae of Government — undermines the commitment and resources expended by local government over the past five years in preparing for the reform. We appear to have been given a masterclass in U-turning.

The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to local government that is accountable to local communities. That is why we support the 15 local authorities for Northern Ireland model; it would have the power to deliver a comprehensive and responsive service to the people. I ask the House to support the amendment.

Mrs Foster: This has been a very useful debate, and I genuinely mean that, although there was one notable exception, and it is unfortunate that the Member was the first contributor to the debate, because he could have spoiled it for everyone else. Thankfully, he did not, and we have had a very useful exchange about functions, numbers and the vision for local government.

Mr McCrea, who moved the amendment, stated his dismay and frustration, and he wanted to know the purpose of the review of public administration. Not once did he mention what he wants to see for local government. His outburst in the House today was more about a leadership challenge in the Ulster Unionist Party than it was about the review of public administration.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will.

Dr W McCrea: I ask the Minister to be careful when using the name Mr McCrea, because I think she means Basil McCrea, and not the other two honourable gentlemen of that name. *[Laughter.]* I can understand the mistake, because he is a new child on the block, and is, therefore, totally inexperienced.

Mrs Foster: I am very happy to clarify that I am referring to the mover of the amendment. I was never referring to my honourable friend on those issues.

As regards the transfer of functions in the emerging findings paper — and they are emerging findings, and I make no apology for that — I said that I would bring the emerging findings to the House so that we could have the sort of engagement that we are having today. Perhaps some Members would rather that I had waited until I was finished before coming to them.

Emerging findings show that there is an increase to net local government expenditure of 21% — an increase from £455 million to £558 million. Members

have indicated that they do not think that that is enough, so I will have to take that matter back to the subcommittee, which will be meeting very soon.

Basil McCrea also said that he did not want a review of the review of public administration. That obviously means that he wants seven councils, which would be another broken UUP manifesto promise, but then consistency has never been a strong point of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Initially, the Executive subcommittee, and then the Executive, which includes two Ulster Unionist Members, approved the issue of the emerging findings paper for consultation. The Member should remember that point, when he talks about a complete and utter farce, because he is talking about the leader of his own party.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Foster: No, I will not give way. I have taken quite a bit from you this morning.

When the Member talks about complete and utter farce, he is talking about the leader of his own party, who gave the go ahead to put the emerging findings paper out for consultation.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will give way to my colleague. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Surely, there must be something with Mr McCrea criticising his leader.

Dr W McCrea: You mean Basil McCrea.

Mr Weir: Sorry, I mean Basil McCrea criticising his own leader. What possible purpose could he have for doing that?

Mrs Foster: I could not possibly comment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: Now —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Take your seat.

Would Members please stick to the motion, instead of political point scoring? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: I find that very interesting. I will be raising issues with the Speaker concerning comments made by Mr McCrea. Obviously, I have some more issues to raise.

Moving on to the content of the motion; Mr Weir welcomed issues on planning, community-planning powers, vesting powers — which Mr Neeson mentioned and will be given to councils — regeneration powers, economic development and tourism. He expressed his disappointment about local roads, the land bank and Invest NI.

He also expressed disappointment in respect of youth services and libraries.

Mr Maskey said that the review of local government was a work in progress, and referred to governance issues. He will know that governance is referred to in paragraph 49 of the emerging findings paper, and that that is very much a live issue, which we will be addressing. He also talked about the consequence of the move to seven councils, and about finding ways of dealing with shared services, which is an issue that the subcommittee is actively examining with respect to economies of scale.

Mr Gallagher also spoke about governance, and I refer him to paragraph 49 of the emerging findings paper. He said that there was very little in the paper, and that stakeholders did not know what was going on. I take issue with that. We are presently engaged with groups of councillors and other interested parties right across Northern Ireland. Mr Gallagher spoke of his concern about stripping jobs out of the west. It will come as no surprise to him that I will not be stripping any jobs out of the west, if I can help it. I assure him that the paper has no hidden agenda, and that is one of the reasons why I brought it to the Floor of the House.

Mr Gallagher said that the only good Departments were the Department for Social Development and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — and I am sure that my ministerial colleagues will be delighted about that. Obviously, he missed the reference to planning in the paper. Mr Gallagher also said that he was disappointed about the local roads issue.

Mr Neeson spoke of the need for councils to have more meaningful power. He, in common with Ms Lo, said that we should not be looking at RPA in isolation from the current review. That is why, in my opening comments, I referred to the evolution of local government. We should have cognisance of what is going on, but I cannot wait for the institutional review report. We must move ahead with the review of local government.

Mr Neeson said that he wanted me to take NILGA's paper seriously. I certainly will. NILGA has been an invaluable partner in this process, and that will continue. He also referred to reform in health and education. Again, as with institutional review, we must be aware of the reform that is ongoing in other areas. There is a real need to link local government reform to reforms in health and education, for example. I am engaged in talks with the two relevant Ministers to see how that can work in practice.

Sammy Wilson spoke about a once-in-a-lifetime change in local government, as did other Members. I reiterate that very important decisions lie ahead, but this is also a process of evolution and looking to the future. Mr Wilson talked about the need to build up the capacity of local councillors, and said that we should reconsider library functions and youth services. He implored me, and other Ministers, to be imaginative in

considering shared services, and he referred to sectors where that had worked well previously. We are actively considering that matter. He also referred to the purchasing power of local councils in respect of roads, and I am also looking at that issue.

Mr Boylan apologised for not being in Armagh, and I accept his apology. He also talked about equality in governance, and I have already addressed that matter. He said that he was disappointed with the functions package, and referred to the importance of community planning.

Mr Hamilton talked about governance issues from a unionist point of view. I am disappointed that some Members across the Floor thought that it was funny when we were talking about unionists in the west, but did not think that it was so funny when we were talking about nationalists and republicans in the east. Equality in governance is for everyone in Northern Ireland, and it should not be seen as a threat. Mr Hamilton also referred to youth services and libraries.

Mr Molloy said that local government needed more powers and hoped that a gap would not develop between central and local government. I do not want to see a gap; I want to see a more joined-up relationship between central and local government, with the appropriate body delivering the appropriate service. Even if there is not full devolution to local government, that should not mean that councils cannot deliver services in particular areas. However, we are looking at ways of teeing that up.

Mr Molloy said that he was disappointed at the talk of a delay of elections until 2011. It is legislatively impossible to have the provisions of the review of public administration through the House before 2009. Therefore, we must either delay the election or simply hold another election to the 26 existing councils. That issue must be resolved.

12.30 pm

Mr Beggs mainly addressed planning matters and the need for area-planning powers. Some 85% of what is currently contained in the area plans will be delegated to local councils. I am disappointed that the Member did not pick up on that fact. There are no area plans in England, Scotland and Wales. All that the Department will retain centrally is the remaining 15% of the content of the area plans, which is required for strategic reasons and to deal with European law. I am sure that Mr Beggs is aware of the judicial review that is under way in respect of the northern area plan. Mr Beggs said that councils must have the power to draw up plans for their areas. That is precisely what we are trying to achieve through local plans. He should also be aware that a planning review is ongoing. We are trying to ensure that the planning process is fit for purpose when those functions are devolved to local councils.

Mrs Kelly said that she hoped that I would listen to the points that Members made from the Floor of the House. I hope that, by now, she realises that I have listened very carefully to what has been said; that is why I brought this matter to the Floor of the House. I accept her comments about the earlier consultations and the lack of engagement. I also accept her comments on the concerns about local government staff and estates. I acknowledge Mrs Kelly's support for community-planning initiatives. Ms Lo also said that community planning was important.

I thank Councillor Elliott for his helpful comments. That is you finished, Tom. *[Laughter.]* I thank him for his comments about Fermanagh District Council and the role that it could play, the need for clarity in respect of relationships between central and local government, and the importance of sorting out the number of councils in the near future.

I firmly acknowledge the work that local councillors have done over the past 35 years, when there was no devolved elected Chamber to take the flak. Local councils were often the only place in which the views of the community could be expressed. I wish to place that on record.

Alan McFarland, who was quite glad to acknowledge the fact that he is not a councillor, said that matters related to the institutional review and dual mandates need to be sorted out. I am happy to pass those comments on to my Rt Hon friend the Chairman of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Leslie Cree made the winding-up speech on the amendment and gave the somewhat surprising indication that he believed that 26 councils could deliver on future arrangements. I hope that the Ulster Unionist position is not that we stick to 26 councils but that we move to the appropriate number, with the appropriate level of service.

Our shared goal is the delivery of a vision for local government, to improve the quality of life for all our people and to create communities that are sustainable, vibrant, healthy, prosperous, stable and people centred.

I look forward — believe it or not — to coming back to the House with the final recommendations of the review. There is much interest in those recommendations, not only among local councillors, but in the House.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the emerging findings of the review of the Review of Public Administration decisions, as they relate to local government, and the initial proposals for the future shape of

local government; and calls on the Executive to transfer meaningful and significant functions to local government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: 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 12.34 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Institutional Format

The deputy First Minister (Mr McGuinness):

With your permission, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to say how saddened I am by this morning's devastating news of the tragic death of a family in Omagh. My sympathy goes out to their friends, relatives and neighbours who are, no doubt, heartbroken by their terrible loss.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to everyone in our emergency services who had to deal with that awful situation. The work in which the emergency services are currently engaged in Omagh contrasts markedly with the actions of those who, in recent days, shot two policemen. That micro-group is totally detached from reality, and has no popular support in the community. I condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the actions of its members and I call on them to stop such actions immediately.

In compliance with Section 52(6)(b) of the NI Act 1998, we wish to make a statement on the second meeting, in institutional format, of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), which was held at the Ballymascanlon Hotel, Dundalk, on Tuesday 30 October 2007. All of the Ministers who attended the meeting have approved the following report, and we make it on their behalf.

The Executive were represented by the First Minister, junior Minister Paisley, the Minister of Education and myself. The Irish Government were represented by Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs, who chaired the meeting.

Ministers expressed regret at the decision of Seagate Technology to close its plant at Limavady. We recognised that, because Seagate's workforce comes from a wide, cross-border area, that decision will have serious implications for both the Executive and the Irish Government. We agreed to co-operate closely in the coming weeks in our efforts to address that situation, and we welcomed the announcement of 300 new jobs at Norbrook Laboratories Ltd in Newry.

The Council noted that the terms of office of the boards of the North/South implementation bodies and of Tourism Ireland Ltd will expire in December 2007, and asked that work be taken forward to ensure that the NSMC can put new boards in place by November

2007. The Council expressed its appreciation of the work and the commitment of the outgoing chairpersons, vice-chairpersons and board members of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd.

The Council welcomed the opportunity to consider the EU dimension of its work, and agreed to consider that matter further at its next plenary meeting.

The Council noted progress on the implementation of the recommendations contained in 'Study of Obstacles to Mobility', which was commissioned by the NSMC, including progress on a mutual recognition of qualifications in the areas of education and health, the introduction of single tariffs by some mobile phone operators, and the greater availability of public-service information for people who wish to cross the border to live, work and study. The Council launched a cross-border mobility website, which provides a central access point for information on a range of issues for such people. The Council requested that its secretariat keep the website's operation, development, marketing and management under review, examine options for its future funding — including possible EU funding — and report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council agreed that the NSMC secretariat should convene two working groups: one to explore options for going forward on the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis; and the second to examine cross-border banking issues, including that of transaction charges. Both groups will report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council noted the progress to date in acquiring permanent accommodation for the NSMC joint secretariat in Armagh. The Council agreed that, once evaluation of the shortlisted bidders is completed, subject to the appropriate internal processes in each Administration, officials should enter into contractual negotiations with the preferred bidder to provide lease accommodation and report progress to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council discussed a number of issues of human resources in respect of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, including pay issues and the regrading of posts, which were raised in a paper that was prepared by the chief executive officers of those bodies.

The Council agreed that officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel and from the Department of Finance would advise their Ministers on the issues and consider the chief executive officers' pay paper together with additional information provided by the bodies in the context of relevant national pay policies. Conclusions will be reported to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council agreed a framework for approving the regrading of certain posts in the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd. It agreed that, provided the principles set out in the framework are

adhered to, NSMC approval of such regradings can be deemed to have been given.

The Council noted that progress on all the matters discussed at the institutional meeting will be reported to the next NSMC plenary meeting and agreed that the Council will meet again in institutional format, as appropriate, in 2008.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I wish to associate myself with everything that the deputy First Minister has said, especially about the terrible tragedy in Omagh. I am sure that our hearts are sore as we think of the sadness over that family and over the town at this time. They can be assured that all right-thinking people feel as we do about the matter.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I want to question him on a specific point. Will he outline to the House the process by which appointments to the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd will take place? I assume that that will happen over the forthcoming weeks or months. In addition, are there any plans to establish a board for Waterways Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: Under the agreement that set up the implementation bodies in March 1998, the North/South Ministerial Council appoints the management boards to the trade and business development body — InterTradeIreland; to the North/South language body, which includes Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch; to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission; and an advisory board to the Food Safety Promotion Board. Overall, there are 60 members on the boards of those bodies. The Special EU Programmes Body and Waterways Ireland do not have boards.

The terms of office of the current board members, including the chairs and vice-chairs, end in December 2007, and since most of those people have served two terms, they cannot be reappointed. Many of the chairs, vice-chairs and members have served on the boards for almost seven years. The current boards have made a sustained commitment to the work of the bodies, and the Executive and the Irish Government are currently considering appointments to the new boards to be made on a 50:50 basis. The process of securing nominations is under way. Appointments to the boards will require approval at an appropriate NSMC meeting in November to ensure that the new boards are in place by mid-December.

If a Waterways Ireland board were to be established, that would require legislation. As Members will know, the St Andrews review is an opportunity to consider that.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I was going to ask when the appointments would be made, but the deputy First Minister has already answered that question.

Mr O’Loan: I wish to be associated with the deputy First Minister’s expression of sympathy in relation to the Omagh tragedy. I also welcome his remarks about, and echo his strong condemnation of, the attempted murders of two police officers.

I appreciate the appropriate reference to the job losses at Seagate Technology in Limavady. It was good that the meeting was able to welcome 300 new jobs at Norbrook Laboratories Ltd in Newry. What contribution can the North/South Ministerial Council make to economic development, North and South, including co-operation between INI and IDA Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: We are all conscious that we are still in the early stages of this Administration; the institutions have been up and running for six months, effectively. Considerable work is taking place in the different institutional formats. In the course of the past week, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Michelle Gildernew were involved in one of the sectoral meetings.

All issues that are connected to the economy are obviously of huge importance to this Administration and to the Assembly, as it moves forward.

We work with people in the Irish Government who recognise the importance of liaising on matters in which it is clear that benefit can be achieved for Dublin and for ourselves. In the context of the work that is taking place on what I consider to be the most important economic investment conference ever to take place on the North, as time moves on, we look forward to working, through the NSMC, with the Irish Government and others to ensure that we take best advantage of the opportunities that are available for our workforce and community.

Mr Ford: I too thank the Minister for his statement, and I associate my group both with his expressions of sympathy to the family that has been devastated by the Omagh tragedy and with his condemnation of the attacks on the two police officers.

When the Minister mentioned the cross-border mobility website, I was surprised to learn that the ambition behind it appears to be merely to provide information. Does the Minister not agree that strong benefits would be brought to this society, North and South, if the cross-border movement of young people into further and higher education were encouraged? Given that he is examining websites, perhaps he might also consider whether he could spare time to publish on the OFMDFM website the report on research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide. Bearing in mind the issues that apply to society here, both North and South, perhaps he could discuss a shared future at the next NSMC meeting.

The deputy First Minister: I shall give a brief history of the report to which the Member has referred.

In September 2000, the North/South Ministerial Council commissioned a study on obstacles to mobility in order to identify the impediments that make it difficult for people who wish to move across the border — in either direction — to work, study or live. That study was published in February 2002 and contained 50 recommendations that covered several key areas. Twelve recommendations, relating to the transfer of pensions, bank charges and the provision of information, remain to be implemented. Some progress has been made to implement those remaining recommendations, including: work on the mutual recognition of qualifications, resulting in the freer cross-border movement of workers in areas such as the education and health sectors; the introduction of single tariffs by some mobile-phone operators; and greater availability of public-service information for people who wish to cross the border to live, work and study. The new cross-border mobility information website has been launched, and the NSMC joint secretariat will keep the operation, marketing and management of that website under review. The secretariat will examine options for the website’s future funding, including possible EU funding, and it will report on that to future NSMC meetings. The Council agreed that the secretariat should convene two working groups. The first group will explore options for implementing a mechanism to transfer pension rights on a cross-border basis, and the other will examine cross-border banking issues, such as transaction charges. Those groups will also report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The Member also mentioned a shared future, about which there is a great deal of debate. The work that the First Minister and I — and, indeed, all the parties in the Assembly — are doing to lead by example is the best illustration of the progress that we are making. We are showing that a huge job of work needs to be done in order to bring about a situation that will obviously create massive savings for us in our budgetary considerations, especially if we have a very sound basis on which to integrate our community more sensibly.

A live and current debate on a shared future is ongoing, but I am not sure that it is an issue for the NSMC. In the final analysis, the matter will have to be settled to the satisfaction of everyone. Everyone in the Assembly has contributed to the work that has been done on it thus far; more people than just the First Minister and I have been involved. The existence of the Assembly, the fact that the institutions are up and working, and the fact that we are making important agreements on budgetary issues, investment strategies, and programmes for Government, are clear indicators to the public about how we intend to move forward. As the First Minister — correctly — said after the NSMC meeting in Armagh, the important point is to end all the old hatreds and divisions.

2.15 pm

Mr Moutray: Will the deputy First Minister assure Members that the review body will critically examine the management of the North/South implementation bodies and ensure that they do not remain the shambles that many of them currently are?

The deputy First Minister: The review will examine objectively the efficiency and value for money of existing implementation bodies and consider the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation in the NSMC that might deliver mutual benefits.

The review group's first meeting took place on 31 October 2007. In addition to senior officials from the Executive and the Irish Government, the review group also includes an advisory panel comprised of four experts — two nominated by the Executive and two by the Irish Government. The two Executive-nominated experts are Peter King and Sean Oliver. Eoin O'Shea and John Hynes were nominated by the Irish Government. Eoin O'Shea is the chief executive of the Institute of Directors in Ireland, and John Hynes is the former secretary general of the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

It is anticipated that intensive work will be undertaken by the review group during November and December and that a final report will be made available to the first NSMC plenary meeting in 2008. To ensure that review costs are kept to a minimum, the NSMC decided that the review group would draw on the existing resources and expertise of Departments in the North and in Dublin in order to implement its terms of reference. The NSMC secretariat will provide full administrative and secretarial support to the review group, and the work of the existing North/South bodies will be unaffected during the review.

Therefore, I have no doubt that in the course of that work, which is under way, we will see people facing up to the past criticisms of those bodies in order to improve them in the future.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to associate my party with the First Minister's and the deputy First Minister's comments about the tragedy in Omagh and the despicable attacks in Derry and Dungannon.

In his statement, the deputy First Minister referred to the North/South Ministerial Council's study on cross-border mobility, which Sinn Féin welcomes. The report, published in February 2002, contains 50 recommendations. Will the deputy First Minister indicate what progress has been made to implement any outstanding recommendations, particularly those relating to workers' pension rights? Will he also indicate whether the study group's report will be presented to the next council meeting and when that might be?

The deputy First Minister: The outcome of that will be reported to the next NSMC meeting. At this stage, it is difficult to say what progress has been made because we have only just ratified the review. Like everyone else, I await the outcome with considerable interest, particularly in relation to pension transfers and bank charges. Both of those matters are being determinedly focused on by the group.

Mr Shannon: In the report, the deputy First Minister mentioned Tourism Ireland Ltd. Has a strategy been agreed that will benefit the whole Province? I ask in the light of the loss of 100 jobs in my area last week, and I am conscious that tourism is a growth area and has the potential to turn things around. In addition, is there any indication when single tariffs for mobile phones will be introduced?

The deputy First Minister: As I indicated earlier, there was a sectoral meeting last week, on which Nigel Dodds, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will report.

On phone charges, things seem to be moving at a far quicker speed than we have previously seen. We are hopeful that there will be action in the shorter term.

Tourism is vital to our economy, and I was heartened by the recent news that, last year, there was a 75% increase in the number of North American tourists visiting the North.

Those are spectacular figures by our standards, and they show clearly that an open market exists for us in the United States in particular. We are conscious that, because of the state of world affairs, instability and the unpopularity of American foreign policy in other countries, many Americans are reluctant to travel widely. The fact that large numbers of them are coming to Ireland is something that we should take advantage of. The 75% increase in the number of American tourists travelling to the North will boost our tourism industry in the future.

Mr Shannon comes from a particularly beautiful part of our country, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the entrepreneurs in his area will be able to capitalise on the numbers of tourists to the benefit of the local community.

Mr McClarty: My party and I would like to be associated with the expressions of sympathy for those who so tragically lost their lives in Omagh this morning. We also wish the two wounded police officers very speedy recoveries.

I was extremely interested to read that the horrendous economic news that emanated from my constituency regarding the impending loss of 930 jobs at Seagate was discussed at the NSMC meeting. Can the deputy First Minister tell the House what progress,

if any, has been made in drawing up an action plan to address that situation?

The deputy First Minister: Essentially, the Seagate facility at Limavady produces substrates — component parts for data-storage systems in computers — which are common across all computer hard-drive systems and which are now manufactured predominantly in Asia. As a consequence of that, and of recent expansion in global capacity, the Limavady facility is, according to Seagate, no longer cost-competitive, particularly as regards labour costs.

How can we provide assistance to keep the plant here, or address what is a serious situation involving the loss of so many jobs? Invest NI has been working closely with the company over the last 18 months in an effort to improve efficiencies and flexibility at the plant. Despite the significant success achieved by the workers at Limavady, the movement in global capacity and prices means that the cost differential, which is approximately £15 million per annum, is too great to be bridged.

It was clear in the course of the meeting that we had with Dermot Ahern that he was keen to see the Administrations of the North and South working together to address the issue. In the coming period, we will try to see how we can take advantage of the combined wisdom of those agencies that are under our combined stewardship to see whether we can deal with the horrific difficulties in Limavady.

The north-west gateway initiative, which was set up during the period of suspension, depended on Departments working with local councils. All of that requires a joined-up approach and an integrated strategy. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the combined wisdom of people who have been through such experiences, particularly in the South.

Dermot Ahern talked about the situation in Clonmel, which suffered equally horrendous job losses. However, the people there did not lie down under it; they got up off their backsides, shook themselves down and recovered — Clonmel is now booming. We hope to do that with Limavady in the coming period. It will not be easy; it will be difficult. However, given the scale of the job losses, there is no doubt whatsoever that we must prioritise Limavady as an area in need of assistance.

Mr P Ramsey: I too would like to be associated with the deputy First Minister's condemnation of the attempted murders of the two policemen and the awful loss of the family in Omagh last night.

In his recent speech to a Chamber of Commerce meeting, the Taoiseach referred to the north-west gateway initiative. He discussed how that initiative is a joint approach to building greater capacity and a better quality of life for all in the north-west region, which, as we know, includes Donegal, Limavady, Strabane and Derry.

The Taoiseach identified challenges that the initiative addresses, including workforce development, higher education, innovation and science. Will those areas be prioritised, especially in light of David McClarty's point about the economic setbacks that recent job losses have created?

Sir Reg Empey has often talked about investment coming from America. However, those investors are no longer interested in capital investment; they are more interested in a trained and skilled workforce. What efforts are the Executive making to ensure that we are creating a better workforce that has the capacity to attract investment?

The deputy First Minister: The Member and I, among others, were present when the Taoiseach visited the north-west a number of weeks ago. The Taoiseach spoke about the importance of the north-west gateway initiative, which is hugely important to everyone who lives in that area.

Since taking up the post of Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey has consistently reiterated the importance of skilling our workforce so that it meets the needs of a changing world. That is a huge priority for him. We have been to the United States on several occasions, and he and I were on a delegation together during the Smithsonian Festival. In all the engagements that we were involved in, it was clear that he considers developing skills a priority on which his Department needed to major.

It is still early days. However, the economic investment conference will take place in May, and many business groups from the United States will probably come to the North before that. In our attempts to attract more inward investment, we hope to interest many of those groups in the situation in the north-west, especially as the recent devastating news in Limavady has created an issue that must be addressed.

Other good work has been done on roads in the north-west. Roads are key to infrastructure, and they encourage people to visit particular areas. The universities in that area have been working to attract more people to their institutions.

Sir Reg Empey was involved in a sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in Dublin in recent weeks, and he majored on the issue of a skills strategy, which is rightly a priority.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. The deputy First Minister's statement referred to the next plenary meeting of the NSMC. Will the Minister please announce the date of that meeting?

The deputy First Minister: The date of the next NSMC plenary meeting has not yet been finalised. However, it is anticipated that it will take place early in

the new year. Given that it is the intention to host the North/South Ministerial Council meetings on an alternate basis, the next plenary meeting will be held in Dundalk in the South.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister state when he envisages that the new accommodation for the North/South Ministerial Council secretariat in Armagh city will be ready? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: A business case and an economic appraisal that were completed in 2006 confirmed that the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat accommodation does not meet operational requirements. It was therefore recommended that suitable alternative accommodation in the Armagh area should be identified. I have been to the current accommodation several times, and I have seen the far-from-satisfactory conditions in which the civil servants are working.

2.30 pm

It is recommended that the secretariat should lease suitable accommodation in the Armagh area from a third party, which will either provide an appropriate building, or design and build one to specification. Earlier this year, expressions of interest were sought from those willing to provide accommodation for the secretariat. A number of tenders were received and have been evaluated against agreed criteria to provide a shortlist of four bidders. Those four have been invited to respond to a second, more rigorous selection process using a more detailed specification. At its meeting on 30 October, the Council agreed that, once evaluation of the shortlisted bids is complete — subject to the appropriate internal processes in each Administration — officials should enter into contract negotiations with the preferred bidder to provide leased accommodation, and report progress to a future NSMC meeting. Following the award of a contract, construction and fit-out will take approximately two years, and the new accommodation could be available in late 2009.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Ministers for their statement. Has the deputy First Minister been driven to distraction by the complaints of the First Minister and junior Minister Paisley about what a waste of time and money the North/South Ministerial Council represents, or have they changed their views on this issue since the first Assembly?

In his discussions with Tourism Ireland on human resources, which I see is on the menu here, have the deputy First Minister and his colleagues worked out how the marked community imbalance in the staff of that body is to be rectified?

The deputy First Minister: With respect to the Member's second question, all those matters are

consistently under review. Where there are difficulties, measures will be taken to correct them.

As to whether I am driven to distraction by the First Minister, I have been working with him for the last six months and he has not driven me to distraction yet.

Dr Farry: No doubt the House takes great comfort from the working relationship between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. However, we would like to see more delivery and better results.

With reference to the deputy First Minister's statement and his focus on economic development after Seagate, is there not a limit on how far co-operation between the two jurisdictions can go? They operate in different frameworks: the South works on the basis of a differential rate of corporation tax; in Northern Ireland, we have to operate on the basis of selective financial assistance through the award of grants.

Have the Executive sought the assistance of the Irish Government in making representations to the British Government on the Varney Review? How will the Southern Government encourage investors who are considering investment in the island of Ireland to invest in the North as opposed to the South, notwithstanding the more competitive framework in the South of Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: The Member raises obvious practical difficulties: the fact that we are working with two separate jurisdictions and two completely different systems of government. The issue of corporation tax has exercised the Executive and the Assembly many times in the last six months.

During the course of his review, Varney went to Dublin and met different interest groups there. No doubt he learnt the views of both the Irish Government, who are supportive of everything that we have said in relation to that issue, and business interests in the South.

There is always a level of competition, as different regions of the country constantly angle for more jobs and more prosperity. For us, the question is whether — in the course of our deliberations with the Irish Government on a wide range of matters under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council — we are working with people willing to assist in economic investment and development in the North. It is clear to us that there is good heart for the North in Irish Government circles and that, in spite of all the practical difficulties, people are willing to be imaginative as to how we go forward and improve the economic prospects for people in the North, who have been so detrimentally affected by decades of conflict.

Our society is emerging from that conflict, and those with whom we work are prepared to assist as much as possible. For example, there is no doubt that our efforts to encourage investment from the United States receive support from the Irish Government. As it approaches, I

am becoming excited about the economic investment conference's prospects. The new US special envoy to the North, Paula Dobriansky, has been here on a number of occasions and has worked very hard to attract key American companies to the investment conference. She has not simply issued fine words or aspirational statements but has stressed the need for delivery, which is the kind of language that I like to hear when I talk to people about economic investment.

The Irish Government are therefore encouraging all of that to which I have referred. Practical difficulties remain, but it is a matter of being imaginative, of which we are capable.

2.45 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Sports Strategy

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 a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for a winding-up speech.

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of sport in the physical, social and economic well-being of society; expresses concern that National Lottery funding is being diverted to the 2012 London Olympics and will have a negative impact on community sport; and believes that the proposed draft budget is not sufficient to meet the standards and priorities of the proposed sports strategy recently announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

I am aware that two of my colleagues on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have tabled an amendment to the motion. We are working well in Committee, so I do not want there to be a Division, particularly on sport. However, we shall see how the debate goes.

Sport and exercise are extremely important to the well-being of society: it is not an accident that socially progressive Governments invest heavily in sport and exercise facilities. Sport and exercise have a direct impact on our health, social lives and education, and they contribute to a country's international standing and economic well-being. There is great concern across the community and in sporting sectors at the inadequate funding for sport in the draft Budget. Given wider spending commitments, the ambitious targets that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has set will not be met.

Serious shortfalls in sports funding have occurred as a result of the siphoning-off of £4.5 million of lottery funding for the London Olympics. When the London bid was announced, no mention was made of the fact that money intended for good causes would be used to subvert the infrastructure in London. As a result, we now see the failure of our Executive to provide adequate funding to offset funding reductions in the draft Budget.

Sport gives society a powerful return on investment. It makes us fitter and healthier, and it improves self-esteem and communities. Where there is world-class participation, sport provides an international platform for the entire region.

Consider the money that sport saves the Health Service. For example, in my Foyle constituency, there is a regeneration project known as the TRIAX community sport programme. The programme involves people from the Fountain, the Bogside and the Brandywell. TRIAX runs a health and fitness club for women, of which one of my constituents — let us call her Mary — is a member. Mary was badly overweight, her physical health was deteriorating, and she was lonely and depressed. After she joined the health and fitness club, she made friends and lost over three stone. She now has her life back. Mary's story is replicated in homes and communities across the North, and, as the Minister will know, that example highlights the input that sport makes to health and well-being in communities.

Sport is worth investing in because the returns for health, education and society are so substantial. There was deep disappointment across the sport and community sectors when the draft Budget was announced.

The sports sector delivers well above its weight due to so much voluntary contribution; it probably has more voluntary contribution than any other sector. It is an indictment that any Government should expect such work to continue to be carried out on the cheap.

As a result of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) decisions announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel last week, there are concerns for sport in Northern Ireland. I will talk about three specific issues: the impact on the draft strategy for sport, the Olympic centres of excellence, and the stadia safety programme.

In October 2007, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure launched the 'Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2007-2017'. That document identified anticipated investments and associated targets for sport's contribution to society in Northern Ireland during the next 10 years. Proposals in the CSR provide only a minute revenue contribution towards the spending that will be necessary to achieve the strategy's targets and outcomes. However, the CSR document lifts many targets directly from the strategy. It is totally unrealistic to expect the level of investment announced for the first three years to make any significant contribution to the targets proposed in the strategy. As a result, the strategy document identifies the need to spend £90 million in developing sports venues in Northern Ireland. Without such development, the targets cannot be achieved.

The draft Budget provides virtually no funding for sports facilities at community level. I will reiterate: no money will be available in the Budget for any community sports infrastructure in Northern Ireland. That, combined with the loss of lottery income to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, means that Sport Northern Ireland will have no opportunity to make capital

investment in community-sports facilities during the next three years.

The historic level of investment by Sport Northern Ireland — £70 million during the past 10 years to local clubs, councils and community organisations — will cease completely. Sport will receive no capital from Government or from lottery funding.

Peter Hain announced the elite facilities programme, and he confirmed that a budget of £53 million to fund programmes would ensure that Northern Ireland would benefit from the legacy of the Olympic Games. Many public- and private-sector organisations have spent time and resources in applying for funds under the funding programme of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Many of the bids were superb and promised to provide outstanding centre-of-excellence facilities across Northern Ireland. Indeed, many of them were promised additional investment. It is disappointing, therefore, that the recent announcement reduces that Budget commitment to £35 million.

Fifteen million pounds has already been set aside for a fifty-metre swimming pool in Bangor, but there are £102 million worth of applications for other Olympic-related facilities outstanding. I understand that Sport Northern Ireland and the applicants had anticipated that there would be a pot of more than £30 million to fund the winners of the competition. The CSR announcement has reduced that pot to just £20 million. If that situation is not remedied, the Executive will fail to deliver on the former Secretary of State's promise of £53 million. Resources have been wasted on making applications when a large part of the budget has now disappeared. Northern Ireland will fail to benefit from any legacy opportunities from the 2012 Olympic Games.

During the past seven years, the stadia safety programme has delivered health and safety improvements to major sports grounds in Northern Ireland. The draft Budget makes no provision for any continued investment in major sports grounds. In 1997, the Scott Report identified that investment of £30 million was required to bring Northern Ireland's sports grounds up to proper health and safety standards. Inflation and increased standards have now taken the required amount to well over the £6.3 million that has been invested by Sport Northern Ireland. There has been failure to deliver on obligations to improve health and safety for spectators and players at major sports grounds, and members of the public will be exposed to unreasonable risk when they attend those grounds.

Northern Ireland will fail to attract significant events because our sports grounds may not be up to the required standard; indeed, some of them may even be closed because they are not fit for purpose. Sporting infrastructure in Northern Ireland is falling further behind that of the Republic of Ireland, Britain, and the rest of the world.

Grounds will fail to meet the standards imposed by The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the associated 'Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds', commonly known as the "green guide". Grounds will be closed or their capacity greatly reduced.

The big problem is the lack of capital funds. The Olympic budget has been cut by £18 million, and there is no funding for safe sports grounds. Sport Northern Ireland has made a commitment of £8.5 million to a safety programme. That money can come only from the Olympic facilities budget, reducing it to around £11 million — plus the cost of the swimming pool. That constitutes a drop of £27 million from the original budget of £53 million — that is a lot of money.

Even if Sport Northern Ireland received an additional £8.5 million to provide for safe sport grounds, the sad reality is that there is no capital funding for sports infrastructure across Northern Ireland. I say that in the context that there are groups that are currently receiving funding for modernisation processes, which are carrying out excellent work.

Ulster Rugby and the Ulster Council of the GAA have secured funding until March 2008. If additional funding is not added to that budget, we shall face major redundancies in those two organisations, which even the Minister would concede are carrying out excellent work in their own communities in promoting health and well-being, and reducing social crime and vandalism. As I understand it, 15 jobs will be lost from the GAA and Ulster Rugby unless additional money is provided.

At a time when we are trying to create a positive environment in which sports clubs have the capacity to deliver on health and well-being, and when they are doing the work that the Government expects them to do, we are shutting up shop.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the second "sport" and insert

"; welcomes the proposed sports strategy recently announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; recognises that funding of the strategy should be considered in the context of the findings of the Vernon assets group; and calls on all stakeholders to work together to maximise the opportunities that exist in the sports strategy."

I consider it almost impossible to underestimate the impact of sport in supporting and sustaining the social and economic framework of our society. I shall comment on the motion and the amendment, consecutively. The effects of active participation in sport on the long-term health of our society are overwhelmingly positive. I believe, as Mr Ramsey does, that we must analyse the benefits of sports activity on the human body and, increase our understanding of why inclusive community-based sport is so essential and why it requires sufficient resources. This matter was discussed by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in the context of the Minister's statement, but

not in respect of how we should address the issue. That is why the motion is a little premature.

Recent research indicates that exercise triggers the release of naturally produced chemicals that protect the brain cells and keeps them performing at top speed — a goal that we are always aiming for. Exercise can protect an ageing brain from dementia, and even from Alzheimer's disease. Perhaps some Members should take note of that.

Participation in sport boosts concentration by assisting us in gaining a restful night's sleep. It also boosts energy levels. Therefore, the impact of participation in sport is very real. Active sports participation reduces the risk of high blood pressure, helps to maintain normal blood-glucose levels, and helps in the prevention and management of type-2 diabetes. Recently, there was a presentation by Diabetes UK in the Long Gallery, at which its representatives said that one of the most common forms of diabetes is type 2. That is the type that affects people who were, perhaps, not born with diabetes, but acquire it later in life.

Moreover, sports participation assists in the development of strong bones and can be exceptionally beneficial for women, who may be prone to osteoporosis.

We all now understand the clear benefits of sport for one's heart in respect of cholesterol and blood flow, which are critical risk factors in coronary heart disease and strokes. We should also consider the negative impact of inactivity, namely the increased risks of colon cancer and breast cancer. It should be noted that inactivity has been linked to cancers of the womb, lungs and prostate. There is a high incidence of prostate cancer in men. High blood pressure — or hypertension — can speed up the progress of kidney disease.

We are only too aware of the rise in obesity rates, particularly in childhood obesity, and the National Health Service is trying to address that problem directly. For all of those reasons, it is critical that our community-based sports services and development of that sector are actively resourced and promoted.

Let it also be noted that I strongly welcome the decision to award the 2012 Olympic Games to the great city of London. The positive repercussions of that decision will be strongly felt in Northern Ireland. Indeed, along with many others, we campaigned at local government level for the London bid. I was delighted that the London 2012 roadshow visited Northern Ireland, and I hope that it inspires the people of this Province to engage in sport and unearth their own talents.

I broadly welcome the comments of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in encouraging everyone in Northern Ireland to get involved in all aspects of the Olympic games, whether it be sports participation, volunteering or coaching, so that we can leave a lasting legacy for generations to come in Northern Ireland.

However, if funds are diverted, I am concerned about the impact on local sports clubs and community sports development. I witness daily the positive impact that funding has had in allowing community-based sports teams to offer an inclusive sports service to hundreds and thousands of my constituents. That is replicated in other constituencies across the whole of the Province. It is therefore imperative that the development of that work is not stunted by inadequate resource allocation or diversion of resources to other areas.

Mr P Ramsey: The amendment refers to the Vernon assets group. Is there a time frame for looking at DCAL and public bodies to determine what surplus lands there are? Some of the groups can ill afford for that review to take place in two years' time. An immediate effect is needed.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. I was about to come to that point.

Just last week, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee received a letter indicating that approximately £43 million of lottery funding and contributions that would have gone to the arts, sport and culture was being given directly to the Olympic Games. We have tried to explain our position in the amendment. That shortfall of £43 million — indeed, some Members have said that it may be as much as £70 million — means that good major projects are being put on hold. Capital projects could be shelved, and many other good sporting projects could be put on the back burner for some time. Where is the legacy for sport in the Province that the 2012 Olympic Games is supposed to leave us? It is not right that some 80-plus projects and schemes are being brushed aside for an Olympic programme. We all welcome that programme, but we want to see what the lasting benefits will be for us. That is why we have put forward this amendment.

For everyone's information, I want to explain the idea behind the amendment. At about half past ten this morning, I spoke to the Minister about my comments so that I could make them publicly in the Chamber. The assets realisation group is headed by Ed Vernon. His job is to source surplus resources in the areas that fall within the remit of the Northern Ireland Assembly and to ensure that those moneys are then ploughed back into projects that will perhaps not go ahead because of the re-allocation of money to the Olympic Games. With respect to Pat, his motion outlines how we all feel, but it does not outline how we will address this matter. However, the amendment does just that; it tells us how we can address the shortfall.

I asked the Minister about that matter this morning, and it is important that the point is made. I was told this morning that that review of surplus resources will be made available and will, I understand, be in the Budget year beginning 1 April 2008. We are looking

for extra resources, and they will be found as a result of the assets review. It is important that all stakeholders work together to maximise the many opportunities of the sports strategy.

It is important that that statement is made, and I thank the Member for making his intervention in relation to it. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure must discuss with the Minister how the issue will be addressed: only then can we move on.

I strongly share the Minister's concerns that participation rates in sport are among the lowest in the UK, and falling. I want to see those rates improve through the combined action of Sport Northern Ireland, councils and resources in our education sector. I want to see a win-win situation, in which we maximise the potential of the 2012 Olympic Games in London and other significant events such as the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in 2014, alongside the adequate resourcing of a community-based sporting infrastructure.

We have a tremendous opportunity, not only to be part of the greatest show on Earth, the Olympic Games — and the next greatest show, the Commonwealth Games — but to have a legacy for the people of the Province and the children who come after us. That will help us to meet the 24 targets set out in the draft strategy; it will assist in improving public health; and it will contribute to our children's academic performance and self-esteem. It will go some way to addressing the under-representation in our sporting programmes of women, people with a disability and people on low incomes. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I approve of the broad thrust of the motion. However, my party will support the amendment as an enhancement of it. The second part of the motion would tend to tie our hands before the Budget consultation process takes place and before, as Mr Shannon suggested, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has an opportunity to talk to the Minister about the matter.

It is disappointing that money is being taken from the poor to feed the rich. Our local sporting community is already — and has ever been — significantly underfunded. More than £40 million of Lotto funding has been taken away from our hopelessly insufficient budget by the English. Some things never change. We are told that there will be some spin-off for us from the Olympics — a sort of “live horse, and you will get oats” assurance. There may be some training or games at the new Long Kesh stadium, and maybe some other crumbs. However, between 2009 and 2012, our sporting organisations, and small clubs, such as boxing clubs, in more needy areas in particular, will not develop as they had hoped, and many may not survive. I pay tribute to my own boxing club — St Canice's in Dungiven —

which has produced one of Ireland's best current professional boxers, Paul "Dudey" McCloskey. I wish him, along with John Duddy from the city, and all our boxers, every success in the future.

We should not rule out the possibility that a further tranche of Lotto money will be taken from us, considering the almost monthly announcements of upward adjustments of the estimates for the London Games. The estimated cost of building the Olympic stadium, for example, has doubled since 2004. During the inevitably lean years from 2009 to 2012, we should seek enhanced investment from the South, considering that all sports, except soccer, are organised on an all-Ireland basis, and not unmindful of the likelihood that many of our local soccer stars will opt to play for the South.

We can be encouraged by the record of our sporting community, with help from generous sponsors, local and otherwise, over the generations, who have dedicated themselves to our young people, giving their time freely and offering their expertise selflessly. However, we must keep struggling to get them the proper tools so that they can do the job as well as they know how. Go raibh míle maith agat.

3.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: The motion specifically mentions the negative impact that a reduction in funding will have on community sport. It then proceeds to highlight the potential impact that an inadequate level of funding would have on the delivery of the proposed strategy that was announced recently by the Minister. It is widely recognised that, compared with GB, historically, sport in Northern Ireland is already underfunded. That was before the double whammy, represented by the withdrawal of £4.1 million from Sport Northern Ireland, appeared on the horizon. Although there have been assurances that, post 2012, there will be a financial redress, a crucial interim period remains when sporting activities may be severely curtailed.

Some people will ask "so what?" and say that sport is unimportant in the scheme of things. However, the sports strategy for Northern Ireland noted correctly that 2,000 deaths a year are attributable to physical inactivity. The increasing levels of obesity among our children are directly linked to a decrease in the opportunities that they have for sporting activity. Coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes —some people in the Public Gallery attended a conference today on that topic — and cancer risks have all increased significantly as a consequence of inactivity. The National Health Service currently spends £886 per head of population to address health issues, but only £1 per head is spent on physical activity, which could prevent many of those illnesses.

Mental-health issues could also be eased through greater physical activity and sport. If levels of participation are reduced, stand back and watch the levels of stress

and anxiety increase. Activity in sport bolsters confidence and allows young people to experience a sense of achievement. A reduction in that physical activity can undermine a fragile sense of worth and lead to young people turning to alternative stimulation in the form of alcohol and drug abuse.

The importance of participation in sport and physical activity provides not only a socially acceptable safety valve for young people, thereby reducing the risk of antisocial activity, but it widens their horizons. It introduces them to situations where they must work as a team and beyond the safety net of their own community. Such transferable social skills lead to an understanding of a wider society and its many disparate sectors. That is a valuable experience for all, but it is especially important for people who are locked into communities where one class and one culture prevail.

The sports strategy is a suitable vehicle to deliver individual and group benefits in the field of health and community cohesion. It is also a valuable vehicle for economic expansion. Sport in Northern Ireland contributes more than £300 million to the local economy. It is also calculated to provide employment to around 13,000 people in the sport and recreation industry. That industry must fear that without adequate funding, the sporting economy will face a serious decline.

On 10 September 2007, at Question Time in the House, I asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he was taking to offset the reduction in lottery funding. The Minister replied that he was making bids for funding to support the development of sport and the arts. Perhaps he will indicate how successful he has been so far in convincing the Minister of Finance and Personnel of that.

Eric Saunders, the chairman of Sport Northern Ireland, has warned of the effects of cuts on participation and performance, and on the provision of new facilities and the upgrading of older ones. He has also warned of the impact on sports development officers, who are attached to local councils, and on the much-vaunted programme for the talented athletes in the Province to develop their skills. Those warnings must not be ignored if the valuable sports strategy is to achieve its aspirations and turn them into reality.

On the matter of the amendment, Mr Shannon has pointed out the benefits that the assets group may bring to addressing some of the problems that have been mentioned today. I hope that his touching faith in Peter Robinson will be rewarded. However, I remain to be convinced that Mr Robinson can fulfil the role of Santa Claus, even in the approach to the festive season.

Mr McCarthy: When I first heard that London had been awarded the 2012 Olympic Games, I thought that the knock-on effect might mean a bonus for Northern Ireland. Athletes will not have to travel halfway around

the world, so many more local people could be trained and sent to compete, after which they might return with some gold medals.

However, the recent news that some of Northern Ireland's lottery funding for sport is to be redirected to the London Olympics has made me question my initial enthusiasm. It is good news that the Olympics will be held nearby, as many of our constituents will be able to travel easily to watch them. However, if that means that London's hosting the Olympics will be to the detriment of sport here in general, it is not such good news.

Sport in Northern Ireland is at an all-time high. Almost all Northern Ireland teams, and many individuals, are achieving success. Some of those successes were expected, but others were not. If funding for sport in Northern Ireland is cut, it will be extremely difficult to maintain that level of success, which is due mostly to sporting activity at grass-roots and community level, where as many people as possible benefit. I do not agree that the money should be redirected to benefit the select few elite athletes from other areas. At a time when fitness and health are high on the agenda, the decision to redirect sports funding away from Northern Ireland was ill thought out.

I wonder whether those in charge of finance for the London Olympics knew all along that lottery funding would need to be redirected from different areas throughout the UK. I am glad to see that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is in the Chamber today. Will he confirm that the budget of £53 million, which was awarded to elite facilities for 2012, is secure and will be honoured? That most important question requires an answer.

Sport can have a massive impact on community relations, as it often provides the only opportunity for children and young people from different communities to come together to interact. Often, children go through primary and secondary school without ever getting involved with kids from the other side. Therefore, sport has an important role to play as Northern Ireland moves into a new era. A cut in funding will, undoubtedly, hinder that progress.

The cut in lottery funding notwithstanding, I voice my concern for all Northern Irish sport, because it was not even mentioned in the recently announced investment strategy for Northern Ireland. People can benefit so much from partaking in a wide range of activities, so I had hoped that sport would feature strongly in the investment strategy. However, I should have realised that my hopes that the Executive would make the right decision were just daydreams, because, so far, they have failed to deliver on almost every issue. I express my disappointment with the Executive. I thought that they would do the right thing for the whole community.

All sporting activities must be supported. I pay tribute to Sport Northern Ireland for its vision and ideals. However, that organisation must be properly funded.

Lord Browne: I support the amendment. I congratulate the city of Glasgow on its successful bid to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games, which, in addition to the 2012 London Olympic Games, will present Northern Ireland with economic, social and sporting opportunities. I hope that Northern Ireland, particularly Belfast, will host some events associated with both the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games. I agree that the Assembly should recognise the importance of sport to the physical, social and economic well-being of society. However, I would be equally concerned about any diversion of funds having an impact on community sport in Northern Ireland.

The 2012 Olympic Games in London will be the greatest sporting event held in the United Kingdom for over 40 years. It will have a dramatic, positive impact on sport generally and on community sport, in particular. However, the Assembly must be mindful of budgetary caution and prudence. I am sure that all Members could cite — and some already have — projects and areas of special sporting interest that could benefit from an increase in the proposed draft Budget. Nevertheless, rather than stating that the draft Budget is insufficient to meet the standards and priorities of the proposed sports strategy, which was announced recently by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I propose that every effort should be made to investigate other means to compensate for any National Lottery funding that may be diverted to the 2012 Olympic Games.

As well as recognising that funding of the strategy should be considered in the context of the findings of the assets realisation group, whose report will be published in early January 2008, other means should be explored to try to make up the shortfall. Camelot is endeavouring to persuade the Treasury to move the National Lottery to a gross profit tax, which would generate additional good-causes revenue of approximately £398 million between 2008-09 and 2018-19. Some of that money could be used to compensate for the moneys being diverted from the National Lottery for the Olympics.

Another means of obtaining funding for sport and for arts could be through the Strategic Investment Board's investment strategy for Northern Ireland. The board's 'Building a Better Future: Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018' states that we can look forward to developing a culture and sporting infrastructure over the next 10 years that will bring great benefits to all the people of Northern Ireland. It also states that a fulfilled and healthy society needs a rich, creative and vibrant artistic and sporting base.

Sport England is another example of an organisation compensating for the diversion of lottery funding. It is seeking ways in which it can raise £50 million through

working with the private sector to increase investment in community-sport facilities. As well as encouraging the private sector to offer its skills and expertise to local sports clubs in the communities that it serves, Sport England is working with the Football Association and the Football Foundation to create sports hubs involving community and commercial activities. I urge Sport Northern Ireland to initiate similar schemes here to compensate for the diversion of lottery funding.

Members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure believe passionately in sport. The Assembly must do everything in its power to encourage, involve and support as many people as possible in sporting activities. That is why community sport is so important. However, we must look beyond our doors in seeking financial support. Therefore, I support the amendment.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú. I support the motion. It should be a cause of concern to the Assembly that the British Government are diverting Big Lottery moneys to prop up development projects financially for the London Olympic Games. That money should come directly from the coffers of the British Government. Surely the British Prime Minister, Mr Brown, having spent many years as Chancellor of the Exchequer, could come up with the money from elsewhere, rather than taking it from the poor and most marginalised communities.

While the British Government spend billions of pounds of taxpayers' money to prosecute their wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, community groups that provide essential services are being hit as lottery funds are diverted to fill the subsequent financial void. As Members of an elected Assembly with no real power to raise tax or revenue, no one should be surprised that we have a limited budget to meet legitimate demands for first-class public services and infrastructure — in sports and leisure, or any other sector. Therefore, there is a need for greater all-Ireland economic co-operation, particularly because — as Francie Brolly said — many of our major sports operate on an all-Ireland basis. That illustrates the need for the Assembly's existing powers to be strengthened, enhanced and augmented. Perhaps we could then levy in support of a sports-development budget that addresses future demands and the expectations of our people.

3.15 pm

As a Member for Foyle, I have additional concerns that the limited funds for the sports strategy should be allocated on the basis of spatial equality and the need for balanced regional development. In 2003, the DSD urban design strategy concluded that job-creation opportunities in local leisure activities would equal knowledge-based job-creation opportunities over the next 15 years. Therefore, local leisure activity is a

strategic area for employment growth in places such as Derry, on foot of the Stand Up for Derry campaign. Tá mé ag iarraidh níos mó jabanna agus tuillleadh infheistíochta i nDoire. I call for more jobs and investment in Derry. That campaign is set against the backdrop of more than 10,000 redundancies in the Derry city area between 1998 and 2004.

If sport has the potential to grow as an area of employment, politicians must take the necessary steps to ensure that cities such as Derry realise their full potential. In addition to facilitating greater employment and enhancing local and regional services, sport can play a key role in assisting the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. That is an important consideration in a city where over half the population live in neighbourhood-renewal areas. A recent study into the role of sport in deprived areas concluded that sport can be used to attract individuals who are reluctant to engage in education or training through traditional routes, and to motivate people to learn new skills. As Jim Shannon said, involvement in sport can help to tackle the growing problem of obesity and contribute to healthier lifestyles.

A clear and dedicated funding stream that is linked to local sports-development plans is required, which includes key stakeholders and — where applicable — neighbourhood renewal priorities. Derry is the largest municipal area west of the Bann; it is the capital of the north-west and the second-largest city in the North. From a regional perspective, Derry has the need, the economic case and the critical mass of population for investment in large sporting infrastructure projects to be successful. The political will of the Minister is required to make that happen. That political will should have been realised in his budgetary bids, and would have been were those bids subject to a full equality impact assessment. I support the amendment, and I am sure that Jim Shannon, Pat Ramsey and Barry McElduff will address in my concerns in the Committee. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I declare an interest as a member of a subcommittee of Craigavon Borough Council that is involved in applying for an Olympic Games flagship project. I support the amendment tabled by my colleagues Jim Shannon and Lord Browne.

I suppose that Members will look at my physique and wonder at my talking about the Olympics and sport.

Mr Shannon: He is a wrestler.

Mr Simpson: Yes, a wrestler. I looked across the Chamber at the proposer of the motion, Pat Ramsey, and then I looked behind me at Lord Browne who was the second Member to speak to the amendment, and I thought that there is hope for me yet.

A Member: There is a heavyweight section.

Mr Simpson: Yes, there is a heavyweight section, and I understand that an observers' category will be introduced, so perhaps we will fit into that category.

Northern Ireland ought to have a sports strategy, and I welcome the Minister's recent announcement to that effect. We have heard other Members say how beneficial such a strategy will be for the younger generations and, perhaps, for some of the older generation. My colleague Mr Shannon mentioned the release of some form of juices within the body to stimulate the brain. We will not get too excited about that, but if that happened, it would benefit us all, and I would welcome it. Had there been a sports strategy in the past, I am sure that all Members would say that they would have been a lot fitter and that things would have been different when they attended school or university.

The amendment sits comfortably with long-established DUP policy. For several years, the DUP stood almost alone in saying that savings could and should be made in the public purse if the size of the public sector were addressed and its efficiency questioned. I hope that the capital-realisation task force, headed by the Vernon assets group, will identify where money can be saved. In sectors where savings are identified, additional investment should be made. I am pleased to hear that my colleague Mr Shannon has spoken to the Minister and that more funding will be available from 1 April 2008. That is encouraging news, despite Ken Robinson's comments about doubting whether the Finance Minister could fulfil the role of Father Christmas. I hope on this occasion that he acts like him and that we will see the benefits of that in due course.

All Members will realise that all projects will not be realised: some will be knocked out in each round. However, some innovative projects are in the pipeline, and I trust that those will be successful. As I said earlier, I am involved in a flagship project in Craigavon to provide a new rowing lake and white water rafting facilities. It is a unique provision that will be beneficial to tourism, and it meets the standards and sustainability requirements as laid down in the Olympic criteria. It will bring thousands of people to my constituency, and all MLAs in the area support the project and are keen to push it forward, given that it will benefit everyone. It is my hope that hugely beneficial projects, such as that in Craigavon and others across the Province, will be realised so that Northern Ireland can punch above its weight in the future.

Mr McNarry: As a committed devolutionist, no one welcomed the removal of the direct ruler more than me. However, one matter that the then Secretary of State addressed positively was the confirmation of a budget of up to £53 million to fund the elite-facilities programme. That funding was intended to ensure that Northern Ireland would benefit from, and contribute to, the legacy of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London.

It is regrettable that the enthusiasm of the Minister responsible for sport is clearly not shared by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who enjoys the sport of "control freakery". Although he would undoubtedly strike for gold, thankfully his skills are not recognised by the International Olympic Committee or any other proper sporting body, and I fail to understand how they are recognised in the House sometimes too.

On 28 October, Mr Peter Robinson, despite the efforts of many in the public and private sectors who spent time and resources in making bids to the elite facilities programme, announced a reduction of £18 million in the fund, reducing it to only £35 million. It was a savage cut, and was without care, consideration or interest in Olympic sports, or in sports in general. It means that Northern Ireland will fail to benefit from the legacy opportunities; the Government will fail to deliver on its promise of £53 million for Olympic-related facilities; resources will have been wasted in making applications when a large part of the Budget has now disappeared, and the reputation and credibility of Government in Northern Ireland is now at stake.

Over the past seven years, the stadia safety programme has delivered health and safety improvements at major sports grounds in Northern Ireland. The draft Budget makes no provision whatsoever for a continued programme of investment in them. The Scott Report of 1997 identified £30 million worth of investment required to bring our sports grounds up to standard. Inflation and increased standards have now overtaken that figure, but, to date, the Government have invested only £6.3 million in sport in Northern Ireland.

Government will fail to deliver on their obligation to improve health and safety for spectators and players at our major sports grounds; and members of the public may be exposed to unreasonable risks when they attend them. Northern Ireland will fail to attract significant numbers of events as a result of the poor condition of those grounds, and the sporting infrastructure will fall further behind that in Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. Sports grounds here will fail to meet the standards imposed by the new safety of sports grounds legislation.

I will talk about building economic structures on another day, but we need to do more than talk. We can only build economic structures when we have also addressed the building of a local social fabric in tandem.

In one way, I have no problem with the amendment, but I must point out a patently obvious question to Members. Why is the DUP running away from the key component of the motion, which focuses attention on the draft Budget? Is it because that party has been bound up in the "control freakery" that it would appear the Executive have been subjected to on the draft Budget?

Sport is an essential part of Northern Ireland's shared, natural story; from the triumphs of years gone by, to more recent achievements. Now is the time to build on that. The draft Budget allows for no building bricks to be put in place, and that is most regrettable.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend Pat Ramsey for moving the motion, as it concerns a subject that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has debated in recent months.

The Assembly should recognise the importance of sport in the physical, social and economic well-being of all in our society. The crux of the matter is that when London submitted the Olympic bid, the costs put forward were not a true reflection of the final cost of running the games.

3.30 pm

Francie Brolly and others stated that over £42 million of lottery money is being diverted from here to the Olympic Games in London, and yet we still do not know what the benefits for us will be. No events or training facilities have been promised; nothing that the North will get has yet been put forward or confirmed in stone. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that that is done.

The cost to us is immense, and all that can be done must be done to make sure that we get the maximum return for the money spent. The loss of that money will have a detrimental effect on many community sports in the North. People will lose jobs and sporting societies will not be allowed to develop as financial restrictions are imposed on them due to the incompetence of the original costing submitted for the London bid. Some initiatives in areas of social need have already been halted because of the fund being skewed to London. My colleague Sue Ramsey has written to the Minister stating her concerns about the issues in west Belfast. Many organisations that will lose funding will come from areas of need, and many people in poverty and social exclusion will be affected — so there is nothing new there.

Members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have raised all those points in the Committee, and will continue to do so. We will also raise those issues with the Minister; argue vigorously about the issues in the draft strategy that we do not like; and urge him to make the relevant changes.

The Committee will scrutinise the draft Budget and advise the Minister on how to improve it. The Committee has already discussed the means for other stakeholders to promote sport in our society. Other Departments must step up to the mark. There will be a knock-on effect on the health and well-being of many of our citizens, and the educational needs and social development of our communities will be affected.

Local communities and councils have a duty to assist our communities. For too long, some local councils have flirted with the important issue of sport. For example, Belfast City Council does not have enough pitches to cater for sporting teams. It has a few rugby pitches, but not enough; it has many soccer pitches, but not enough for the many teams in Belfast. There are some Gaelic pitches, but clearly not enough for the vast number of clubs in Belfast; and there is not one suitable camogie pitch, even though there are many camogie clubs in Belfast.

The amendment to the motion calls on other stakeholders to become involved in sport in the North. It is not good enough to allow councils such as Belfast City Council, and Departments, off the hook while we search for better sports facilities for everyone in our community. Sinn Féin will support Jim Shannon's amendment —

Mr McNarry: Shame.

Mr P Maskey: Call shame if you like, David, but that is what we are doing.

Mr McNarry is the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and the Committee will discuss the draft Budget this Thursday. Members of the Committee want to put their stamp on it to ensure that the Minister delivers for sport in the North of Ireland. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ross: I too welcome today's motion. I support the amendment moved by my colleagues Mr Shannon and Lord Browne. As the original text of the motion recognises, sport has the ability not only to inspire individuals, but to have a positive impact on their physical and mental health and their social lives. It also has a positive economic impact on a nation.

We have heard today about the many millions of pounds that good causes in Northern Ireland will lose, and a considerable amount of that will be from grass-roots sport. That is of great concern to us all, particularly with regard to those community projects that, over the years, have benefited from lottery money to fund new AstroTurf pitches and tennis courts, or to provide additional equipment for sports clubs.

Clearly, such a dramatic impact on sports funding is not in the best interests of those of us in Northern Ireland who love sport. Anything that has a negative impact on community sport is not to be welcomed. However, let us not be so pessimistic. Some Members seem to be content to seek problems rather than solutions.

I strongly welcome the draft sports strategy that was announced in the House by the Minister. The hosting of the Olympic Games in the United Kingdom represents a massive opportunity that does not often come around for local sport. Northern Ireland could greatly benefit

from the London 2012 Olympic Games, and it is up to us to ensure that we reap that benefit.

The DUP amendment calls on all stakeholders to work together to maximise the benefits of the proposed sports strategy and to wait to see what additional funding might come as a result of the findings of the Vernon assets group, which should go some way towards addressing the shortfall that Members have heard about today.

As other Members have pointed out, the motion is premature because the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has not yet addressed this matter or considered further potential funding outlets. Mr Ramsey raised those concerns and, having enjoyed playing sport from an early age, I share his concerns.

Ken Robinson talked about participation in sport. However, as a result of London's hosting of the 2012 Olympic Games, huge opportunities exist for participation in local sport. I remember the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games when the Great Britain men's hockey team beat West Germany in the final to win the gold medal. Two local players were on that team — Stephen Martin and Jimmy Kirkwood — who, as the Minister knows well, are now associated with my hockey club. The performance in the 1988 Olympic final of those two men and their team did more to encourage young people to play hockey — a relatively small sport that does not receive masses of funding or media exposure — than any other initiative.

The impact of local heroes participating in the Olympics is an inspiration for thousands of youngsters. Last Thursday, in the Long Gallery, I listened to Lord Coe speaking about the young athletes who took up running after watching Kelly Holmes in the last Olympics. It is important that the 2012 Olympics are successful and that team GB bring home as many medals as possible, and that will cost vast sums of money.

With the Olympics on our doorstep, Northern Ireland will be able to attract many teams here to train, and I am optimistic that we will also be able to host a few events. I listened to Lord Coe addressing Mr Ramsey's concern about funding, and he spoke of the important role that major Olympic sponsors will play in developing and getting involved in local sport. I hope that that happens and that local communities see the benefits. We must be vigilant and ensure that those sponsors put money into local community sports.

I share Members' concerns about how much money is being diverted from community-level sports in order to fund the Olympics. However, I hope that Members also recognise that the Olympic Games can inspire a new generation of sports stars to participate in sport at all levels. Let us embrace this opportunity and work together to ensure that funding from other sources is available and that grassroots sport in Northern Ireland

benefits rather than suffers as a result of the Olympics. I support the amendment.

The Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am grateful for this further opportunity to address the Assembly on the subject of sport. Members will recall that, on 9 October, I specifically requested such an opportunity. At that time, I announced the publication of the draft Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation 2007-17 for a three-month consultation period.

In my statement, I drew attention to Northern Ireland's rich sporting heritage and highlighted the importance of sport in its own right and in its potential to deliver other significant benefits such as improved public health and academic performance in children and young people, community development, and neighbourhood renewal. Therefore, I welcome that fact that sport's physical, economic and social importance is also recognised in the motion and in the amendment.

I also stressed that that did not represent the whole picture. Northern Ireland sport faces major challenges and difficulties: its participation rates are among the lowest in the United Kingdom — and falling. There is evidence that some people in our community — notably women, people on low incomes and those with a disability — remain seriously under-represented in sport. Our sports and recreation infrastructure requires substantial modernisation and, additionally, Northern Ireland has a declining record of achievement in major competitions.

In order to address those issues, I call for a new long-term vision for sport in Northern Ireland that will enable it to be developed on a sounder basis for the future and will deliver all the benefits, including social and economic benefits, that are potentially available.

The draft strategy for sport and physical recreation that has been developed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in consultation with Sport Northern Ireland and is currently out for public consultation, suggests such a vision. It also suggests that Government should commit to taking action to help to develop sport in Northern Ireland. Those commitments, if accepted, would involve recognition of the value of sport by Government, including its community benefits: the importance of success and of implementing a suitable strategy in partnership with other stakeholders.

The draft strategy proposes a series of 24 targets to be achieved over the next 10 years. The targets are designed to address concerns about participation in sport, infrastructure deficiencies and the performance of Northern Ireland's athletes and teams in major competitions. However, it is recognised that change on such a scale comes at a price. It is estimated that the full implementation would require an investment of some £200 million over 10 years.

The draft strategy further emphasises that no organisation will have the capacity to meet single-handedly the cost of delivery and that a genuine partnership approach to resourcing will be required. That will involve all stakeholders, including Government, Sport Northern Ireland, local authorities and the voluntary and private sectors. Moreover, I have repeatedly stressed, as does the draft strategy, that the levels of public funding are subject to the normal budgetary processes, including consideration of other competing priorities and the ability of stakeholders to contribute.

The Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012 will help to address some of the issues in the draft strategy, particularly those relating to Northern Ireland's sporting contribution to 2012. However, the transfer of funds from the National Lottery's distribution fund to the 2012 Olympics does not appear to have taken due account of the needs of community and grass-roots sports. To that end, the matter was raised with Lord Coe last week when he was in Northern Ireland. I also informed him that DCAL had made a bid directly to the Treasury for £53 million for elite facilities and asked for his support on that issue.

As the National Lottery is a reserved matter, responsibility for the transfer of funds lies not with my Department but with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Since it decided to support London's Olympic bid, DCMS has consistently said that lottery proceeds would form a key part of the public funding package.

Having said that, I believe that the reduction of funding from the lottery will be about £2.5 million from 2008 to 2011, although it will go on until 2013. The money that we will gain for sport over the three years from 2008 to 2011 will be £11.5 million in our block Budget.

Today, some Members, including Mr Shannon, talked about the importance of sport in keeping the mind's juices flowing and helping people to think better. I was tempted to make some Members do 50 press-ups and 20 laps of the grounds, because everyone seemed to focus on bad news, implying that there was no good news and that sport was all doom and gloom. In fact, the money that we will lose as a result of DCMS taking £2.5 million from us over the next three years, and a further £2 million over the following two years, has been more than made up for by the £11.5 million that will be raised through our normal budgetary processes.

Mr Ken Robinson suggested that we should not put our trust in a Robinson; it was up to him to make such a statement. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has not been unreasonable when it comes to sport.

Mr P Ramsey: When Lord Coe was in Parliament Buildings, I asked him whether the clawback of lottery

money for the London Olympics would commence only in 2009. Will the Minister answer that question?

Mr Poots: The clawback of lottery money to fund the Olympics will start in 2008 and will continue until 2013.

When the Olympics is finished, there is to be a clawback, and there is supposed to be the sale of some £675 million worth of assets, which we will undoubtedly be bidding for. There is also a legacy trust, which we will be going after as well.

3.45 pm

Mr Brolly said that the English were robbing us, and that this was historic. I notice that he is wearing a nice, bright orange tie today that would do many Orangemen proud. There is a chance that we will get something back from the English after the Olympics.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: He is also wearing a blue shirt.

Mr Poots: Yes, he is a true orange and blue today.

It is important to recognise that today is not all doom and gloom. We will continue to support the Olympic Games. I fully recognise the potential for adverse effects, and, together with the other devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, I have lobbied the DCMS to ensure that the contribution from the National Lottery be kept as low as possible. We have also sought assurances that, should the costs for the Olympic Games increase, DCMS will not approach the National Lottery again to seek further funds, as that would be damaging to the regions.

DCMS has stated that the latest budget for the Olympics is based on a thorough assessment of costs, includes substantial contingency amounts that are based on analysis of risk, and is a robust budget that will last until 2012. Furthermore, land values in the Olympic park are expected to increase considerably. That should help with the windfall that I referred to earlier.

Therefore, the benefits of the Olympics to Northern Ireland should not be overlooked. The opportunity, through the elite facilities, to prepare for host preparation plans will be hugely beneficial. The opportunity to host preliminary rounds of the soccer tournament will also be beneficial. My Department wants to maximise the amount of time that the Olympic torch relay will spend in Northern Ireland, and to ensure that the opportunities for business as a result of 2012 are fully exploited.

What we are trying to do for the Olympics, we need also to try to do for the Paralympics. We should encourage and recognise the role that disabled people have in sport and increase their participation. I will touch on the health aspects later. Some 90% of people with disabilities who are actively engaged in sport are in full-time employment. That is far higher than the general figure for people who have disabilities. That is an indication that people with disabilities who engage

in sport have higher self-esteem, greater confidence and greater motivation. That is one of the positive influences that sport can have on people with disabilities.

The Games will also act as a catalyst for the development of sport in the UK. Northern Ireland intends to capitalise on the Olympics by getting young people involved in sport at domestic and international level; achieving high performance in the Games; creating better facilities on the back of demand; leaving a legacy; and maximising economic and social impact.

The Department made bids for funding for sport under the comprehensive spending review, and we have had funds awarded in the draft Budget. The draft Budget, which was published on 25 October, showed that my Department will receive £33.7 million for resource and £112.3 million for capital.

We are spending somewhere in the region of £8.2 million on capital this year alone. Next year, we will have a 400% increase to £31.2 million, followed by £36.5 million and then £44.6 million in 2010-11 — a 500% increase on this year. I cannot say that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has been overly stingy in granting 400% and 500% increases.

Regarding the current shortfall, I indicated that my Department is bidding directly to Treasury for £53 million for the elite facilities. The Barnett formula — which would normally apply, with the regions receiving a stream of that funding — was not used to establish the Olympic funds. Therefore, we have a strong case to make that bid, and it would be reasonable for us to receive that.

Mr Ken Robinson readily identified that for every pound that central Government spends on sport, some £900 is spent on public health. I could make a much greater contribution to people's health in Northern Ireland by increasing the budget for sport than could be made through the increases that have been given to health. Debate in the Assembly over the past few weeks has centred largely on health issues. Again, Mr Ken Robinson identified rightly that, annually, 2,000 deaths in Northern Ireland could be attributed to people not engaging in enough physical activity. Some 17% of men and 20% of women in Northern Ireland are clinically obese, and by the age of 12, one child in 20 is clinically obese.

Sport and physical recreation have an important role to play. It has been recognised that they can help to combat problems such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer of the colon, anxiety and stress. Through a combination of healthier-eating and sport and physical-recreation programmes, Finland has succeeded in stemming the rise in obesity. In the United Kingdom only 32% of people take the recommended amount of exercise, but in Finland that proportion has reached 70%.

Research that was carried out in recent years in the primary-school sector in Northern Ireland suggests that regular participation in sport and physical recreation contributes to improving a child's academic performance and perceived self-esteem. Short-term and sustained exercise programmes can contribute positively to the cognitive performance of children and young people. In addition, the appeal of sport and sports-related employment can be used in the curriculum to engage disaffected pupils and increase their commitment to continuing in education.

Sport is a social activity by its very nature, and it can be beneficial for those young people who are perhaps on the margins of our society. Yesterday, I mentioned the positive effect that midnight soccer could have on communities in which young people may feel that they are of little importance or have no key role to play. Sport can reach out to young people who are in areas of social deprivation and make a significant change, giving them something worthwhile to do — something that is more appealing to them than taking drugs or engaging in binge drinking. It will help them to look after their bodies and to have healthy bodies and minds. It will also help them to recognise that they have a significant contribution to make to society.

The most recent figures that are available for Northern Ireland show that spending on sport has contributed £293 million per annum to the economy, which is around 2% of the gross domestic product. Tourism is estimated to have contributed around £30 million. Around 12,500 people are in sport-related employment in our economy.

I trust that that helps Members to address some of the issues that they raised. I thank the proposers of both the motion and the amendment for bringing them to the House. I trust that this will lead to further investment in sport.

Mr McCausland: In proposing the motion, Pat Ramsey set out clearly the important issues that surround the funding of sport in Northern Ireland. He analysed the financial position so thoroughly that I was impressed by his mathematical ability, and I feared at one point that he had swallowed a calculator. He dealt with the subject at some length and expressed views that all of us share about the importance of sport in society.

Jim Shannon highlighted the relevance of sport again, and he spoke about the review of surplus assets, which is the key to his amendment. The findings of the Vernon assets group, which examines surplus assets and the money that can be raised through them, will be published soon. In January we will know how much money will be made available from that source.

Francie Brolly also emphasised an important point in stressing the role of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and that topic will be examined on Thursday.

Moreover, he did not disappoint us; he managed to mention Dungiven in his speech.

Ken Robinson highlighted an important issue: the social skills and social benefits that flow from sport, as distinct from the medical and physical benefits. In playing sport — particularly team sports — people develop skills in working with other people.

Kieran McCarthy spoke of the redirection of lottery money from Northern Ireland. Lord Browne congratulated the city of Glasgow on being selected to host the Commonwealth Games in 2014. He took the issue a stage further as regards fund-raising for sport, in that he referred not only the Vernon assets group, but he spoke about other opportunities that exist and that we should seek to increase. He mentioned in particular the Strategic Investment Board.

It is important that we look at other opportunities to raise funds in a creative way for sporting facilities.

Martina Anderson took us on a world tour via Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, David Simpson was appropriately parochial and stuck to the project that he has in mind for Craigavon.

David McNarry told us that he was a staunch devolutionist but proceeded to exude doom and gloom on every quarter. He disappointed us by not mentioning, despite his position as Deputy Chairperson, the role that the Committee of Culture, Arts and Leisure will have in this issue on Thursday.

Paul Maskey referred to the work of the Committee and spoke of the benefits of local events. No doubt the Committee will work with the Minister to see what can be done to bring the most benefit to Northern Ireland through the 2012 Olympics, whether that is through training opportunities for teams or through the events themselves.

Alastair Ross talked about the variety of sports, and in particular the impact that a reduction in funding would have on community sports. He made the pertinent point that certain people prefer looking for problems to finding solutions. The advantage of the amendment is that it highlights the opportunities that there are to find solutions. It also gives the Committee the opportunity to look at the issue thoroughly.

The Minister cited the low participation rates in sport in Northern Ireland, particularly among women and people with disabilities and in areas of social disadvantage. As he said, we need to find a new vision for sport in Northern Ireland. He talked of the benefits that there will be after the Olympics from the sale of associated assets. There will be opportunities then to bring out resources throughout the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. The Minister, like his party colleague Alastair Ross and others, looked at the issue in a positive way, trying to find solutions rather than

purveying doom and gloom, as was the case with Mr McNarry.

I am happy to support the amendment; it is a good amendment that strengthens the motion. The motion highlights the issue, quite rightly, while the amendment seeks to show a way forward. I hope that others will see the sense in supporting the amendment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar na hargóintí a rinneadh ar son an rúin. Tuigim féin an tábhacht le cúrsaí spóirt i saol an lae inniu agus sílim gur chóir dúinn an spórt a chothú ar achan bhealach is féidir linn. I value the contribution that sport makes to many aspects of life in Northern Ireland, as has been outlined during the course of the debate. We heard about the importance of sport to health, education, social life and relationships. Members talked about how sport can improve self-esteem, save money for our health system and improve both physical and mental health. My colleague Pat Ramsey told the story of a lady called Mary who got back her good health through sport.

We heard of the disappointment of a range of sporting bodies about the provision for sport in the draft Budget. Mr Ramsey referred to the elite facilities project, the reduction of its budget from the promised £53 million to £35 million, and the outcomes that that might have.

He referred to the Government's failure to deliver on their promise of £53 million and the many resources that have been wasted on making applications when a large part of the budget has now disappeared. That presents a challenge to the reputation and credibility of the Government. Subsequently, Northern Ireland will fail to benefit from many legacy opportunities of the 2012 Olympic Games.

4.00 pm

David McNarry mentioned the Scott Report, which identified that investment of £30 million was required to bring Northern Ireland's sports grounds up to standard. He pointed out that that figure had been reduced to £6.3 million as a result of inflation and increased standards. He also mentioned some of the effects of that; for example, that members of the public will be exposed to unreasonable risk when they attend major sporting events; that Northern Ireland will fail to attract significant events because of the poor condition of its sports grounds; and that Northern Ireland's sporting infrastructure will fall further behind that in the rest of Ireland, the UK and the world. Those were some of the main points that have been made in support of the motion.

The sport and physical recreation strategy, which was launched by the Minister in October 2007, identifies anticipated investment and associated targets for sport's contribution to society during the next 10 years. However, the CSR proposals provide only a small revenue contri-

bution to the spend that is necessary to achieve those targets. The CSR document lifts many targets directly from the strategy. It is totally unrealistic to expect the level of investment that has been announced for the first three years to make any significant contribution to the targets proposed in the strategy. The result will be that the targets will not be realised without a corresponding level of investment.

The strategy identifies a need to expend £90 million to develop sports venues in Northern Ireland, and the associated targets rely totally on creating opportunities for people to participate in sport and physical recreation. Without developing sports venues, the targets cannot be achieved.

The draft Budget, which was announced last week, provides virtually no funding for sports facilities at a community level. Mr Ramsey pointed out that when that is combined with the loss of lottery funding to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Sport Northern Ireland will have no opportunity to make capital investments in community sports facilities during the next three years. Historic levels of investment — over £70 million during the past 10 years — by Sport Northern Ireland to local clubs, councils and community organisations will cease completely during the next three years. In future, local sport will receive no capital support whatsoever from Government or the lottery.

Those are the hard facts that have been presented in support of the motion. The motion's aim was to widen the debate beyond the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and to make other Members, and people further afield, aware of the way in which the sports budget has been slashed. The shortage of resources has been highlighted. Members have heard how sport contributes to people's well-being. It also fulfils some of the responsibilities of several Departments other than the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; the Department of Education; the Department for Employment and Learning; the Department for Social Development; and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. All parties are agreed that there is a shortage of resources.

Much faith has been put in the capital realisation task force and the resources that it might bring forward. However, there will be many calls for whatever resources the task force realises.

Members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure — and others who are interested in sport — have no guarantee that sport will be compensated by the capital realisation task force for the amount that it has lost from the Budget. Ken Robinson pointed out that we are being asked by the amendment to put our faith, blindly, in Santa Pedro, who has many presents to deliver to many

people. We are not convinced or assured of the size of the parcel that sport will ultimately receive.

Although the supporters of the amendment state that it seeks to identify funds, and to add to the motion, it fails to do so. We are in no way certain or assured of the amount of resources that will be allocated to sport.

Tá sé ar intinn ag an pháirtí seo cloí leis an rún bunúsach agus gan tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú atá in ainmeacha Jim Shannon agus Lord Browne.

It is therefore the intention of the SDLP to stick with the motion and not to support the amendment, which promises much, but delivers little. We do not know what resources will come from it, ultimately. I reaffirm my 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 recognises the importance of sport in the physical, social and economic well-being of society; expresses concern that National Lottery funding is being diverted to the 2012 London Olympics and will have a negative impact on community sport; welcomes the proposed sports strategy recently announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; recognises that funding of the strategy should be considered in the context of the findings of the Vernon assets group; and calls on all stakeholders to work together to maximise the opportunities that exist in the sports strategy.

Irish-Medium Club Bank

Mr Deputy Speaker: A valid petition of concern has been received in respect of the motion.
[*Interruption.*]

Order. Members must resume their seats.

Having checked the petition, I regard it as fulfilling the requirements of Standing Order 27. However, the presentation of the petition means that a vote on the motion may not be held at the conclusion of the debate. The Business Committee agreed, at its lunchtime meeting, that the vote will take place as the first item of business on Monday 19 November 2007.

Members should also note that the vote on the motion will be conducted on a cross-community basis. Members who wish to inspect the petition of concern may do so in the Business Office. We shall proceed with the debate, for which the Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes. 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.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly opposes the introduction of a club-bank arrangement for establishing Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland.

From the outset, I would like to make it clear that the motion does not represent a sectarian attack on the teaching of the Irish language. It seems that there are parties in the Chamber that have such an agenda. The Minister is so belligerent that, in following a narrow sectarian political agenda, she has adopted the safety net of a petition of concern to ensure that she gets her way. Obviously, she is convinced that she will not win the argument. The motion is concerned with the provision of a level playing field whereby education is provided in an even-handed way, without advantage to any sector.

Since the Assembly came into being, much has been said about fairness and equality. The introduction of a club bank arrangement for establishing Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland does nothing for fairness and equality, nor does it promote the concept of a shared future. It is my opinion, and that of my party, that the controlled sector caters for everyone. Having four sectors is not logical, and places too great a financial burden on the Department of Education. Things were bad enough when there were two sectors; next we had the integrated sector; and now we have the promotion of the Irish-medium sector. At present, according to the report of the independent strategic review of education, there are 50,000 empty places in our schools.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It is estimated that due to the decline in pupil numbers there will be an additional 30,000 surplus places over

the next 10 years. The opening of further Irish-medium schools can only add to that problem.

The sector potentially most at risk from the unfair advantage being given to those schools is the Catholic maintained sector. Given that, due to falling numbers, schools are being amalgamated or closed in order to save costs, it seems amazing that more investment in Irish-medium schools is planned. Despite that, it has been proposed that a club-bank system, similar to that currently in place for the integrated sector, be established for the benefit of the Irish-medium sector. Such club banks have an unfair advantage over the controlled schools and the Catholic maintained schools. As such, I find the concept wholly objectionable.

In order to put that into context, I will briefly explain how the club-bank system works, but, at the same time, try to avoid sending my colleagues into a coma. The Integrated Education Fund was established in 1992 to provide a more co-ordinated approach to the funding issue. The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) made arrangements with three banks; in return for depositing £1 million, the Integrated Education Fund could borrow up to £10 million to finance the capital costs of establishing new integrated schools. If after at least three years the school has been deemed viable, it will, according to the Department of Education, receive recognition for capital grant aid. During the course of assessment for viability, the Department of Education is responsible for any interest due on the loans. The school would then be reimbursed by the Department for any capital expenditure incurred during the period that it is funded by the club bank.

It is not therefore simply a case of £1 million being spent and, all of a sudden, self-sufficient schools appear. Rather, £1 million is spent, and then once the school is set up, the Department must once again open up the coffers. The Department has spent £33 million in the last five years funding similar schemes in the integrated sector.

The viability criteria for Irish-medium schools are based on enrolment figures for two consecutive years, plus estimates for the third year. The Department of Education will currently grant recognition and grant-aid status for 12 pupils in year one. With the best will in the world, it would be difficult to see how a school could not meet those criteria as they are set so low. Once the viability criteria are met, the school is eligible for grant funding. A decision to amalgamate St Joseph's Primary School in Ahoghill with St Patrick's Primary School in Aughercloney was made when the schools were attracting numbers of 18 and 26 respectively. However, Irish-medium schools are deemed viable and eligible for grant funding with only 24 pupils and an estimated enrolment figure for the third year.

The council for Irish-medium education is to operate the scheme in the same way as NICIE does for grant-maintained integrated schools — or so we are led to believe by the Department of Education. However, details are so thin on the ground as to be virtually non-existent. Last year the then Education Minister, Angela Smith, confirmed that the Department of Education had directed more than £1,300 towards a report into the operation of the club-bank system. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that this report is now available in order that the wider public can be made aware of the system and the conclusions contained in the report. I would be grateful if the Minister would refer to it in her remarks.

For Members' information, the Minister has already requested that the sum of £1 million be allocated in 2008-09 for an Irish-medium building fund club bank. That is before the report on the club-bank system has been made available for consideration, and also before the Minister's review of Irish-medium education has been completed and considered. Does that mean that she is determined to press ahead with her plans, regardless of those outcomes?

In addition to the bid for £1 million, the Minister is also asking for additional financial support for Irish-medium schools: £170,000 in 2008-09 for Irish-medium budgets, rising to £230,000; £215,000 over three years for language enhancement for teachers in the Irish-medium sector; £75,000 over three years to upgrade Irish-language skills for pre-school workers; and £6 million over three years for curriculum support.

With reference to those additional moneys that are required to enhance and upgrade the language skills, it seems incredible that Government money is being spent on teaching teachers what is allegedly their own language. Are similar amounts of money being spent on teachers who teach English in the controlled sector or in the Catholic maintained sector?

In a previous debate, the Minister lambasted Members and told them to read the report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education.

I ask her to do the same, and I specifically draw her attention to chapter 9 of the Bain Report, which is titled "Planning: A Strategic Approach". The report recommends area-based planning, and that the Department of Education should proceed with that until the education and skills authority is established. It also states that:

"future school building projects should be approved only after area-based planning is established".

4.15 pm

That does not seem to fit well with the Minister's bid for £1 million to establish an Irish-medium club bank. Is she continuing to pick and choose the aspects of the Bain Report that suit her agenda? Members are still waiting for the Minister to clarify her position on

the recommendations of the report in its totality. The simple fact is that limited money is available for investment in education. Investment should be made on the basis of area planning, and need must be identified. A club-bank system merely impedes area-based planning by creating a bias through the provision of financial incentives.

To use such a scheme is an attempt to circumvent the system and impose a new set of rules for Irish-medium education and protections that do not apply to mainstream schools in Northern Ireland. That should not surprise us, however, after what we have all seen. At a time of budgetary constraints across all Departments, money could be better spent on school repairs, on existing grant-maintained schools, which cater for the overwhelming majority of pupils, or on the dire need to deal with illiteracy and innumeracy in society.

In the Department of Education's 'A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', criteria are set out that must be adhered to before opening a school can be considered. One criterion is financial viability. A school with only 50 pupils costs almost 200% more than an average school, which has around 140 pupils. The Department's consultation document points out that that rises to almost 300% more if a school has fewer than 20 pupils. According to the Department, in order to establish viability, an Irish-medium school has only to show an intake of 12 pupils in year 1 and 12 in year 2, and it has only to provide estimates for year 3. If the Minister determines that three schools meet the viability criteria with 24 pupils and an estimate, each school will cost, in the worst-case scenario, 200% more than the average school.

I may be accused of scaremongering when I say that. However, over the summer, the Minister announced the opening of three Irish-medium schools: one in Londonderry; one in Glengormley; and another in Crumlin. According to the Department of Education, the school in Glengormley has only 13 pupils enrolled in year 1. How does that school meet the viability criteria? The school in Londonderry has 15 pupils in year 1, but only seven in year 2 and nine in year 3. Again, how does that school meet the viability criteria? The school in Crumlin had an intake of 12 pupils in year 1, one in year 2, four in year 3 and three in year 4. Will the Minister apply the criteria that she used to award grant funding to those three schools when she uses the club-bank system? If so, I dread to imagine the impact of that far from thriving sector on the meagre resources of the education system.

In proposing area-based planning, the report of the independent strategic review of education — the Bain Report — calls for fairness, equality and cost effectiveness. A club-bank system that will be to the advantage of Irish-medium education will achieve none of those

aims. For those reasons, I ask the Assembly to vote in favour of the motion.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an rún seo atá os comhair an Tionóil. Cé go bhfuil buaireamh orm faoi, sílim ag an am chéanna go dtugann sé deis dúinn an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a dhíospóireacht.

I welcome the motion on the club-bank scheme. Although I have concerns about the motives behind the tabling of the motion, I welcome a debate on the scheme and its use in the Irish-medium sector. Therefore, I thank Michelle McIlveen and Mervyn Storey for securing the debate.

The motion is dressed up as concern over the club-bank scheme as a means of funding schools, but it is really an attack on the Irish-medium education sector.

It is disappointing that, once again, the DUP is playing politics over the provision of Irish-language schools. Of course, such attacks are not confined to the Irish-medium sector; the DUP has also shown hostility to the Catholic education sector and the integrated sector. Michelle McIlveen, for example, recently called for the abolition of the Catholic, Irish-medium and integrated sectors. One has to question that type of approach, as it insults the parents, children, staff and teachers at those schools. It tells me that the DUP cannot tolerate minorities in society.

Let us consider the facts behind the club-bank scheme in relation to the Irish-medium sector without all of the DUP's alarmist and scaremongering language. There is growing evidence that children in the Irish-medium sector are receiving their education in an environment of substandard buildings and poor facilities. A two-tier system is in place when it comes to the provision of school buildings and accommodation. The club-bank scheme aims to enable children in the Irish-medium sector to receive education in improved accommodation and school buildings, without any risk to the public purse.

This debate also raises an equality issue. The club-bank scheme is a way of helping to ensure that children in the Irish-medium sector are not taught in lower standards of accommodation than other education sectors. It has been said that the integrated sector has been using this kind of scheme since the mid-1990s, when there was recognition that newly established integrated schools would not be included in the capital building programme until they had demonstrated a level of enrolments that would make the school viable. The objective of the club-bank scheme is to minimise the risk to public money of a significant capital loss if a new school were to fail during its initial start-up phase. A few years ago, the Department of Education reviewed the use of the

scheme in the integrated sector and concluded that it should continue.

The Department of Education has undertaken to provide an initial lump sum to allow Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta agus Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta to start a club-bank scheme by drawing loans from their chosen bank. The idea of the club-bank scheme is that it allows the Department of Education to share the risk for schools that have not yet met the threshold for capital support grants. Accommodation in the Irish-medium sector is significantly worse than in any other sector, and that must be addressed. The club-bank scheme is an innovative attempt to get to grips with the accommodation crisis in the sector, and it should be actively encouraged. Irish-medium schools have not been funded by the Department of Education through the club-bank scheme to date, and, if the club-bank scheme is to be taken away, rather than expanded, people here must ask themselves how the Irish-medium and integrated sectors are to be funded.

A growing number of parents are choosing to have their children educated through the medium of the Irish language. That is happening at a time of falling rolls and an increasing number of empty desks in our schools. We have a diverse education system, and many parents wish to have their children educated through the Irish-medium sector. If the Assembly supports the motion, it must tell both the Irish and integrated sectors how they will be funded.

Mr K Robinson: My preferred option, with regard to the facilitation of the teaching and learning of Irish in schools, would be to build on the excellent work that is being undertaken in Irish-language units that are attached to maintained schools across Northern Ireland. That meets the crucial criteria that should be of concern to the cash-strapped Executive. It integrates children whose parents wish them to be schooled in Irish with their wider peer group in a district or parish. It is also a more cost-effective approach to the provision of education.

I have concerns over the rapidly escalating costs which, in recent years, have been associated with the expansion of exclusive Irish-medium schools.

There is also the practical matter of the serious shortfall in the number of qualified teachers who are available to teach a range of specialist subjects in Irish. Those subjects are vital if pupils are to pursue examination courses effectively and realise their full potential in life.

In the past seven years, £47 million has been spent on Irish-medium education. I am sure that I am not alone in pondering what impact that sum of money could have made if it had been spent on raising the literacy and numeracy levels in schools located in marginalised communities such as the Falls, the Shankill, the Bogside and the rural communities west of the Bann.

The club-bank mechanism is an intriguing approach to facilitating the wishes of a small number of enthusiasts. As has been mentioned, from the mid-1990s, the lobby for integrated education used the mechanism for many years. The Department of Education facilitated the approach, and the appearance of new schools reflected the obvious attraction of being able to access such a funding stream.

It is small wonder, therefore, that the controlled and maintained sectors, which, after all, represent the overwhelming majority of schoolchildren, looked on in awe. It is understandable that many associated with those two major sectors felt that the club-bank scheme did more than merely facilitate: it created an advantage that they could not hope to emulate.

One cannot blame Irish-medium schools for wanting to hitch their wagon to a similar scheme. The potential danger of widening division that is caused by this mechanism was apparent in the mid-1990s. The model that Members are debating today underlines the danger of that ever-growing division and flies in the face of the clichés of a shared future and a shared vision to which the Assembly is supposed to aspire.

All Irish-medium schools are funded under the common funding formula, as are the controlled and maintained schools. A vesting process is initiated when schools reach the prescribed viability criteria which, as has been mentioned, are normally based on enrolment figures for two consecutive years: currently the figure is 15 for schools in Belfast and Londonderry and 12 for those located elsewhere. Furthermore, there must be evidence of an expected intake in the third year of 20 pupils in Belfast and Londonderry and 15 elsewhere.

The Integrated Education Fund and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education made an arrangement with the agreement of the three banks. That arrangement requires £1 million from the IEF, against which £10 million can be borrowed to finance capital costs. After three years, schools receive recognition for capital grant aid. Vesting is carried out by solicitors for the Department, NICIE and the schools. When the process is complete, any approved capital expenditure is reimbursed.

Presumably, the Irish-medium club bank would seek to make a similar arrangement. The trust fund for Irish-medium education would underwrite a new school's capital costs, and the Council for Irish-Medium Education would operate the scheme in a similar fashion to NICIE.

The central issue is equality for all, and advantage, real or perceived, to none. The fundamental shortage of funds necessary to achieve educational progress is all too obvious to Members. Therefore, it is essential to direct funds to where they are needed — to improve the levels of literacy and numeracy in all schools. That would better enhance the employability prospects of pupils,

and nowhere is that required more than in the urban and rural areas in which the most marginalised young people live. Such investment would improve their quality of life and their future prospects immeasurably.

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

Mr K Robinson: It would also improve the overall social cohesion of the entire community and move us towards the shared future that everyone seeks.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh céad maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm labhairt ar an rún seo. Ní hé go n-aontaím leis — ní aontaím leis in aon chor. Mar sin féin, fáiltím roimh an deis forbairt na gaelscolaíochta anseo sa Tuaisceart a phlé. Caithfidh mé a dhearbhu ag an tús go bhfuil spéis ar leith agam sa ghnó seo toisc go bhfuil mé i mo bhall de bhord ghobharnóirí gaelscoile in Iúr Cinn Trá agus toisc go raibh baint agam le bunú roinnt naiscoileanna

I cannot say that I agree with the motion. However, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the development of Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland, as did Mr Butler.

I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of an Irish-medium school. I have also been involved in setting up a number of Irish-medium preschools.

4.30 pm

The rapid growth and development of the Irish-medium sector over the past 37 years has been amazing. It is a story of diligence and dedication against great odds to realise a vision that many would have considered impossible. Only five pupils attended the first Irish-medium school, Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, which was founded in 1971. It took 13 years of continuous voluntary work and fund-raising before official recognition was gained for the school from the Department of Education.

The efforts of the founders of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste are indicative of the work that parents have been prepared to put in to ensure that their children can avail of Irish-medium education. Further testimony to their commitment is the present state of Irish-medium education, with 46 naiscoileanna — pre-school units — 33 bunscoileanna — primary schools — and three meánscoileanna — post-primary schools. By any measure, that is a remarkable development and it shows beyond a shadow of a doubt why Irish-medium education is considered to be the fastest-growing area of education, even in a situation of declining rolls. Irish-medium education is represented in the controlled, maintained and voluntary sectors.

There is considerable demand for Irish-medium education, and the Department of Education is legally bound to provide for that demand. Irish-medium education provides children with high-quality education in developing pupils spiritually, emotionally, physically,

intellectually and linguistically. Pupils in Irish-medium education gain the added value of competence in two languages.

The Irish-medium education sector recognises current demographics and is willing to co-operate with other sectors, with a view to sharing facilities to maximise valuable resources. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta — the Council for Irish-Medium Education — has a strategic plan for the development of the sector throughout Northern Ireland. At the moment, a review arising from the Bain Report is under way to decide how the growth of the sector can be best facilitated in the future.

The amazing development of Irish-medium education has meant that estates provision has lagged far behind growth. Almost half of all Irish-medium primary schools are in accommodation that meets health and safety standards but is not fit for purpose. The idea of the club bank is to address that gap in order that newly established schools can access accommodation that is fit for purpose, thus enabling them to meet the threshold for capital recognition.

On the operation of the scheme, the Department of Education will approve the interest rates applicable to the scheme, the staging of interest payments and the agreement with the bank. The risks for the loans are attributed to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta — the Trust Fund for Irish-Medium Education — and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, not to the Department or the taxpayer. Should the scheme go ahead, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta would provide the Department with all requested documentation monthly. The Department of Education has provided an initial lump sum to allow Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta to start the club bank by drawing loans from a bank that are based on the lump sum acting as collateral. However, the money will be used only as a guarantee to the bank. It will not be spent, and it will eventually be returned to the Department. The scheme is intended to last only —

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

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party opposes the motion. It is regrettable that a petition of concern has to be tabled on what is essentially private Members' business. The motion is the latest in a line of debates on the Irish language and Irish-medium education. Most people looking in from the outside will wonder about the Assembly's sense of priorities.

There are so many issues to discuss and challenges to face, yet the Assembly is still debating the Irish language. There are major challenges in education — for example, the future of post-primary education and sustainable schools. Those are much broader challenges than the one outlined in the motion, but there has been no debate on the fundamental principles that underlie

the future of education. Instead, Members debate the small side issues.

Equally, the Minister must articulate the wider range of problems faced by the education system in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party has some concerns that the Programme for Government refers only to the Irish-medium sector and not to others — most notably the integrated-education sector. I hope that the Minister will address that when she speaks.

As set out by its proposer, the motion does not add up; it opposes the club-bank approach, but Miss McIlveen tried to set out some practical difficulties and concerns that she had with the scheme. I do not know whether that was a front for her overall opposition to the scheme, or whether those concerns were genuine. Asking for a review, or a more detailed study, of the club-bank approach — to see whether it offers a positive way forward and delivers results — would have been a more constructive approach.

The club-bank system has considerable merits. The Alliance Party is not wedded to any particular method of funding the education system. If innovative approaches can be found, they are worthy of consideration. The club-bank system is a relatively low-cost option for Government to facilitate choice in the education system. Reference has already been made to integrated education, and it is worth highlighting the valuable role of the club-bank approach in the expansion of integrated education in Northern Ireland. I pay particular tribute to the Integrated Education Fund and its work. Often, the Government have had a narrow mindset about defending the status quo in communities and not recognising the demand for an integrated approach to education from parents. Money made available by the IEF has meant that those wishes are respected and enabled integrated schools to come into existence and prove their viability and overall sustainability to communities.

I am aware of the sustainability problems across our education system due to the falling rolls in the school estate, which have resulted in over 50,000 empty school places. In trying to seek a simplistic solution, the proposer of the motion makes a fundamental mistake by saying that those problems would disappear if all schools were controlled. Members must look at the wider context of area planning, collaboration between schools and sharing. The Irish-medium sector can fit into the broader perspective of the way forward for education.

It is important to recognise the demand for Irish-medium education — it is not my preference but I respect that it is for others. A respect for choice and diversity is a fundamental element of a shared future. Integrated education has proven to be the more sustainable option, although I have an open mind about whether Irish-medium schools are sustainable in certain localities

of Northern Ireland. However, they are certainly part of the future provision of education and, as long as they are placed in the firm context of a sustainable schools policy, which the Department has still not produced, are something that we can celebrate as part of our cultural heritage and the future of education in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party opposes the motion.

Mr McCausland: I believe in a shared future. Rather than supporting the segregated system that exists at present, we should seek to break down segregation and create a truly integrated single system of education in Northern Ireland. Dominic Bradley told the story of Irish-medium education, some aspects of which I want to discuss. A voluntary trust fund for Irish-medium education similar to the Integrated Education Fund was mentioned — I understand that it is called *Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta*.

I am indebted to our colleague Dominic Bradley for that pronunciation, because I had no idea how to pronounce it. However, an interesting point about that organisation is that it already receives funding from the Department of Education. I asked who sat on the board of the organisation and, lo and behold, it emerged that its chairperson — who was appointed by the Department of Education — is Seán Maguire. He is also the editor of the 'North Belfast News' and is chairperson — or at least he is one of the leading figures — of Sinn Féin in North Belfast. Therefore, I started to understand why Caitríona Ruane is possibly so enthusiastic and committed to the proposal.

A couple of weeks ago, our colleague Barry McElduff and I were discussing the Irish language on Radio Ulster's 'The Stephen Nolan Show'. The mother of a child in a school in west Belfast — the name of which I will not attempt to pronounce, but it translates as the school of the skylark — phoned in. I said that the skylark was a pseudonym used by Bobby Sands and that the school was holding up Bobby Sands — a convicted terrorist — as a good role model for children. At that point, the lady went apoplectic and would not undertake to translate the name of the school into English. Thankfully, Barry McElduff did translate it into English, but he did not concede the point that it was so named in honour of Bobby Sands.

The next stage of my story takes us down to Newry — an area not unknown to Dominic Bradley — and the recent visit to the Irish-medium school there by Conor Murphy who was presenting Irish-language versions of the life of Bobby Sands to the schoolchildren. Again, Bobby Sands was being held up as a role model for children. Members should begin to get the story that helps to explain why Caitríona Ruane — whom I see has left the Chamber — is so enthusiastic about Irish-medium education.

During a debate on 6 November 2007, my colleague Michelle McIlveen referred to an article in a Rathfriland newspaper — 'The Outlook' — in which a hunger striker Laurence McKeown was commenting on the visit to the Irish-medium school in Newry by Conor Murphy. He said that many teachers in Irish-medium schools — even some principals — are former prisoners. When Michelle McIlveen repeated that in the Chamber, Barry McElduff got upset. He said that she was endangering the lives of those teachers by saying that, but she was merely repeating what Laurence McKeown had said. Instead of dealing with the issue —

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it not be in order for Mr McCausland to address the motion? He has not done that yet, and he has been speaking for three and a half minutes.

Mr Speaker: I note the Member's concern. I ask Mr McCausland to carry on; I am sure that he will get to the motion.

Mr McCausland: The motion is about Irish-medium education, and I think that I have spoken about that. For instance, when I spoke about the role of Sinn Féin, I was dealing with Irish-medium education, and I will continue to do so. I have commented on the fact that so many teachers and principals in that sector are former prisoners. One of the difficulties that many unionists have with Irish-medium education is that it is a closed sector — unionists do not know much about it. However, the veil drops occasionally.

We are indebted to some unnamed person — who is unknown to me — who contributes to discussions on a local website. He picked up on the thread from someone who seemed to be a dissident republican or supporter of republican Sinn Féin and provided some interesting insights into the Irish-medium sector in Londonderry. He told, in great detail, the story of a maintained school that used to have an Irish-medium unit, and he explained how Sinn Féin was working actively within it. He detailed all the meetings and the names of the people involved.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member in the Chamber to quote from an unnamed source on an unnamed website, because the references that he is making cannot be corroborated or referred to by any other Member? *[Interruption.]*

If Mr Storey believes everything that he reads on a website he is in for a bad day. The world will be flat before he leaves the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: It would be useful if the Member would clarify exactly what he is saying.

4.45 pm

Mr McCausland: I am simply stating what I have become aware of through reading that website. I am

now attempting to ask some questions. I have an answer to one question that I have posed; I will follow up that with more, and then we will be able to illicit the truth. The website makes it clear why Caitríona Ruane is so enthusiastic about Irish-medium schools.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. Unlike interventions, no extra time is provided for a point of order.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mar urlabhraí Shinn Féin ar son na teanga, éirím le cupla focal a rá in éadan an rúin seo. Cuireann sé brón orm amannaí go bhfuil an oiread sin daoine chomh géar, chomh láidir, is chomh nimhneach in éadan na teanga uaisle áilne seo. I declare an interest, a mhacasamhail Dominic anseo, as a founder member of Naíscoil Neachtain in Dungiven, which I am glad to mention again. I am also a trustee of the school.

Yet again, a motion is before the House that reveals a fundamental antipathy to the Irish language, despite the protestations of the proposer. Yet again, as was the case with David McNarry's recent motion, the proposer of the motion is a person with a lovely Gaelic surname: McIlveen. Ironically, one of the great champions of the Irish language in Belfast is a young man of that name, although he uses the original Gaelic spelling — Mac Ghiolla Bhéin — which, translated into English means "the son of the follower", or "the disciple", or "the servant of Ben". Ben was most likely an early Christian Gaelic holy man or, perhaps, a holy woman.

The Irish-medium education sector now comprises 65 schools here, educating up to 5,000 pupils at nursery, primary and secondary level. However, as with the integrated-education movement, instead of being complimented and encouraged for what is positive and laudable in its campaign, it continues to be undermined and discouraged by people who see it only through political eyes. I expect that the integrated-education movement will take some comfort from the fact that the naysayers have now a target in Irish-medium education at which they can launch themselves more warmly and enthusiastically.

The indigenous language of any land is the jewel in its crown. The Irish language pervades our physical environment — our family surnames, towns, townlands, rivers, streams, hills and glens. It is important that we, the Irish people, maintain and develop the cultural and spiritual character that inspired the creation and evolution of that lovely language.

Sinn Féin fully supports the Irish-medium education sector.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Others in the House were much exercised earlier when my colleague Nelson McCausland was accused of not addressing the motion. When does the Member propose

to deal with club banking, instead of talking about Dungiven and giving a host of Irish lessons?

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope that the Member will address the motion.

Mr Brolly: I am simply outlining how important it is that the Irish language be supported by the club-bank system and that the two schools that are currently eligible receive funding from it as soon as possible.

Sinn Féin fully supports the Irish-medium education sector, and wants to see it develop and grow. Sinn Féin also wants to see it develop and grow outside of the Catholic, nationalist community.

Over the centuries, the Irish language has proved itself impervious to political, religious and other malign influences.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he aware that, during the establishment of the national schools in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, Irish-speaking children were made to wear an *bata scoir* — a tally stick — around the neck? Each time a child spoke Irish, a notch was cut in the tally stick, and the child was later punished for each notch. Does the Member agree that the motion is the modern-day tally stick, in so far as it wishes to punish children with substandard facilities just because they are learning through the medium of Irish?

Mr Brolly: I thank Mr Bradley for his intervention, which shows that history evolves and changes. We are now in a new cycle, and the Irish language is fighting back.

However, regardless of the intervention, I hope that Irish-medium schools will become eligible for club-bank loans. No one complained about it until now, and it is regrettable that the motion was proposed. I look forward to the day when every facet of our cultural life here can be shared, encouraged and promoted by us all.

I am glad that the Minister acknowledged my small contribution of wearing my orange tie. Out of small acorns great oak trees grow. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: It is pleasant to welcome the Minister of Education to the Chamber, after being kept informed of her movements by Mr Butler. I am really pleased to see her here and to have a nice chat with her about this important issue.

In no way am I against the Irish language. When I was in the west coast of Scotland for my summer holidays, I came across the McCrea clan, and a lot of the information about the clan was written in Scottish Gaelic or whatever. Neither have I a problem with people speaking in Irish.

It is important to have a real debate. My concern with club banks is that we are putting the cart before the horse. It is fundamentally wrong to push ahead with an

agenda for the Irish language when there is no consensus that that should be done. It is strategically flawed. I am not against the language, but I am absolutely against its being used as a political tool.

Francie Brolly spoke most eloquently about the language and Sinn Féin's support for it, and that is OK. However, instead of being supported, the language has been hijacked. The Irish language has been taken over and the debate is put forward in terms that make it difficult for anybody to support. One does try to keep an open mind on those matters, look forward and determine the benefits of giving preferential treatment to an Irish-language exercise through the club-bank system. Does it prepare our young people for the future, and does it add anything to it?

Even if those arrangements can be made in primary schools, what happens in the post-primary sector? There is a shortage of teachers in that sector, and it would be quite awkward. However, even if that could be sorted out — and I have heard the Minister say that people could be brought from elsewhere — what happens to the tertiary sector? We are keen to get 50% or more of our young people into that. Where will we get the lecturers?

Then what happens after that in R&D? How much of the world's research and development is conducted in English and how much in Irish? At that stage, the question must be asked: does it really stack up? The potential problems of such a move must be considered.

I am committed to a shared future, and it is important that we find a way to work together and respect differences. However, I have a bit of a problem with a language that requires 100% immersion. How does one integrate or work with people who speak a completely different language? That seems to be incompatible. In the South, there has been a direction — although maybe it has changed — that even Irish-medium schools must also teach English from an early age. Even there, it is not 100% immersion.

On a serious, non-political point, our education system is in danger of getting into problems by "salami slicing". For example, and to show that there are a breadth of things going wrong and demonstrate the difficulty of singling out a particular issue, a primary school in Mallusk is threatened with closure because a Brethren school is going to be set up. I understand absolutely that the Brethren have issues of their own, but there is a knock-on effect.

Similarly, I have spoken to Muslims who want to open a school. There are a range of people, such as the Muslims, the Chinese and the Poles, whom one could attempt to deal with, but one cannot deal with them all. Before moving to fund such ideas, Members must properly debate the issues. Respectfully, the UUP supports the motion. However, I am sure that we will

return to the issue at another time, and I look forward to a friendly and frank engagement.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This debate has been prompted by opposition to plans to introduce a loan arrangement for the provision of accommodation for approved Irish-medium schools. Such an arrangement has existed in the integrated sector for many years. At the outset, I should say that a loan scheme for the Irish-medium sector is still under discussion. It is important that such a scheme be considered carefully — not least because of the planned changes to the future administration of education and improved strategic planning of the estate.

Nevertheless, the focus to which Irish-medium education has been subjected in the Assembly should be of concern. More than 40 questions have been asked by the other side of the House — 6.5% of all education questions — about a sector that accounts for approximately 3,750 children, or 1.1% of the school population. We have had only two petitions of concern in the House. What were they about? Irish-medium education. We have had 0.7% — I repeat, 0.7% —

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: No, I will not give way. We have had 0.7% of the Budget spent on Irish-medium education. What does that say to us? The Irish language is part of our national heritage. It should be celebrated and treasured, not insulted in an attempt to fan the flames of prejudice and hatred.

The Good Friday Agreement included a commitment to:

"take resolute action to promote the language ... seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language".

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to allege that the petition of concern in relation to Mr McNarry's motion on 9 October referred to the Irish-medium sector when it had nothing at all to do with education? Obviously, in relation to the petition of concern, the Minister is giving wrong information to the House.

Mr Speaker: A petition of concern has been presented to me, and it has already been dealt with. The Minister should continue.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. The Good Friday Agreement included a commitment to:

"take resolute action to promote the language ... seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language".

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages contains a commitment to education in Irish where numbers are considered sufficient. There is a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-

medium and integrated education, and I intend to do just that.

5.00 pm

We are in a new era in which people expect to see leadership from their politicians. I visited Mount Vernon this morning to discuss the issues faced by the community there — issues that are faced by communities in other parts of the North. It is important that the Assembly be inclusive and show leadership to those communities to help to improve their lives, step by step. That is a small step but, in a small way, I am trying to show leadership, and I ask Members to join me in that.

It is a shame to hear a young woman, such as Michelle McIlveen, attacking the Irish language and trying to justify her attack by saying at the outset that that is not what she is doing. I would much prefer to see innovative thinking from a young woman in the DUP — or in any party — rather than tired, narrow-minded thinking or obsessions with the Irish language.

We must move forward. My colleague Francie Brolly mentioned the Irish-medium community. I ask Members to consider for one moment the effect that this debate will have on that community and on the children who might be listening to parts of it. It is not fair.

I congratulate the Irish-medium sector for the work that it is doing; I want to distance myself from the attacks on it and to say that I am sorry that there has been such a constant attack on its chosen form of education. I would like to reassure those people —

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your capacity as Speaker, can you help the House by distinguishing whether this speech is being made by someone acting as a Minister or a Member —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order.

Ms Ruane: I would like to reassure those people that they can expect fair play, as will everyone in the education sector. I would also like to reassure them that, in my role as Minister, I have been out and about in many communities, and I have visited many schools that are predominately Protestant. The generosity of spirit shown by people there on many issues, including the Irish language, is in stark contrast to that shown by Michelle McIlveen and Nelson McCausland today. Those people are ashamed about such attacks and the type of narrow mindedness that has been shown today, and they want to distance themselves from that.

Beidh Comhaltaí i ndiaidh ráiteas agus tuairimí a chluinstin faoi scéim chlub bainc, agus creidim go mbeadh sé ina chuidiú ag Comhaltaí míniú a fáil ar cad é atá i gceist leis an scéim agus an dóigh a n-oibríonn sí san earnáil imeasctha.

Members will have heard comments and concerns expressed about a club-bank scheme, and it would be useful if I explain briefly what that is and how it operates for the integrated sector. It is referred to as a club bank simply because it is an agreement among three banks, NICIE and the Integrated Education Fund. The agreement allows the integrated sector to place money on deposit against which it can borrow sums to finance the capital cost of new grant-maintained integrated schools. That can be done only for schools for which a statutory development proposal has been published, has been the subject of consultation, and which has been conditionally approved by the Department of Education. It cannot be used for schools that are funded independently.

The publication of a development proposal is required when there is a proposal for a school to be established, be closed or to undergo a significant change that would alter its character or size. The development proposal gives the school recognition for funding. The club bank is a means of delivering accommodation for integrated schools without capital funding from the Department of Education at the outset.

In agreeing to the use of club-bank arrangements in the mid-1990s, the Department's objective was to reduce the risk of loss in providing public funding for a new school during its early years, until it had proven its enrolment viability. Thus, a newly established school that had been approved for funding by the Department would receive recurrent funding only to cover costs such as teachers' salaries, conditional on meeting the intake requirements. That school would be eligible for capital funding if it had met the minimum intake requirements over a longer period of three years.

Those schools have traditionally been constructed with a core building and mobile classrooms, with further mobile classrooms being added over time, subject to the schools increasing in size.

The Department reimburses approved capital costs once the criteria are met. Once the reimbursement of approved capital expenditure is made, the club-bank arrangement does not provide any further funding for that particular school. The school trustees have to meet the costs of any further capital work, then retrospectively claim grant aid from the Department. Therefore, in the early years, the sector, rather than the Department, takes the risk in providing facilities through borrowing from the banks for capital works.

Tá roinnt blianta ó shin, moladh socrú den chineál seo d'earnáil na Gaeilge. Tuigim gurb é an rún a bhí ann ag an am nach mbeadh ach banc amháin i gceist in ionad trí cinn cionnas go rabhthar ag dream le scála níos lú iasachtaí.

A similar arrangement was proposed for the Irish-medium sector several years ago. I understand that, because of the anticipated smaller scale of loans, the

intention was for only one bank to be involved, rather than three. It was envisaged that such a scheme would operate in a similar way to that in the integrated sector: the sector would borrow for the purposes of providing accommodation for a school that had itself been conditionally approved by the Department.

The work of the review of education administration includes the development of an area-based planning approach to the schools estate. In a period of significant changes to pupil numbers, that approach will help to offer a real solution to the issue of over-provision. Furthermore, it should bring greater consistency and equality to planning. It is proposed that the new education and skills authority will have a central role in the planning of the estate, within the policy framework and guidance provided by the Department.

The production of well-developed area-based plans could make club-bank arrangements redundant. In future, all school schemes that are considered necessary to meet expected needs in an area, and are supported through area-based planning, should be able to be considered for funding from the outset. That will require the education and skills authority to have access to robust information on anticipated needs for an area. The use of bank loans for a particular sector will be expected to diminish, and will most likely become unnecessary altogether.

There is an important question around how to address the accommodation needs of existing Irish-medium schools in the period before the education and skills authority is established. The issues are subject to consideration, and the position of individual schools will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. Equality will be at the forefront in the making of those decisions, and statutory duties will be taken into account.

A club bank, therefore, is simply a means of addressing accommodation needs for recently established schools that have already been recognised for recurrent, but not capital, funding. As I have explained, there is a question over the future role of a club bank.

Although Members have focused on concerns about access to loan arrangements for Irish-medium schools, we have heard little from Members today — except sniggering and bully-boy tactics — as to what funding arrangements should be used instead for recently established approved schools. All children are entitled —

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for that sort of language to be used in the Chamber? My colleague and I have tried to be constructive during this debate. We have suggested — I do not know whether the Minister was present at that time — that the maintained sector and the Irish units that are contained —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have allowed the Member some liberty on his point of order. I remind all Members and

the Minister that, in this House, as far as possible, they should temper their language.

Mr F McCann: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. While the Minister is on her feet, some Members in the Chamber are continuously trying to shout down the other Members, which disrupts —

Mr Speaker: That is not an appropriate point of order. I understand that, from time to time, there are debates in the House that raise emotions. However, once again, I remind Members that they should be temperate and measured in what they say.
[*Interruption.*]

Ms Ruane: Has the Member opposite finished making his point?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.
[*Interruption.*]

I am taking no further points of order. I ask the Member to take his seat, and I am — [*Interruption.*]

I am taking no further points of order on this issue. The Minister may continue.

Ms Ruane: I will repeat my last sentence, as I do not know whether Members heard it.

Although Members have focused on concerns about access to loan arrangements for Irish-medium schools, we have heard little today as to what funding arrangements should be used instead for recently established approved schools and, indeed, for schools that are working out of Portakabins, of which there are many in the Irish-medium sector.

All children, regardless of creed, race, religious belief or political opinion, are entitled to learn in facilities that meet modern educational standards. An obvious alternative to borrowing would be to plan for capital funding for new schools from the outset. Is that what Members want to see? Those matters will be considered carefully in deciding how best to proceed, and in anticipation of an area-based planning approach.

I will not tolerate any sector's being treated in a discriminatory or unfair manner. I will continue to take my equality duties as Minister of Education in the North of Ireland — *Mar Aire Oideachais i dTuaisceart na hÉireann* — very seriously. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: Sometimes, I hear the comments of Members, and it is clear to me that they forget that they are in a debating Chamber. This is not a stroll down to the dry-cleaners to hear what everyone is saying. This is a debating Chamber, so let us have the debate; let us have the banter, but in a way that is fair. I do not accept the allegations made by the Minister that bully-boy tactics are being used. Those on the other side of the Chamber know well how parts of society operate with respect to bully-boy tactics.

Members know me to be someone who uses temperate language — someone who is always considerate and moderate in what he says. However, Members have made a number of contributions to which I must respond. I dissociate myself from the scurrilous comments that were made by the Minister and others, attacking Michelle McIlveen. I commend Miss McIlveen for stressing that her motion is not a sectarian attack on the Irish-medium sector. The motion simply highlights the problems that will emerge as a result of this policy, should it ever be implemented.

The policy is unfair, and it gives an unfair advantage to the Irish-medium sector. We have the figures: £33 million was given to the Irish-medium sector in the past five years. Obviously, one cannot argue that there has been discrimination. Surely, £33 million — *[Interruption.]*

I will not give way. I have 10 minutes, and I can assure Members that I will use them to the full.

Having given the Irish-medium sector £33 million, the Minister plans to give it additional moneys and an additional advantage.

My colleague Michelle McIlveen also made reference to area-based planning. It seems as though that concept, along with 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools' and the Bain Report are to be torn up. Those matters are referred to; credence is paid to them in lip service, but they are not dealt with in reality.

Paul Butler was next to contribute. I am surprised and somewhat disappointed that he is not sitting in his usual place. Normally, he sits at the Minister's side, like a mini-me of the Minister of Education. However, he has taken a seat at the back of the Chamber. He said that Miss McIlveen's comments were an attack, dressed up. I have disposed of that allegation.

The DUP is not playing politics. The education of all our children, whether they attend an Irish-medium school, a controlled school, a maintained school — or, like my children, a Christian independent school that does not receive one penny from the Department — is too important to be the subject of political games.

If we have entered a new era — I say "if" because recent events have perhaps called that into question — let us see it in reality. Let us have a level playing field for all.

5.15 pm

Paul Butler referred to growing evidence of the existence of substandard buildings in the Irish-medium sector. However, he did not refer to the substandard buildings that exist in the maintained sector, the controlled sector or the other sectors. It is all right for pupils in those schools to be in Portakabins. It is acceptable for schools such as Ballycastle High School, which is in my constituency, not to have had a newbuild since

1964. That is a controlled school, and, as such, it is in one of those sectors that can be ignored when it comes to giving financial and infrastructural assistance. Mr Butler also said that the scheme will educate children in the Irish-medium sector:

"without any risk to the public purse."

One million pounds has been proposed for the scheme, and the breakdown of the additional bid that the Minister has submitted cites £3.5 million for 2008-09, £2.5 million for 2009-10, and another £2.5 million for 2010-11, of which some is for language enhancement for teachers in the Irish-medium schools. Obviously, Long Kesh did not provide enough Irish-language teaching, and that is the reason that their skills need enhancing.

[Interruption.]

Mr Storey: You probably understand it better.

Moving on, I welcome Ken Robinson's comments, and I always appreciate the wisdom that he brings to education matters, not only in the Chamber, but in the Committee for Education. He referred to the Irish-language units in the maintained sector. We must ask why there is a problem and a division. Why are people making a choice? I welcome his comments about the exclusivity of the Irish-medium sector and the dangers of division. He also referred to a shared future, but I will come back to that in a moment.

Dominic Bradley, who is not in the Chamber, spoke of rapid growth in the Irish-medium sector. I thought that he would say that such growth has taken place over the past five or 10 years, but, lo and behold, he said that it had occurred over the past 37 years. If we wait until the sector's fiftieth birthday, we may have 5,000 children in the Irish-medium sector. Is that rapid growth? The Minister has told us that the Irish-medium sector represents the equivalent of 1.1% of the school population and 0.07% of the Budget. If Dominic Bradley deems that to be rapid growth, I hope that the economy grows faster than the Irish-medium sector, otherwise the Programme for Government will have no chance of surviving.

What can one say about Stephen Farry and the Alliance Party? He dealt with a small side issue. However, the one point that amazed me about his speech was that, probably for the first time in any of his interventions or contributions in the Chamber, he did not refer to the document 'Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide'. That document is the bedtime reading of all Alliance Party Members. What does that document say about the divisions that exist in the education system in Northern Ireland? I will quote a part that Stephen may have missed last night:

"schools provision — greater collaboration across schools sectors and consolidation within the schools estate could result in savings".

The document goes on to say that between £15.9 million and £79.6 million could be saved. Are we not getting to the heart of the issue for the Irish-medium, maintained and controlled sectors? Members must face up to the reality that our education system will cost an absolute fortune, as that document proves. What does the Minister do? She decides that money is of no consequence and that we can afford to dish out more for new schemes such as the club banks.

I must clarify for Mr Brolly, who needs to be given a lesson in Ulster-Scots — not Irish — history, and assure the House that the McIlveens, one of whom is on this side of Chamber, were Ulster Scots who arrived with the Hamiltons and the Montgomerys when they settled in 1606. That needs to be understood.

I welcome Mr McCausland's comments, which were self-explanatory.

I will now deal with the Minister's remarks and leave Basil McCrea alone for once. During an intervention that she made on another occasion when she addressed the House, the Minister quoted poetry to me. She also said that she was glad that I was not the Education Minister. I want to quote a little bit of poetry to her:

"As I was sitting in my chair, I knew the bottom was not there; nor legs, nor back, but I just sat, ignoring little things like that".

That is what the Minister has done with regard to the financial arrangements for education, classroom assistants, and so on: she has continually ignored the facts. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the debate on the motion. I remind Members that the Question will be put as the first item of business on Monday 19 November 2007, on a cross-community basis.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

Priory Integrated College, Holywood

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer will have 10 minutes in which to speak and all other Members will have approximately seven or eight minutes in which to speak.

Dr Farry: I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss this important issue. This debate is, first and foremost, about the future of Priory Integrated College in Holywood. However, the subject is, in fact, broader because the wider reorganisation of educational provision in Holywood depends on decisions that will be taken on Priory Integrated College in the near future.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge the strong support for the new campus and other educational reforms in Holywood that has come from across the political spectrum in North Down and which will, undoubtedly, be reflected in the comments of my fellow North Down MLAs during the debate.

By coincidence, North Down Borough Council will also be debating a cross-party motion on this subject tonight, which will, no doubt, be passed. I thank the MP for North Down, Lady Sylvia Hermon, who has been vocal on the issue and who has provided critical leadership.

I also thank the Minister of Education for taking the trouble to visit Priory Integrated College in June 2007, just a few weeks after she assumed office. The school was grateful for her visit, during which it was clear that the Minister took a great deal of interest in the children's work. She could not have failed to notice the building's poor state of repair: it is well past its sell-by date and is no longer fit for purpose.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board, in considering the future of education provision in Holywood, has, through an economic appraisal, come to the firm conclusion that the most efficient and effective solution — financially and educationally — is to relocate Priory Integrated College to the Redburn Primary School site; demolish the current building in order to make way for a new primary school that would facilitate the amalgamation of Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School; and construct a new nursery unit on the site vacated by Holywood Primary School. It is a significant reorganisation of education provision in the town. However, it places education on a fully sustainable basis. The newbuild

campus for Priory Integrated College must be the first step in that reorganisation.

On 1 March 2006, former Education Minister, Angela Smith, announced funding of £8.7 million for the new building. That was part of an overall investment of £380 million in the schools estate across Northern Ireland. That announcement was made shortly after the Secretary of State had announced the independent strategic review of education, which was subsequently headed by Professor Sir George Bain. Therefore, the announcement was made as the Department was moving to adopt a more strategic approach to the schools estate. However, in January 2007, the Secretary of State indicated that capital projects that had already been approved, such as that of Priory Integrated College, needed to be reviewed in light of the Bain Report's recommendations.

In February 2007, the South Eastern Education and Library Board reaffirmed its support for the project, in the light of the Bain Report. In other words, the board sees the project as being consistent with that report. In March, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Maria Eagle confirmed that the building work for 84 schools, which had been put on hold, could proceed. She stressed that the remaining assessments could be completed within two months. It is now almost six months since the time in which those assessments should have been concluded. However, Priory Integrated College is still awaiting the go-ahead for its project. Other schools are also awaiting decisions, not least the High School, Ballynahinch, which is in the Minister's constituency. Priory Integrated College has done everything that has been, and could be, asked of the school.

I wish to stress a number of important points about Priory Integrated College. First, it is an integrated college. I firmly believe that integrated schools are the most sustainable form of education, both financially and economically. They offer the most rounded education to students, which is of benefit to wider society. The former Holywood High School took on integrated status 10 years ago, with a new name and a new ethos. It is widely acknowledged to be one of the most successful post-primary integrated schools in Northern Ireland. The Minister is aware of my concern over the approach that the Department takes to viability criteria for integrated schools. However, it is worth noting that, in North Down, fewer than 70% of students are recorded as having a Protestant background.

Priory Integrated College is the only integrated post-primary school in the constituency, and it is fully subscribed. A considerable number of its pupils attends from Bangor and east Belfast. However, the majority of its students comes from the town of Holywood. The neighbouring post-primary integrated schools — namely, Lagan College and Strangford Integrated College — are oversubscribed. Therefore, the school is not only sustain-

able but critical, if every child in North Down and East Belfast is to be offered the opportunity to avail himself or herself of integrated post-primary education.

Priory Integrated College has established partnerships with Oakgrove Integrated College in Derry and an Irish-language school in Cork, the Pobalscoil na Tríonóide. I hope that I have pronounced its name correctly. Moreover, Priory Integrated College is an all-ability school and delivers excellent academic results. It is worth noting that the college is the only non-selective option for people who live in the large town of Holywood. The school and its students make valuable contributions to the community through sports, the arts and community and charity work. The wider community in Holywood, including the Holywood Chamber of Trade, is supportive of the new school.

As an integrated school, its appeal to the entire community is maximised. However, the sustainability argument goes even further. The school has collaborated with a wide range of other local schools, including Glastry College, St Columbanus High School, Strangford Integrated College, South Eastern Regional College and Sullivan Upper School. That collaboration offers students in all those schools the benefits of, and access to, the widest curriculum possible. Holywood's local grammar school, Sullivan Upper, is also supportive of the changes.

I am conscious of the problems facing the schools estate across Northern Ireland. Those problems include falling rolls and 50,000 empty school places, which, in a few years' time, may rise to 80,000. It was in that context that the Bain Report was commissioned. That report places a heavy emphasis on sharing in and between schools, collaboration among schools and area planning. It is clear that Priory Integrated College ticks all those boxes.

Clearly, there must be a rationalisation of the schools estate. That rationalisation will create many problems in many communities. Local representatives will use Adjournment debates to argue for special cases. However, the case of Priory Integrated College is different. Holywood is well ahead of the curve in innovation and rationalisation. The community is hungry to move ahead with the necessary rationalisation, but decisions are not being taken. A ready solution for area planning has been presented on a plate to the Minister. That solution could be a model for other areas.

The reorganisation of the schools estate in Holywood will provide a much more sustainable outcome. Priory Integrated College can provide for long-term enrolment, well in excess of 450 students. The year 8 intake for 2007-08 was 88. Although, the Bain Report recommended a threshold of 500 students for post-primary schools, that threshold was for reviewing the situation in the context of those schools' experiences. A threshold of

500 students is, of course, an arbitrary figure. The realities of how communities exist must be taken into account.

Frankly, a newbuild campus for Priory College could see an expanded school well beyond that threshold figure of 500. The demand is there, and integrated education is extremely popular, not only in Holywood, but throughout North Down. In any event, the amalgamation of the two primary schools on the current site will see a single primary school with an enrolment figure well in excess of 400. That is almost three times the Bain threshold figure for primary schools. The overall package of this reorganisation is, therefore, unambiguously sustainable.

5.30 pm

What further information or evidence does the Minister need from the school in order to make that decision? She may be in a position to make a crucial announcement this evening. However, if not, I ask her to assure the House, particularly the MLAs from North Down, and the entire community in Holywood, that she will be able to take a positive decision in the very near future.

The consequences of delay are pupils and staff continuing to work in conditions recognised by the Minister's own Department as not being fit for purpose; health and safety issues; high levels of anxiety among staff, students and parents; high maintenance costs, which are totally unnecessary; and uncertainty in the feeder primary schools. I urge the Minister to take the necessary decision and to provide a model system for education, not just in Holywood, but right across North Down. I must stress that the will exists in the community to move forward on education and to make the types of changes that are necessary in Northern Ireland. With the support of the Minister and the Department, those changes can be made.

Mr Weir: I thank my colleague for North Down Dr Farry for bringing this issue to the Assembly's attention. Moreover, I take this opportunity to welcome some representatives from Priory Integrated College who are in the Public Gallery to listen this very important debate.

As has been said, what has happened with Priory Integrated College goes to the heart of many issues. It goes to the heart of the issue of the Department's integrity. A previous Minister announced that the investment in the college was to go ahead; however, there was a lack of follow-up action — indeed, the Department dragged its feet. Such cases are not unique. Often when announcements are made, the failure to act swiftly on them, and, in some cases, the failure to implement particular decisions, places a question mark over the integrity of the Department.

This issue also goes to the heart of the need for decisive action. Although we can be critical of the Department for failure to move forward on the matter when direct rule Ministers were in charge, there are

some concerns over the length of time that this matter has taken since devolution. Soon after devolution was restored at the beginning of May, I wrote to the Minister about Priory Integrated College — indeed, I am sure that she has received representations from a number of Members. In June, I received a response thanking me for my letter of 24 May. Indications were given that, at that stage, it was not possible to determine when the scheme will be allowed to proceed and when building work on the new school could commence. It is now nearly five months since I received a response to that letter, and nearly six months since the matter was originally raised by Members, yet the pupils, staff and governors of Priory Integrated College are still in a state of suspended animation. They still wait to hear when the college will be given the green light on the newbuild, or, indeed, whether it will be given the green light at all.

Above all, this issue is about the application of pure common sense. As Stephen Farry pointed out, it is clear that the case for a newbuild in Priory Integrated College is unanswerable. In making the case, let me ask four questions. First, is a newbuild necessary? I have had the honour of visiting the school and seeing the conditions there — I am sure that other Members have, too. In the previous debate, reference was made to a school in north Antrim that has remained unchanged since the 1960s. Priory Integrated College has been in existence since 1952, so the building is 55 years old. Unfortunately, anyone visiting the college can clearly see the wear and tear of that building.

It is simply in an unacceptable state for education. The walls are peeling, and there are areas that are unsafe for the children. Indeed, when an education and library board representative visited the school and was asked about refurbishment, he said that the school was not refurbishable, and that it had reached the stage at which any money spent on repairing or improving it would only be throwing good money after bad. It is clear that that is not an answer.

Against that background, the next question is whether the school is successful. Despite the appalling conditions in which teachers have had to work — as the previous contributor said — Priory Integrated College's academic record has been excellent. It is a non-selective school; one might almost say that it is a model for the path that the Minister would like to go down. However, it has achieved excellent results. Sixth-form provision was first made available at Priory Integrated College four years ago, and of the first cohort of A-level students, 93% are at university. The vast majority of that group of pupils would have been unfairly labelled as 11-plus failures, yet they have achieved excellent academic results.

The third question is whether the school is sustainable. There is a clear demand for integrated education and, as Dr Farry said, the nearest schools — Lagan College

and Strangford Integrated College, both of which are some distance away from Priory Integrated College — are oversubscribed. Despite the appalling physical condition of the school, its numbers have increased. At one time, the school roll reached a low of 190; it is now about 420 or 430.

In discussions about the sustainability of the school, a figure of 500 pupils has been mentioned. However, Dr Farry has already pointed out that that is not a proper comparison because it does not compare like with like. Given that the maximum enrolment of Priory Integrated College has, in effect, been capped at about 450 pupils, the opportunity to achieve that target of 500 is nigh on impossible at this time. The school is growing in popularity, and found itself oversubscribed after the most recent intake. It would be difficult for parents to be impressed with the school, given the state of the building, but many parents want their children to go there.

The needs of the area go beyond Priory Integrated College itself. There is a knock-on effect for Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School, which intend to amalgamate, and also for nursery provision. The vast majority of pupils aged between three years and 18 years throughout Holywood and parts of Bangor and east Belfast are affected. A new build at Priory Integrated College is clearly going to be sustainable.

The final question is whether best practice is being adopted in relation to sustainability. Co-operation exists between Priory Integrated College, Sullivan Upper School, St Columbanus' College, South Eastern Regional College, which comprises the former North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education, and also involves Strangford Integrated College and Glastry College. Work is continuing with a school in County Cork — unlike Dr Farry, I am not even going to attempt the Irish pronunciation. The school co-operates with Oakgrove Integrated College and is involved in a cross-generational project with the primary 7 class at Glencraig Integrated Primary School. Priory Integrated College fulfils the Bain Report's collaboration criteria; it is a model school.

The parents and governors of Priory Integrated College are asking the Minister for some implementation, some delivery and, at the very least, some certainty in the process, so that they can have a date for a newbuild. It is an unanswerable case. Let us see something being done for all the people of Holywood.

Mr Cree: I support my colleagues on this issue. Dr Farry has set out the history of the matter. Prior to the debate, I dug out some of the many oral and written questions that have been put to the Minister.

I am amazed by the number of questions that there have been, although the replies have been much the same. In March 2007, we were told that six schools would be put on hold and one of those would be Priory

Integrated College. On 15 June, in response to a question for written answer, the Minister said:

“The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, pWA105, col 2*].

The enrolment level was capped at a maximum of 450 pupils, and the Department of Education was concerned at projected enrolment trends and the sustainability of those projected trends. On 17 September 2007, the Minister said in the House:

“Pupil numbers are clearly an important factor in assessing the future viability of schools, but they should not be the sole factor.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, No 7, p323, col 1*].

The Minister confirmed that other factors to be taken into consideration included:

“the educational experience of the children, the financial position of the school, leadership and management at the school, accessibility, and links with the community.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, No 7, p323, col 1*].

I contend, and I do not think that there is any dissention from the point of view, that Priory Integrated College scores in all those areas. The enrolment figure of 450 could easily be reached, and one of the problems is that the lack of action on the Priory Integrated College site delays the two primary schools in Holywood, but also the ones in Bangor and in Conlig that have applied for integrated status. There is now a queue of schools awaiting decisions, while other decisions have been taken. For example, the Minister decided to close the school in Conlig, even though its application for integrated status is still being considered. A nonsensical situation is developing in North Down.

We want to have the best education system possible for North Down, and we cannot be faulted for that. Therefore, we must be told sharply when a decision will be made by either the Department of Education or the South Eastern Education and Library Board, whichever one is holding up the issue.

I mentioned the nightmare situation that has developed: the numbers of pupils who attend, or are about to attend, integrated primary schools are diminishing overall because of the lack of progress at Priory Integrated College. I have been surprised to learn that, in considering the future of schools, the powers that be tend to look at the numbers on the ground and give little thought to the projected numbers. For example, it seems that there is no liaison between the projected enrolment of a school and the building of houses in that area.

In Conlig, where the primary school wishes to be an integrated primary school, 1,600 new houses are being built in the area. By any stretch of the imagination, that is an essential criterion to be taken into account when deciding the future of that school and the future of education for integrated-status applications throughout the borough of North Down. If they were given integrated

status, those primary schools would be feeder schools to Priory Integrated College. I appeal to the Minister to make a decision about Priory Integrated College so that the issue may be resolved and people can plan for the future education of their children.

Mr Easton: I am delighted to support Dr Farry in raising this matter in the Adjournment debate.

Children, teachers and residents from Holywood and the surrounding area have waited patiently for an effective reorganisation of the school system in Holywood. They have grown resentful that, year after year, their hopes of a new school being built have been dashed with delays and inaction. Dr Farry and I, along with other Members in the Chamber today, are colleagues on North Down Borough Council. Along with every member of that council, we are disappointed by the Minister's failure to act responsibly and decisively to provide a suitable educational infrastructure to serve the children of Holywood.

Much is made at times of the area's reputation as the County Down gold coast, but North Down Borough Council, like many other councils, serves a diverse community, and all its children, especially those from disadvantaged areas, are entitled to have their education in a positive and supportive environment.

5.45 pm

The people of Holywood pay high rates and taxes, and they reasonably expect proper educational provision for all their children in return. The Minister should be keen to advance the proposals for a new school in the area, because education in the town is characterised by the willingness of many parents to send their children to schools that accept pupils without considering their religious affiliation.

The proposal to build a new school for Priory Integrated College in Holywood has been on the table for several years, and the patience of the community is wearing thin. The proposed newbuild will have numerous social, educational and economic advantages, and it will benefit the pupils of both primary schools in the area when they amalgamate. The Minister's failure to act is causing problems and has led to considerable frustration for parents, teachers and children at both primary and secondary schools. It is also having a major impact on the plans for the local primary schools in the area, because they too are in limbo as they await a decision.

Local political representatives have been inundated with requests from constituents for information, action and support. They are entitled to an answer, and I hope that the Minister will provide one today. The implementation of the plan would ensure that Holywood has an excellent educational infrastructure that is appropriate to the needs of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the community would understand that devolved Government works for all areas of the Province. The plans for Priory

Integrated College must be implemented immediately, because it is vital for the well-being of the children in the town.

In the last debate on education, the Minister spoke about how many schools she had visited. I stand to be corrected, but she has not visited any schools in North Down. I challenge her to visit Priory Integrated College to observe the result of academic selection, the viability of the project, the support of the community and the state of the building. I hope that she will come to North Down and show a bit of interest in the people there for a change.

Mr McFarland: I thank Stephen Farry for introducing today's debate. I also thank the Minister for being present, and I hope that she has her listening ears on.

Priory Integrated College is a successful and popular integrated school. As Members have heard, an exciting plan had been agreed to amalgamate the two primary schools into one new school on the existing college site and move the college to a new building on the Redburn Primary School site. Why has that plan been halted? It appears that it is because the number of pupils enrolled does not meet the departmental threshold of 500 that is required for a newbuild. I understand that the college has a cap of 450 pupils, which was determined by the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Therefore, the college has to turn away a number of pupils each year, which prevents it reaching an enrolment of 500.

The situation is ridiculous. I visited the school with fellow Members earlier this year, and I wrote to the Minister outlining the daft position. The Minister even visited the school, for which I thank her. I understand that she arrived shortly after my visit. However, despite a mound of supporting evidence, she still refuses to approve the newbuild. Will she please explain why, in the face of so much evidence that the plan meets the requirements, does she still refuse to back it? Priory Integrated College is everything that an integrated school should be, but the board and the Department are discriminating against it.

My colleague Lady Sylvia Hermon MP is a strong supporter of the project, and all MLAs and local councillors are in favour of the newbuild. I ask the Minister to sort out the confusion and to process the proposals now.

Mr B Wilson: I am increasingly concerned about the delay in starting the building of the new college. I congratulate Dr Farry for introducing the debate today. The debate is a result of growing frustration, because Members have questioned, and written to, the Minister but have had little response.

My interest stems from the fact that my eldest son is a former student of Holywood High School, which he attended when it was in the process of applying for integrated status. I was involved in the ballot before the application that successfully transformed it into

Priory Integrated College. Since then, I have taken a great interest in the development and expansion of the college because, at that time, it was not in a good state. I supported the school's application for integrated status because I recognised that there was an increasing demand for integrated education in North Down. It has been highlighted that the neighbouring integrated post-primary schools of Strangford Integrated College and Lagan College are oversubscribed, and, in fact, Priory Integrated College is also oversubscribed this year. Therefore, there is great demand for integrated schooling. More parents are choosing to send their children to integrated schools, and that is reflected by the increase in enrolment at Priory Integrated College. That is likely to continue, particularly with the provision of a new school.

The excellent examination results and the fact that the college now provides A-level courses have contributed to the increase in enrolment. The college's GCSE results are well above average for a non-selective school, and all A-level students obtained three A-level passes at grade A to D, which is exceptional, given that all the students were deemed 11-plus failures.

Priory Integrated College's progressive policies are also highlighted by the fact that the college is at the forefront of adopting the principles set out in the Bain Report. It is working with Sullivan Upper, the South Eastern Regional College and St Columbanus High School on various courses. Priory Integrated College is doing all the right things for the future of education, and it is making considerable progress. The only problem is that the school buildings are deteriorating; they are grotty and are no longer capable of meeting the demands of modern education. A recent survey of the school showed that repairs totalling more than £1 million were necessary to bring the college to a fit state, but that would be simply throwing good money after bad. Priory Integrated College needs a new campus.

The fact that the college was oversubscribed this year highlights its popularity. In some cases, the conditions under which students and teachers are expected to work are appalling. A new school is necessary to allow the college to develop its full potential.

An early decision is essential, as a delay affects not only the students of Priory Integrated College, but virtually every other child in the Holywood area. Work on Holywood Primary School and on Holywood Nursery School cannot commence until the Priory Integrated College site is vacated. The delay is unacceptable, as it creates uncertainty throughout all levels of education in Holywood.

In March, the then Minister with responsibility for education, Maria Eagle, stated that a decision would be made in two months. However, eight months later, we still await that decision. It is time to remove that uncertainty

and to make a firm commitment to Priory Integrated College. That would release the land for the development of the new primary and nursery schools in Holywood.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Department of Education considers demand for all forms of education within a framework set out in legislation whereby, in so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. The Department also has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium and integrated education. The Good Friday Agreement states that an essential element of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to encourage and facilitate integrated education.

Members have said that the capital scheme for Priory Integrated College was put on hold by direct rule Minister Maria Eagle, following a review of capital planning schemes to assess their consistency with the direction set out in the Bain Report.

The Bain Report recommended a schools estate comprising fewer larger schools, with greater collaboration and integration within, and across, school sectors to address the needs of local areas.

In assessing the need for building projects, it is important that the particular circumstances are examined carefully. We must look at preferences, within and between sectors, and take account of the impact of declining rolls on long-term sustainability in the post-primary sector. There are added difficulties involving the availability of places and effects on enrolment patterns.

Following the Bain Report, six projects — including Priory Integrated College — were put on hold because of uncertainties surrounding them. Priory Integrated College has an enrolment of 368 pupils in years eight to 12; 41 pupils at post-16, and 17 pupils with statements. The projected long-term enrolment is for 400 pupils in years eight to 12.

The Bain Report did not state that schools that are below that level must be rationalised automatically; and I have not agreed with the report's recommendations in their entirety. There are issues relating to the Irish-medium and integrated sectors that the Department must examine — and there is currently a review of Irish-medium education.

The Bain Report recommended that schools below the 500-pupil level were to be reviewed to ensure that they were continuing to provide a high standard of education. All schools must be judged on their merits, with a particular focus on the duty to promote and encourage.

In response to Alex Easton, I visited Priory Integrated College on 30 May 2007 and was impressed by the good work of the principal and the staff, as well as the evident commitment to the delivery of high quality education. Priory Integrated College has well established links with other providers across all sectors, and enjoys strong leadership and management. There is no doubt that the school has developed strong links with the community. The key issue is to determine the provision needed for the local area, which takes account of local enrolment trends and anticipated demand in the future. Bhí an Roinn i dteagmháil le bord an oirdheiscirt maidir le riachtanais ionchasacha an cheantair le gur féidir cinneadh a dhéanamh a luaithe is féidir.

The Department has liaised with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on its position regarding anticipated needs in the area. I have no development proposal in front of me, but I want a decision on the future of the project as soon as possible. I understand and share the frustration of the school. I note the support of all the parties present — the Alliance Party, the DUP and the UUP — and I will make sure that the board and my officials get a copy of the debate.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ruane: I will finish first. I do not believe in uncertainty or that it is fair for schools to operate in an uncertain environment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Dr Farry, the Minister has finished so the debate is over.

Adjourned at 5.58 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 19 November 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. Is it in order to ask you whether you intend to hold a reception to celebrate the remarkable performance of the Northern Ireland football team and its supporters in the quest for qualification for the 2008 European Football Championship finals?

Mr Speaker: Order, order. That is certainly not an appropriate point of order, but I am sure that the appropriate Minister is listening.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the debate on the review of public administration on 13 November 2007, the Deputy Speaker rebuked the Minister of the Environment and me for supposed “political point scoring”. Do you intend to investigate the issue? That seems to be a very inappropriate use of language by the Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That issue was brought to my attention immediately after the debate, and I understand that the appropriate Minister has written to me. I assure Members on all sides of the House that the matter will be dealt with.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am seeking a ruling in relation to the debate on Irish-medium club banks that was held on 13 November 2007. During that debate, Mr Dominic Bradley intervened to state that:

“during the establishment of the national schools in Ireland ... Irish-speaking children were made to wear a bata scior — a tally stick — around the neck. Each time a child spoke Irish, a notch was cut in the tally stick, and the child was later punished for each notch.” — [*Official Report, Vol 25, No 4, p174, col 2*].

From the opposite Benches, Mr McNarry was clearly heard to state “Good enough for them”. Is that appropriate language for a Member to use in relation to child punishment? Also, why was that remark not recorded in the Hansard report?

Mr Speaker: Fairly soon, I shall turn to several issues regarding this House. I hope that when I have finished, Members will understand where I am coming from and what I am saying to the House. It is a statement, rather than anything else.

I wish to make a statement on a number of issues, some of which were raised as points of order during the sittings of 12 and 13 November 2007. I shall begin by making a number of general points.

First, let me make it clear that, in my view, Members resort more often than is necessary to raising points of order in the Assembly. Many of these remarks are not points of order at all, and others are raised to oppose or defend points of order that have already been made. In either case, the remarks often refer to matters that could be more appropriately dealt with other than on the Floor of the Chamber, and often to greater effect.

That is not to say that Members have not raised valid and helpful points of order: they have, and those are very welcome. However, I appeal to Members to be more understanding when using points of order. I have often said to Members from all sides of the House that I understand that, on occasions, making a point of order is the only time on which a Member can speak on a particular subject. I have been fairly lenient in allowing Members to intervene on serious issues, especially if they make very quick points of order. If, however, all sides of the House abuse that facility, I must deal with the issue in another way.

Secondly, too often in recent weeks, a number of Members, in their choice of language, have failed to display the good temper that should characterise proper parliamentary debate. There are seasoned politicians in the Chamber who will say that the moderation of language is the characteristic of any debate.

I recognise that this is a debating Chamber, and it is understandable that, on occasions, debates can raise the temper of some Members. However, Members must moderate their language in any future debates. Furthermore, Members should be mindful that points of order — and interventions from this Chair — would be less common were they to behave in that way.

With regard to the recent point of order, I said on Monday 12 November that I intended to make a ruling on the phrase “misleading this House”, which was used by Mrs I Robinson during questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on Monday 5 November. I shall do so in a moment.

Since that debate, on Tuesday 13 November 2007, Mr P Robinson made a point of order in which he asked me to consider whether breaches of Standing Orders must be dealt with promptly and at the time at which they take place, or can be dealt with retrospectively. In making his point of order, Mr Robinson referred to Erskine

May, to which Speakers of this Assembly refer when our Standing Orders and conventions do not provide guidance on matters of order.

In one respect, I agree with Mr Robinson. Members should, where possible, raise what they feel to be breaches of order at the time at which they occur, or as soon as possible thereafter. Those matters will be dealt with at the time, or after reflection. However, I will not be drawn into lengthy searches of the Official Reports of previous sittings. Once again, I make the point that were any Member to come to me immediately after a debate with a fairly important point about which he or she feels very strongly, I believe that I have a duty to try to respond to that point.

However, if Members are going to come to me days or weeks later, that is a different issue. Nevertheless, neither Erskine May nor our conventions state that it is beyond the Speaker's authority to rule retrospectively on any matter of order. I reserve the right to deal with matters that come to my attention as I deem appropriate.

Finally, Members, I will move on to the use of the phrase "misleading this House" by Mrs Robinson. Although I did not hear it at the time, the remark was recorded in the Official Report. Having reflected on the matter and taken my own counsel on the issue, I believe that the remark was unparliamentary. As I said, I am guided by our own Standing Orders and conventions, and then by Erskine May, which clearly states that the term is unparliamentary.

I am aware — and Dr McCrea has raised the issue — of a recent ruling by the Speaker of the House of Commons that suggests that the term may not be unparliamentary in certain circumstances. It will be for the authors of Erskine May to decide how that may be reflected in a future edition. In my view, the remark is clearly unparliamentary.

I know that Mrs Robinson is not in the House today; I intend to deal with the issue at the next appropriate sitting when she is in the House.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not clear from the statement that you have made just what the guidance is to Members. First of all, you said that you will not allow days to pass before you deal with a complaint. However, it appears, in this particular instance, that although, by your own admission, the complaint was not made until nearly a week after the event — which, in my interpretation, is "days" — you have still made a judgement on it. Secondly, in the House of Commons, the Speaker has ruled that the Prime Minister is exempt from being ruled unparliamentary when he uses the term "misleading". Why has a different attitude been adopted by you in this House?

Mr Speaker: I believe that I made myself absolutely clear on this issue. Mrs Robinson's remark was reported to me directly after Question Time on Monday 5 November. I have said to Members on all sides of the House

that if they come to me a week later, two weeks later or three weeks later, I will have to reflect on a different issue. I hope that the Member is not saying that if somebody comes to me directly after a debate to raise a very serious issue, I cannot reflect on it. Surely not.

I think that I have made myself quite clear. I am not prepared to take any further points of order, and I intend to move on. If Members read the Hansard report, they will know that I am very clear on this issue.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on the same issue?

Mr Attwood: It is not on the same issue.

Mr Speaker: OK.

Mr Attwood: I am seeking clarification, Mr Speaker. Is your statement not only in response to the matter that has just been referred to —

Some Members: Same issue.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: It is a point of order.

Mr Speaker: It is the same point of order, or coming very close to it.

Mr Attwood: My question is whether your statement is a response to previous points of order in respect of comments made during the bill of rights debate in the Assembly a number of weeks ago.

Can you clarify whether the height of your response to those points of order is what you have just outlined?

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I have made a general ruling, because several points of order were raised on all sides of the House that were not real points of order. I hope that my ruling lays down a marker and will draw a line under all those issues. I hope that my response is helpful to the Member.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I note what you say, but I must raise a number of issues. First, the comments that were made during the debate on the membership of the Bill of Rights Forum were —

Mr Speaker: I will not allow the Member to continue. I ask him to take his seat. Today, I have tried to deal generally with points of order that have come to my attention. If I were to deal with every point of order raised, which was not a point of order, we would probably spend a week in the Chamber in an attempt to deal with them all. I hope that all sides of the House appreciate that. I will not allow the Member, or any other Member, to raise a further point of order.

I have also noticed in recent weeks that when asked to take their seats, some Members have not done so. In fact, I have had to call to account two Members, if not three, on at least three occasions for their not taking their seats. If that happens in future, I assure the House that those Members will not be called during debate.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Petition of Concern: Irish-Medium Club Bank

Motion proposed [13 November]:

That this Assembly opposes the introduction of a club-bank arrangement for establishing Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland. — [*Miss McIlveen.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that a valid petition of concern was presented on Tuesday 13 November on the Irish-medium club-bank motion that was being debated on that day.

Under Standing Order 27, the vote could not be taken until at least one day had passed. The Business Committee agreed that the vote should be taken as the first item of business today.

I also remind Members that another effect of the petition of concern is that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 47.

AYES

Unionist:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, 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 McClarty, 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, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey.

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Adams, Mr Attwood, 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, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy,

Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Other:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Brady.

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|--------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|------------------|
| <i>Total Votes</i> | <i>93</i> | <i>Total Ayes</i> | <i>46</i> | <i>(49.46%)</i> |
| <i>Nationalist Votes</i> | <i>41</i> | <i>Nationalist Ayes</i> | <i>0</i> | <i>(0.00%)</i> |
| <i>Unionist Votes</i> | <i>46</i> | <i>Unionist Ayes</i> | <i>46</i> | <i>(100.00%)</i> |
| <i>Other Votes</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>Other Ayes</i> | <i>0</i> | <i>(0.00%)</i> |

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

12.30 pm

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At about this time last week, a bus that had equipment to screen women for cervical cancer was ordered out of the Markets area of south Belfast by a Sinn Féin election agent. Is it in order to ask that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety makes a statement to the House about the details of that incident and that he describes any alternative arrangements that have been put in place to resume that screening service?

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say that that is not an appropriate point of order, no matter how strongly the Member might feel about the matter. Once again, I am sure that the Minister is listening.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Speaker and, undoubtedly, the whole House will be aware of the two recent brutal attacks against police officers, one of which occurred in Londonderry and the other in Dungannon. Do you believe that it would be appropriate for you, sir, to send a message of support to those officers and their families on behalf of the entire House, thus demonstrating the utter condemnation that the House has for such attacks on our police officers?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member has said. I will reflect on his request; however, I believe that tabling a motion to debate the matter is the appropriate way in which to deal with it.

I shall come back to the first issue that I dealt with this afternoon. Members will be aware that I clarified that the manner in which the word “misleading” was used in a debate on 5 November 2007 was unparliamentary. I call on Mrs Robinson to withdraw the remark.

Mrs I Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Naturally, I have respect for the high office that you hold. However, your ruling does not allow me to establish the truth, which is that, despite his protestations, our Health Minister did indeed sign off on the draft Budget.

Therefore, in order that the truth is not compromised, I will not withdraw my comments.

In another place, our Prime Minister used the same word, and the Speaker ruled that the use of that word was not against Erskine May. Following that incident, when a Back Bencher actually accused the Speaker of misleading the House, the use of the word was not ruled out of order. Despite the fact that Members who have since come to you to make the complaint did not do so on the very day that I made my comment, with respect to you, I disagree with your ruling. I cannot and will not withdraw my remark, given that I was trying to establish the truth.

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member that as she has not withdrawn the comment, under Standing Order 60, I shall order her to leave the Assembly and its precincts for the rest of the day.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understood that in an earlier ruling that you made today, you said that you would deal with this matter at the next sitting of the House at which the Member concerned were present. This sitting is the same as that in which you made your ruling, but you have spoken about what would happen after today.

Mr Speaker: No. I will clarify what I said: I said that I would deal with the matter as soon as the Member was present in the House.

Lord Morrow: You said, “at the next appropriate sitting”.

Mr Speaker: I am dealing with it now. I have asked the Member to withdraw.

Mrs I Robinson: Very well, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When can we expect you to deal with the issues, which must be dealt with, of other Members, who said nothing worse than what Mrs Robinson said?

Mr Speaker: I have already had two Members from another party in my office this morning about those issues. I intend to deal with them. I understand the rule, and there could be an apology on one of those issues.

Let me say to Members on all sides of the House that it gives me no satisfaction to stand here this morning and make rulings on some of these issues. In fact, I came to them with a very heavy heart. Members need to understand that. They must understand clearly that I do not fudge issues, and I certainly do not shirk issues. I will take issues on, now and in the future. Let me make it clear that, irrespective of what side of the House an issue comes from, I will deal with it — no matter how difficult it may be.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Agricultural Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in agricultural sectoral format — *[Interruption.]*

Order, Members.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 about the eighth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the agriculture sector, which was held in Harvey’s Point Country Hotel in Donegal on Friday 9 November. The Executive were represented by the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster MLA, and me. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Coughlan TD, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. This statement has been agreed with Minister Foster.

The Council noted progress made since the last meeting in September 2002 and welcomed the opportunity to come together to discuss co-operation in the agriculture sector. The Council also welcomed the mutually beneficial collaborative work undertaken in response to the recent outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease, bluetongue and avian influenza in Britain.

The Council noted an all-island animal health and welfare strategy paper developed by the North/South animal health and welfare steering group. It agreed that the free movement of animals on the island of Ireland remained the ultimate aim of the animal health and welfare strategy, and that the way forward was through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.

It was noted that the animal health and welfare strategy included a list of initial activities for delivering key elements of the strategy and outlines various milestones and deadlines for the coming months. The Council requested officials to oversee progress on those issues and submit further measures to implement the strategy for approval at the next agriculture sectoral meeting.

The Council agreed that North-South co-operation on plant health should focus on the status of pests and diseases which threaten the island’s plant health and on co-operation on EU matters. There has been ongoing and continued liaison between the North and the South on, for instance, an outbreak of *Phytophthora ramorum*, or sudden oak death — which affects trees and shrubs

— in the North, and brown rot — which affects potatoes — in the South.

It was noted that DARD (the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development) is developing a plant health strategy for Northern Ireland which will include a section on North/South co-operation consistent with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's plant health strategies. The Council also agreed that the work of the North/South pesticide steering group should focus on the production of co-ordinated pesticide usage surveys for grassland and fodder crops and for arable crops.

With regard to the common agricultural policy (CAP), the Council agreed that officials from the Departments should remain in close contact on a range of key issues, including the Council of Ministers' recent adoption of a single common market organisation, the reform of the fruit and vegetable sector and the forthcoming CAP health check. It was noted that future agriculture sectoral meetings would consider and review common challenges and opportunities arising from the EU dimension of agriculture.

The Council noted the work of the North/South steering committee on cross-border rural development. The Council agreed that future work should focus on developing maximum co-operation in implementing rural development programmes and policies, including EU programmes, and examine the scope for a common approach on the feasibility of developing cross-border, area-based strategies and rural development research.

The Council welcomed the progress achieved as a result of the funding provided by EU Peace programmes and requested that officials submit a report and recommendations to the next meeting on the rural development programme 2007-13 and co-operation projects.

It was agreed that the next meeting of the NSMC in agriculture sectoral format would take place in spring 2008. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Dr W McCrea (Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): As Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I welcome the Minister's statement. The Minister is aware of the Committee's views, and it is important that those views are developed at future Committee meetings.

It is accepted that the animal health and welfare strategy is the primary issue. I am pleased that the Minister outlined that that strategy was noted — not approved — at the meeting and that the way forward is through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.

As an individual member of the Committee, I welcome the fact that there is co-operation and that

complementary policies are being developed. However, as I have said to the Minister on a number of occasions; although I welcome that co-operation, I am glad that that Council noted, rather than approved, the all-Ireland animal health and welfare strategy and that there is co-operation, not convergence.

There is anger in the agriculture industry because nothing effective has been decided that will enable the free movement of animals between Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe. The Minister knows that the issue is important, and the industry wants to know when there will be movement on it.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. An all-island animal health and welfare strategy was discussed at the meeting on Friday 9 November. Therefore, a discussion on the rest of Europe was not part of that meeting.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Regarding the strategy that is in place on North/South co-operation on rural-development issues, is there a list of programmes currently progressing to develop co-operation between the different sectors, particularly concerning agricultural waste?

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

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. As I outlined in my statement, officials have been tasked to examine the scope for a common approach to the feasibility of developing cross-border, area-based strategies and rural development research. Therefore, there is a great deal of scope for considering how we can best utilise resources on both sides of the border. Officials will be working to bring forward policies on that matter.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement. Far be it from me to support some sort of all-Ireland co-operation. Regarding health checks, will the Minister consider bringing voluntary modulation for farmers in Northern Ireland into line with that in the Republic of Ireland, as their farmers do not have any?

Did any discussions take place at the NSMC meeting regarding the recent reports of BSE outbreaks in the Republic of Ireland? Was that issue on the agenda, and if so, were there any conclusions to it?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. BSE was not discussed at any great length at the meeting; although, obviously, it is part of the working group's work. We had a lot of ground to cover, and BSE was not dealt with specifically.

12.45 pm

Mr P J Bradley: I welcome the Minister's statement. However, I am obliged to reiterate my party's commitment to the development of North/South policies on agriculture that will benefit the industry and secure its future. I note that plant health was discussed at the

meeting. I have often said in Committee that I am concerned about the adverse effects that a total ban on some selective weed killers and pesticides may have on the quality of our pasture land and cereal crops. With those comments in mind, I ask that plant health be kept on the agenda.

The Minister stated:

“the way forward is through co-operation and the development of complementary policies.”

Will she give the Assembly some examples of the development of such policies?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. As the Member has pointed out, considerable work is ongoing in the North/South pesticides steering group that will focus on producing co-ordinated pesticide usage surveys for grassland, fodder and arable crops. A considerable body of work has been completed, and research has been shared between North and South.

With respect to co-operation and the development of complementary policies, a wide range of groups are covering animal health, epizootic diseases and the free movement of animals. One of the most topical issues is foot-and-mouth disease, and North and South are co-operating with complementary policies which will work well together to keep foot-and-mouth disease out of the island. That is a recent example of how complementary policies are essential if we are to keep out such diseases.

Mr Ford: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement, which, I notice, refers to brown rot in potatoes, which is currently active in the South. Will she give us her assessment of the threat to Northern Ireland potato production from that disease?

Furthermore, I would refer to the Minister's remarks in answer to P J Bradley's question on complementary policies. I am surprised that, after five years, any discussion on agriculture in the NSMC did not mention the largest threat to a major sector of agriculture, North and South — Brazilian beef. Was there was any discussion of that matter? What proposals does she have for dealing with it on a co-operative basis?

Ms Gildernew: As regards brown rot, much work has been ongoing between the two Departments since the disease was discovered in the South earlier this year. The plant health strategy for the North sets priorities for maintaining and promoting high levels of health in arable and horticultural plants and produce; protecting the natural environment and local agricultural and horticultural industries from imported pests and diseases; and supporting domestic trade and export. We did our best to ensure that brown rot did not spread. All consignments of potatoes from the South were checked, and there was immediate sharing of information with respect to the disease.

The issue of Brazilian beef did not come up at the meeting but was discussed at the press release afterwards. As the Member says, five years of work was surveyed at the meeting, and time was therefore limited. It was a general discussion. We went through all the work that had been done during the past five years and there was not much time to get into the nitty-gritty of any particular issue. However, I see room for further collaboration on all of the issues.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question is on a practical issue. Northern Ireland farmers receive a very poor price for dairy-bred bull calves and, as a result, many are forced to put down those calves at birth because of the lack of markets. Why will the Minister not change the rules in Northern Ireland and make them similar to those in the Irish Republic, which allow exporters to buy calves at local auction markets? That would help the situation that farmers face.

Ms Gildernew: As I have said many times in the Chamber, Committee and in other places, I will do all in my power to help the agriculture industry. However, I do not enjoy the same luxury as the Minister in the South, who represents a member state in the European Union and brings that authority with her when she attends EU meetings. There are also financial issues involved in some cases that prevent me from doing some things.

I do not have specific details on the issue today. However, I will respond in writing to the Member. I assure Members that I will do everything I can to assist the agriculture industry here.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and ask her to outline the discussions that she has had about a vaccine being made available in the spring to combat the spread of bluetongue.

Ms Gildernew: While bluetongue was mentioned at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, there was not a specific discussion on the detail of how to deal with it. The steering group, made up of officials from North and South, will deal with that issue. Currently, the EU does not allow vaccination in bluetongue-free areas, so the work that is being done on the basis of the area being bluetongue-free would change if it were unlucky enough to become affected by bluetongue. Officials continue to work on that detail, but it was not discussed at any great length at the meeting.

Mr Shannon: In the Minister's statement, she said that the Council agreed that North/South co-operation on plant health should focus on pests and diseases as well. Has the Minister made approaches on an east-west basis in order to utilise the expertise and knowledge that the UK Government — and DEFRA in particular — have gained, which could be used to the advantage

of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as the Republic of Ireland? Will the Minister provide a detailed response on that?

Ms Gildernew: My statement dealt with the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on 9 November. However, I can assure the Member that we work with scientists and experts from many places, including DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), to ensure that we are privy to the most up to date scientific information. Officials from my Department work closely with officials from DEFRA on that issue. As part of today's business I do not have detailed information to hand, but I am happy to come back to the Member with that.

Mr Savage: In her statement, the Minister made reference to the reform of the fruit and vegetable sector and the forthcoming CAP health check. In my Upper Bann constituency, there are many apple orchards. Will the Minister elaborate on the effects that the proposed reforms and the CAP health check will have on them? More importantly, will the Minister give an assurance that there will be no detrimental effect to the future of the fruit and vegetable industry in Northern Ireland?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As I have discussed before with the Member, the issue of top fruit is part of the new single farm payment regime, and there will be benefits for the orchards of which he speaks. Indeed, I live not too far away and know many of the apple producers and processors. There is good news for that sector, and I reiterate the point that I have made many times before: my Department will do everything that it can do to help any sector. Last week, for example, the Agricultural Forum met in my office in Dundonald House, and work is ongoing between officials and the industry to ensure that we can get the best deal possible.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement and her ministerial colleagues, North and South, for the work that was done at the meeting. The Minister indicated that a future sectoral meeting would receive a report on the next round of the EU programme for peace and reconciliation. Will the Minister ensure that that report addresses not only the peace programme, but also the potential for rural development under the whole range of EU programmes in order to identify those measures, specifically according to programme, but also in aggregate terms, on both sides of the border? In that context, would it be in order for the sectoral format to be used to explore the potential to use some of the moneys in the national development plan's social inclusion pillar to support rural development work, especially, but not only, in border areas?

Ms Gildernew: DARD will not have a formal role in the implementation of Peace III; however, following a call from the Special EU Programmes Body

(SEUPB), the rural development division, along with DCRGA in the South, has submitted an expression of interest to SEUPB for a regional programme of activities with the rural community network (RCN) and Irish Rural Link under the building positive relationships at the local level measure.

That is currently being assessed by the SEUPB. The programme, which is known as a rural enabler, will deal with issues such as sectarianism and racism in rural areas under the following headings: young people; flags and emblems; housing; interfaces; racism; community relations and community development; and rural institutions. The total estimated cost of the programme of activities is £2.4 million, North and South.

Other cross-border opportunities exist. Apart from the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 9 November, I had a meeting in September with Éamon Ó Cuív in Dromahair, County Leitrim, at which several of those issues were discussed. There is great potential to maximise spend — particularly in border areas — by working closely together.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for her statement and for the work that has been done so far in the North/South Ministerial Council. I am particularly grateful for the work that was done at the agricultural sector meeting in Donegal.

An all-Ireland approach to an animal health and welfare strategy benefits everyone, despite the difficulties that some people may have with it. Indeed, it benefits every farmer in Ireland as much as everyone else. It is important that an all-Ireland approach, rather than any other, is taken to animal and plant health.

Have Ministers — North and South — and scientists considered the impact that global warming will have on plant health in Ireland in the future? Further to that, have they considered the effect that it will have on animal health in coming years?

Ms Gildernew: Full co-operation in Ireland on animal and plant health has the potential to help reduce and prevent the spread of disease, to facilitate trade, and to improve the sustainability of farming in the North. The ultimate objective of North/South co-operation should therefore be to facilitate trade by allowing the freer movement of animals on the island and to optimise the animal-health status of Ireland by aligning policies that control animal disease.

Careful consideration must also be given to climate change and to other global factors that may affect plant health. Climate change has implications for much of the Department's work. On Friday 16 November, I visited the marine research vessel, *Corystes*. Climate change featured in several of the discussions on fish stocks and fishing sustainability that I had with the researchers. All the available scientific evidence must be examined.

The steering groups work closely on all those issues, and they share information and scientific knowledge.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. Given the importance to the fishing industry of the Fisheries Council meeting in December, can the Minister indicate what discussions on fisheries took place at the agricultural sectoral format meeting and what were their outcomes?

Ms Gildernew: Fisheries were not discussed at that meeting. As I said, the meeting was a chance to overview the work that has been carried out on animal and plant health and rural development over the past few years. There was no specific discussion on fisheries.

However, I hope to meet with Mary Coughlan in the coming days in order to discuss the Fisheries Council meeting. I have also had meetings on the issue with ministerial colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales. In preparation for the December Fisheries Council meeting, we will take part in a video conference today or tomorrow. Although there was no discussion of the issue at last Friday's meeting, a great deal of work has been done.

1.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. The Further Consideration Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill (NIA 6/07) is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ad Hoc Committee: Draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that there is an error in the Order Paper. The date should read "2008", not "2007".

Motion made:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 48(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the proposal for a Draft Criminal Justice Order 2007, referred by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 28 January 2008.

| | | |
|--------------|-----------|---|
| Composition: | DUP | 3 |
| | Sinn Féin | 3 |
| | UUP | 2 |
| | SDLP | 2 |
| | Alliance | 1 |

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

— [Ms Ni Chuilín.]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Justice for the Bland Family

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

Mr Donaldson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with deep concern the failure of the Irish Government and Irish Courts to provide justice for Patricia, Sarah, James and Julia Bland, in light of the evidence presented by the family concerning the alleged crimes committed against them by Rory Bland; and calls on the Irish Prime Minister and Minister for Justice to give this case priority attention, so that justice is done and is seen to be done.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. The House first debated the matter in September 2001. The Bland family has endured 28 years of sorrow, loss and heartbreak stemming from a miscarriage of justice on the part of the Irish state. Six years after our previous debate on the matter, and despite much effort on the family's part to discuss its plight with the Irish Government, it is still without justice. Once again, the family has asked for our help to highlight its concerns and to bring the matter to the point at which justice is done and is seen to be done.

The sorry affair started with Rory Bland allegedly committing the crimes of rape and incest against his youngest daughter, Sarah, when she was a young child. Despite the allegations that were made against him, the Irish courts issued an order that allowed this man to have continued access to his children over two years, during which time he allegedly committed additional crimes against Sarah. A judge then sent Mrs Patricia Bland and her three children, Sarah, James and Julia, into exile in Canada. Due to wrongful court orders, the Bland children could never safely live in the Irish Republic, which is the land of their birth.

Sarah's health was — and continues to be — compromised by her early ordeal and by the length of time that the unresolved situation has affected the entire family. Sarah was only three years of age when the alleged abuse started. She has lived all that time knowing of nothing but the case that hangs over her head. The same applies to her brother and sister. Mrs Patricia Bland, their mother, has spent all those years trying to protect her three children from the dreadful implications of the crimes and the resultant injustices.

She was, and is, a mother who is simply trying to protect her children, yet she was actively prevented from doing so by orders emanating from Irish courts, which undermined her position and rendered her

children vulnerable and isolated. That ought to be unheard of in a civilised society.

Patricia Bland was also wrongfully sued for many years by her husband while her children were young. Unaided by any lawyer in Dublin — in fact, she would say that she was betrayed by some, if not all, of the lawyers involved in the Bland case in Dublin — she has had to battle all the way to keep her family safe.

A lengthy legal opinion on this entire case obtained from outside the Republic highlighted that the Bland v Bland case was void from the outset by virtue of the fact that one firm of solicitors acted for both parents — acting in conflict of interest between the parties — and then went on to act for one parent against the other, whom they knew full well to be of unsound mind. Under Irish and British law, neither of those acts is permitted, yet they happened. Those very acts caused a snowball effect of utter chaos for the Bland family. The situation could never be remedied as to do so would have exposed the initial criminal acts and automatically exposed the perpetrators — we have reason to believe that more people than just Rory Bland were involved in those acts.

This Irish family with a British mother was failed by every single organ of the state, which meant that the children were not protected under the constitution. Fraud and criminal acts ensued against them, and 13 years of wrongful court action has left the family bereft of their ancestral home and has utterly destroyed three childhoods. The loss to the family runs into millions of pounds.

It has often been said that the case could be resolved through judicial means. However, the court process was compromised at every stage, and in such a way as to stymie the possibility of the hoped-for outcome being a remedy. The only remedy that the Irish state has ever given to this family was back in 1983, when they were officially ordered to leave the Republic and never come back. However, that was two years too late for Sarah, who was aged just six at the time. Surely, requiring the victims of this whole sorry episode to leave the country cannot be a proper way to dispense justice.

There are many examples in this case of how the Irish state has evaded its responsibility through the manner in which it has responded to the miscarriage of justice faced by the Bland family. I quote from a letter dated 6 August 1999 from the then Irish Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform who stated:

"You will appreciate the Judiciary are, subject only to the Constitution and the Law, independent in the exercise of their judicial functions, and I am precluded from commenting on or intervening in decisions in individual court cases."

Another useful insight is taken from a letter from the Taoiseach dated 14 April 2004:

"The Taoiseach is very conscious of the very serious allegations that are contained in your correspondence. He has forwarded the

material to his colleague, Mr Michael McDowell, TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform for his consideration."

The matter still rests with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and there is still no remedy for this case.

A further quote for the House to consider is from another letter from the Taoiseach's office to my colleague Mr Ian Paisley Jnr dated 28 February 2005, in which it states:

"neither I, nor any other political figure, can intervene with regard to a decision of the Courts."

This case is an example of one which has fallen between the pillars of the constitution, and the Irish Government have denied any responsibility in the matter. All they are doing is shifting the Bland case between the Department of the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on an annual basis — that has been the case since 1983. Unfortunately, that means that the Irish constitution is being interpreted by the Government in a way that prevents any remedy for the Bland family. The matter simply goes from pillar to post and back again.

The failure by the Irish Government to act on the Bland case has raised grave concerns internationally. The Bland family rightly demands that the Taoiseach acknowledge the miscarriage of justice that has occurred in this matter and find a way to deal with the family's statement of claim that is before the Irish Government. The Bland family also asks that the Irish Government take steps to ensure that no other Irish family is so gravely failed by the state, as has been their experience, and that any reforms arising from the Bland case be rapidly undertaken for the benefit of the citizens of the Republic of Ireland.

I am sure that some people will wonder why the Assembly should be considering this case. Well, our neighbours in the Irish Government have failed to deal with the matter in an open and honest way that would give the Bland family some sense of justice for the terrible ordeal that they have suffered. When people come to us out of sheer frustration and desperation, we have a duty to speak up. We have done so in the past here, when wrongs have been done against people in other countries. The Assembly has, rightly, raised its voice on the international stage to mark its concerns, and it is appropriate that we do so in this case also. I hope that, following this debate, and subject to the motion being passed, there will be an opportunity for my ministerial colleagues and others to raise this matter with the backing of the Assembly.

When writing of those who favoured the retention of slavery, President Thomas Jefferson said that:

"Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."

The same might be said of many in the Irish state who have had the opportunity to consider this case. Self-

preservation must never be allowed to outweigh justice in any democratic society. I urge the House to support the Bland family in their ongoing quest for justice.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion, and want to address a number of issues that the proposer of the motion, quite rightly, mentioned. The Assembly debated a similar motion in September 2001, and six years later there has been no change. Normally, when a motion is debated in this Assembly on a subject that is beyond its control, the relevant edition of Hansard and a covering letter are sent to the relevant authorities. Did that happen in 2001, and if so, what was the response? I ask the Speaker's Office to examine that issue.

The key elements of this tragic and disturbing case are domestic violence; severe and continuous child abuse; and alcoholism. The tragedy was compounded by the decision of the court to award care of the child to the father, at whose hand she suffered the kind of trauma and torture to which no child or individual should ever be subjected. In turn, that left the child's mother to fight an ongoing court battle to gain any kind of protection for her child. The situation was further compounded by the failure of the courts and the Irish Government to provide any kind of help or apology to a family who had been ill-treated. Indeed, the family has seen its life savings drained away by a system that has completely failed it. It is right that the Assembly should call for justice.

Although the facts of the case are extreme and disturbing, the failure to provide justice for those who suffer from sexual abuse, rape or domestic violence is not peculiar to the Irish justice system. Many women and children in our own and other jurisdictions face difficulty in securing both the conviction of the perpetrator and the kind of justice that they require. We must learn the lessons of other jurisdictions.

Domestic violence in residence and contact cases must be clearly identified, and the risk to children living in such situations must be assessed.

1.15 pm

The police and the courts must be clear — and they were not in this case — that domestic violence is an abusive context for children and that they may experience emotional or other damage, or suffer physical harm, as a result. Research findings indicate that where there is domestic violence, a child is at an increased risk of physical or sexual abuse. The perpetrator may abuse the child as part of his violence against the woman. The perpetrator can continue to abuse the child emotionally and physically during contact visits. Domestic violence must be viewed as a serious child protection risk, and all court interventions for that risk must be assessed and fully taken into account in residence and contact issues. If only such a view had been taken in the case

of the Bland family, further serious abuse would have been prevented.

A risk assessment model has been developed and is being used in several health and social service trusts in the North. I call on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that that model is being used across all trusts. The proposer of the motion covered some issues about the judiciary. It is essential that the judiciary is trained to understand the risk assessment model and to take it fully into account when making decisions that are linked to residence and contact. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am speaking on behalf of Sir Reg Empey, who is attending the funeral of Lord Cooke, who served on the Senate of the Parliament of Northern Ireland many years ago.

It would be impossible for anyone to read, as I have done, the chronology of events as presented by Mrs Bland without a deep sense of unease. Although the events that are detailed took place exclusively in other jurisdictions, the Assembly has been asked to lend its support to the family's search for justice. For almost three decades, Mrs Bland and her children have constantly sought redress through the Irish legal system for a set of grievances, thus far without anything that could reasonably be described as success. The file that she has painstakingly prepared on the case raises many concerns regarding the part that has been played by some in the Irish legal system.

The family's troubles began in September 1979, when Mrs Bland sought legal advice in an effort to save her husband from suicide. That led to a series of events that, at first sight, look stranger than fiction but are nevertheless supported by well-presented documentary evidence. Mrs Bland and her children state that, because of the unwillingness of the Irish legal system to act properly, they have endured physical, mental and sexual abuse, financial ruin, and were for a time exiled to Canada by an Irish judge, who realised — too late — that Sarah had been sexually abused for two years on foot of court orders.

From a powerless position, Mrs Bland and her children have watched the dissolution and dispersal of family assets, including land, property and the contents of the primary family home, Rath House in County Laois. Those contents included antique furniture, works of art in oils and watercolours by a variety of Dutch and other European masters, crystal, silver, Chinese porcelain and a library of approximately 10,000 leather-bound books that was considered so important that the Irish Government once requested its donation as a national treasure. In addition, there were personal items belonging to Henry Grattan that linked the Bland family to four saints, among them Sir Thomas More and Oliver Plunkett.

All that represents a capital loss to the Bland family of €17 million. The family also seeks damages of €4 million each for Mrs Bland and her daughter Sarah, and a further €2 million each for James and Julia Bland. Those are not small amounts of money, but Mrs Bland's documentation of the case is well presented. The time factor is all important, as 27 years of such a massive miscarriage of justice have passed while the Irish state has denied any misdoing.

Many years ago, a leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, who was also a highly regarded legal figure, was involved in the George Archer-Shee case, in which a cadet was dismissed from a naval college for allegedly stealing a small-denomination postal order.

It was reported that, at a vital stage in the proceedings, Sir Edward Carson passed a note to his legal opponents that simply stated: "Let justice be done." Surely we, in this Chamber, could make no stronger demand of those in a position to progress the case than to say to the Irish Government: "Let justice be done." As Sir Reg is now in the House, he may wish to second the motion.

Sir Reg Empey: I formally second the motion.

Mr A Maginness: Any injustice to any person in any jurisdiction is a matter of grave concern. The case of the Bland family raises several questions about how it was treated by its legal representation and how the courts in the Irish Republic considered its case, and it is right and proper to raise such questions.

It would be appropriate for Members to meet the Justice Minister in the Republic, Mr Lenihan, to discuss the case. My understanding is that the Secretary General of the Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform ordered the DPP to investigate complaints raised by the family. The result of that investigation was that nothing untoward was found in the way that the criminal complaint was handled, and no evidence of discrimination or anything of that nature was unearthed.

However, having said that, such a serious matter should be vigorously pursued, and any element of doubt should be eliminated. The previous debate on the case indicates that there were suggestions of some kind of conspiracy by the judicial authorities and solicitors who acted wrongly on behalf of the family, or the father of the family. Any such impropriety must be fully investigated. If the Bland family considers the original investigation to be inadequate, a further investigation should be carried out to remove the suspicion of conspiracy by any judicial authority in the South, solicitors or state authorities, including the DPP and the police.

Again, reading about the case shows that the family was ill served on occasions by its legal representation. Initially Mrs Bland asked a firm of solicitors to represent the family, as opposed to individual family members, and perhaps that was the genesis of a conflict of interest. I support the examination of certain matters relating to

the case. I hope that Members will pursue such an examination with the Justice Department in Dublin as a matter of urgency, and should they gain no satisfaction, perhaps the family can take legal action in the courts in the South. However, I stress that the judiciary in the Republic is totally separate from Government.

It is an independent judiciary that acts under the law of the land and the Constitution. The Constitution is an effective safeguard for any citizen. If the matter were to come before the courts again, in whatever form, one would hope that they would consider it seriously and vigorously examine and scrutinise what has happened in the past.

Dr Farry: I, too, support the motion, and I thank its proposers for bringing it to the House's attention. This is a truly dreadful situation for the Bland family, particularly for the children. There appears to have been a systematic failure across the board to deal with the situation effectively, and that failure extends throughout the system. The statutory agencies; the police, through their investigation; the legal system, which did not regulate solicitors effectively; and the political and judicial systems in the Republic of Ireland have all failed the Bland family.

The proposer of the motion has set out well the history of the case, but some points must be stressed. First, this debate should not necessarily be seen as an attack on the Republic of Ireland. Such situations can arise in almost every jurisdiction. In the UK in recent years, there have been miscarriages of justice, failures of the justice system to take effective action on serious cases, and failures of statutory agencies and the police to deal with sex offenders and instances of domestic violence. Therefore, the Republic of Ireland is not alone in this situation. Nevertheless, it is imperative that it addresses the failures that have been identified in its system.

It is important that lessons be learned from what has happened and that any prospect of justice, even at this late stage, be pursued to the maximum. As we all know, justice delayed is justice denied. That seems very much to be the case with the Bland family.

I fully support the mood of the House, which seems to be that we send a copy of today's Official Report to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in the Republic of Ireland, in order that that they might read MLAs' views. I am also keen that our Ministers raise the issue at the North/South Ministerial Council. Although it is unusual for individual cases to be discussed in any legislature, there are sometimes extreme cases in which it falls to legislators to discuss matters that should be dealt with at an operational level. When legislators discuss such matters, it indicates serious concerns about what has happened at an operational level. It is unusual for a legislature in one jurisdiction

to refer to the justice system in another jurisdiction, but this is an extreme case in which justice has not been delivered effectively. The Government of the Republic of Ireland have taken an interest in some cases in our jurisdiction; therefore, it is reasonable that we voice our concerns about what is happening down there.

This debate must serve as a clarion call to explore whether Northern Ireland has sufficiently robust procedures in place to prevent a similar situation arising. In recent years, our criminal justice system has undergone major reforms, which have been generally welcomed. Nevertheless, it is useful to have an ongoing monitoring process to ensure that we have the systems in place to deal with such cases. The Department of Finance and Personnel recently concluded a consultation on the regulation of legal services. There are lessons to be learned from what happened with sister firms in the South of Ireland.

It would be useful to reconfirm that systems are in place to prevent the conflicts of interest that arose in the case of the Bland family. There is no doubt that that is the case, though the system in Northern Ireland is still effectively self-regulatory.

1.30 pm

This issue is much wider than criminal justice: it includes how we deal with sex offenders in society and how we approach domestic violence — a subject that the House considered in a debate in June. The issue needs to be set within the context of the wider issues that we need to consider in Northern Ireland, while putting pressure on our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that their systems are fully robust. The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Donaldson and the Member for East Belfast Sir Reg Empey for getting this matter on the Order Paper. This is the second time that the Assembly has debated the issue, the first time being during a previous mandate. That indicates how serious this House and Members continue to regard this gross miscarriage of justice to the Bland family.

It has been said, rightly, that a country can be judged by how well it treats its most vulnerable. The way in which the Republic of Ireland has dealt with this case has set a poor standard. If people were passing judgement on how that country treated a vulnerable woman and her vulnerable children, they would find the standard to be far too low, and that all the effective safeguards supposed to be in place to protect citizens, quite frankly, failed this family miserably.

A miscarriage of justice is possibly the most pernicious insult to a person's character. How deep and awful must be the scar upon a family when someone has been wrongly treated, defamed by the courts of the land, abused

verbally and in the press, and knows in his or her heart of hearts that they are nothing more than a victim.

This House does well today to reflect on this miscarriage of justice — almost 28 years of passing a case from pillar to post. As a public representative, I know how frustrating it can be to deal with cases that have been delayed by months; but 28 years — almost a generation — of delay is unacceptable, and that is why this House ought to be saying most powerfully to its neighbour that it wants this matter resolved, not expeditiously, but now. We need to make that point very clearly.

The Member for Belfast North Mr Alban Maginness made a very telling point when he asked whether there was anything else that the Assembly could do. We should take up that offer. I would be more than happy to join a cross-party delegation of Members representing this House and the Bland family to meet with the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, or indeed the Taoiseach, to make it very clear how the House feels about this case and to drive home the need to have it resolved. The matter can go back to trial or it can be extended further; however, we need to see political will in the Republic to resolve the case.

My colleague Jeffrey Donaldson quite rightly said that this matter has been passed from pillar to post. I have in my hand a massive manuscript containing letter upon letter, to Taoisigh, justice ministers and all sorts of officials in the Irish justice system. To pursue this case again through the courts would simply extend the pain that the Bland family has already suffered.

Let us encourage the Republic of Ireland authorities to find the political will to resolve this issue. I do not know any other jurisdiction that could tolerate the fact that a neighbouring jurisdiction regularly debates a case of injustice and yet does not appear worried about getting it resolved. The Irish Government should be seeking a way to resolve this matter urgently and expeditiously.

I met Judge Smithwick to discuss the case — and I am reminded of what the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said: there appears to have been an inadequate handling of the case — and during our conversation, that senior judge of the Republic of Ireland courts made it clear that he disagreed with the evidence in front of him. Members can rehash the case time and time again. However, if there is a simple disagreement, we must get the political will to solve the case and to find a way to get the Republic of Ireland's Government to allow it to be addressed satisfactorily. I hope that the Assembly can do that.

The Bland family have given me details of the horrific catalogue of abuse that was waged against Sarah Bland. I am prepared to place the DVD, numerous drawings and a report drawn up on behalf of the family by Professor Ivor Browne in the Assembly Library so that Members can study the abuse that this young

woman faced and understand the necessity of having the case solved expeditiously.

Sir Reg Empey: I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak at such a late stage in the debate. I apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being present at the beginning of the debate.

Dr Farry asked why the Assembly is looking at this case when the legal, and other, remedies are in another jurisdiction. On a number of occasions, the Irish Government have involved themselves in justice matters in this jurisdiction that they were sufficiently concerned about, including miscarriages of justice. Therefore, there is no reason why Members should feel any compunction about raising a matter about which they feel concerned.

I support Alban Maginness's suggestion — which was echoed by junior Minister Paisley — that a delegation of Members could meet with the Irish Republic's Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, or the most appropriate official. This case involves a most unusual catalogue of events, and I appreciate that anyone who has not seen or studied the facts may find it difficult to comprehend. Virtually every issue of grave concern to our society, from legal protection to child abuse, appears in this case. The family have suffered for a prolonged period of, as junior Minister Paisley said, 28 years. That is a very long time.

I am thankful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the debate and commend the motion to the House.

Mr Donaldson: I sincerely thank all my colleagues in the House who participated in the debate. I give a special word of appreciation to Sir Reg Empey the Member for East Belfast for his support for the motion and for coming back to the Chamber so quickly after a funeral — the House understood the reasons for his absence. I thank the Member for North Antrim Rev Dr Robert Coulter for delivering the remarks on behalf of his party leader.

In her comments, the Member for West Belfast Ms Ramsey indicated her support for the motion and asked what follow-up there has been since the matter was debated in 2001. As I understand it, since that motion was passed by the Assembly, letters have been written to the Irish Government, and the matter has been raised at ministerial level with the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Office.

Therefore, there has been a follow-through, but, unfortunately, no progress has been made as a result of those representations. The Member also called for additional safeguards to protect children in the Republic, and I am sure that all Members would echo that sentiment.

Rev Coulter spoke on behalf of Sir Reg Empey. He mentioned his support for the case — which we appreciate — and highlighted the injustices that have been dealt to the Bland family. He made particular mention of the

family's statement of claim, which, as he rightly said, is a valid statement that ought to be responded to by the Irish state authorities.

The Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness suggested that a cross-party delegation meet the Irish Justice Minister, Mr Lenihan, to discuss the case, and my colleague junior Minister Paisley said that the DUP would be happy to support that meeting. Sir Reg Empey also gave his assent. Between all the parties, we will seek an appropriate way in which such a delegation can be arranged to meet the Irish Justice Minister and representatives of the Bland family. That meeting would be timely and, I hope, productive.

Mr Maginness also emphasised the separation of powers between the judiciary and the Government in the Republic of Ireland, and we appreciate and respect that. Nevertheless, the injustices that have been visited upon the Bland family carry political implications, to which the Irish Government ought — and need — to respond. I hope that a meeting with the Irish Justice Minister will help to expedite that response in due course.

Dr Stephen Farry, the Alliance Party Member for North Down, offered his party's support for a cross-party delegation to meet the Irish Justice Minister, and we appreciate that. He also stated that the motion should not been seen as an attack on the Republic of Ireland, and I — having moved the motion — can confirm that it is in no way an attack on the Irish state. Dr Farry rightly said that there are cases of injustice in our own country, and it is right and proper that we criticise those — just as it is appropriate to criticise the injustice against the Bland family. He also said that justice delayed is justice denied. That is an appropriate way of describing how the Bland family feel about their situation.

The junior Minister Mr Paisley Jnr also contributed to the debate. On behalf of the Bland family, I acknowledge the long-term support that the junior Minister and his father, the First Minister, have given to them over the years. They have raised the issue persistently in meetings at political level and — as my colleague said — with representatives of the Irish judiciary in their search for justice for the Bland family. The family appreciates Mr Paisley Jnr's commitment to the case. He rightly said that political will was needed to solve this problem and that it was not a matter solely for the courts. He is right; and I hope that following this motion — provided that it is supported by the House — we can apply further pressure to ensure that that political will is exercised soon, because the ongoing delay is unacceptable. The Bland family are entitled to some form of justice now, despite the lateness of the day. The junior Minister stated that he has material — of which I have also had sight — that he will place in the Assembly Library in order that Members can consult it if they wish.

There is much detail associated with the case, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not think that the purpose of today's debate is to go through in precise detail what has happened and the injustices that have occurred. However, I want to reiterate two examples of the injustices that have arisen in the Bland case — and they are only two of a number of injustices. First, as a result of Irish court orders, Sarah, as a young child, was placed in the care of her father, and was subjected to ongoing assaults, including rape. That must be addressed by the Irish state.

1.45 pm

The second injustice is that, over a lengthy period, Patricia Bland was subject to her husband's ongoing legal proceedings. Those proceedings damaged her health, undermined her role as a mother, and kept unacceptable pressure on the family. That all happened when the solicitors acting for Mr Bland were claiming to the revenue commissioners in the Irish Republic that he:

“is not capable of taking business decisions”.

They also claimed:

“Because of his state of mind my client does not recall receiving any Notices to Appeal”.

etc, etc, etc. Despite knowing that this man was not of a sound mind, and despite making that case to the Irish Revenue Commissioners, those solicitors continued to sue Mrs Bland on behalf of their client. That brought enormous pressure to bear on the family, and it is another example of how the family has been subjected to injustice and unfair treatment.

I believe that it is right to debate the matter today. It is right that the Assembly, if minded, reiterates its support for the Bland family. We ask only that the family be given proper consideration. The Irish state, whether that means the political system, including the Government as a whole, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department of the Taoiseach, or whether it means the Irish judicial system and the courts, must address themselves to the issues at hand and to the outstanding and unresolved matters. The Irish state must do so quickly in order that the Bland family can take away some sense of justice from the whole sorry affair. The motion states that justice must be done and that it is “seen to be done.” The sooner that that happens the better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with deep concern the failure of the Irish Government and Irish Courts to provide justice for Patricia, Sarah, James and Julia Bland, in light of the evidence presented by the family concerning the alleged crimes committed against them by Rory Bland; and calls on the Irish Prime Minister and Minister for Justice to give this case priority attention, so that justice is done and is seen to be done.

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

Closure of the Seagate Operation in Limavady

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow two hours 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 received and is 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 McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the impact on the economy, particularly in the north-west, of the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, with the loss of 900 jobs; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to agree a co-ordinated strategy to assist Seagate workers back into employment.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin accepts the amendment that the party opposite has tabled; it usefully updates the situation in light of the subsequent announcement of even more job losses in the area.

The announced closure of Seagate Technology in Limavady, with the loss of 930 jobs, was a devastating blow to the local economy. It was the most severe in a series of job losses that has been announced in the Limavady area, and, quite literally, it has brought that subregion to its knees economically.

The affected workforce is drawn from a wide area that encompasses Derry, Antrim, Tyrone and Donegal. The closure will have an impact on the Limavady and Coleraine areas in particular. However, the crisis will have a detrimental economic effect on all the areas that I mentioned. That means that it is imperative that all parties in the Assembly co-operate fully with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI and, if possible, with enterprise agencies across the border to repair the economic damage that will be done to the north-west economy.

It would be easy to be critical of the company or of the various statutory agencies. However, at this juncture, raking over the coals of what could have been done to prevent the Seagate closure would serve no positive purpose. Invest NI could tell us when it first became aware of Seagate's intention to close the plant; what steps it took to prevent that or to attract other investors; and what it can do to recover as much grant aid as possible. However, important as those issues are, they are for discussion on another day.

Lessons can be learnt from this experience. As the downturn in major economies continues, competition

will increase and multinational companies will come under significant stockholder pressure to maximise profits by moving operations to emerging, low-wage economies. Therefore, it is time for us to radically rethink how we plan to develop our economy.

We should address the issue of proper employment conditions and security of entitlements for workers — an issue that exercises all parties. Companies, particularly those in receipt of substantial Government or departmental subventions, must adhere to the basic human and financial rights of workers, including the right to organise. No company should be encouraged to locate in our economy or be eligible for grant aid if it insists on a non-unionised workforce. In addition, the Assembly must address the wider issue of the recruitment of so-called “agency” workers who are being employed on one-year contracts as a way of circumventing local employment legislation.

If we are to compete for sustainable, inward, direct investment and expand our indigenous manufacturing sector, we must equip ourselves and our workforce with skills and expertise in higher-knowledge-based disciplines. We must target investors who specialise in those areas, and we must invest in the future by enabling young people to focus on achieving qualifications in areas such as engineering, research and development, intelligent design and medical research. I welcome the fact that that focus has been reflected in the recent Programme for Government statement, in ISNI, and in wider Budget discussions. Such disciplines and skills will attract employment from the higher end of the economic spectrum, which is an area of intense competition — not least between this region and similar economic regions on this island. That is a key area in which we must record progress and display an increasing ability to compete for investments.

Locally generated employment tends to be less susceptible to competition from low-wage economies and provides a sustainable basis for future planning. However, if the indigenous sector, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, is to compete, we must ensure that the wider economy provides benefits and opportunities — particularly from procurement policies that will give those enterprises access to Government contracts.

In the Seagate factory in Limavady, we have a skilled workforce that is housed in one of the most modern manufacturing plants in the North. The facilities are of the highest specifications, including the water treatment plant. In meetings with the workforce, I discovered that if that water treatment plant is mothballed, it will not be capable of being recommissioned — it will have to be replaced or scrapped.

The factory is built to high specifications, with a 1-metre-deep anti-vibration floor that is essential for

modern production processes. It has a fully-equipped office suite with 100% broadband connectivity, a canteen that can cater for more than 1,000 workers, and two massive car parks.

This is an unusual set of circumstances. I invite the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to state how we might deal with the projected Seagate closure rather than issuing a terse two-line statement to the effect that the company has withdrawn. We have some notice — a gap — in which an opportunity exists to match the skills of the still-intact workforce, combined with high-specification factory accommodation, with a suitable inward investor.

My approach to this crisis will be non-confrontational, but the situation presents a challenge to Invest NI. Given that an important investment conference is scheduled to take place a month before Seagate's projected closure date, in the meantime, can Invest NI match the facilities and the workforce to an inward investor to ensure continuous employment? All Members should co-operate and support Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and other Departments, if current employees need to be reskilled or upskilled. All parties must co-operate in order to demonstrate that not only can we deal with this crisis — which is not of our making — but that we can realistically address our targets for the generation of new jobs and the expansion of the economy.

This crisis presents a challenge for all parties in the Assembly, all MLAs and all Departments to co-operate and to work with DETI and Invest NI to show that a local Assembly can respond differently to the way that it did in the past when job losses were announced. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “loss” and insert

“of 1,000 jobs; and calls on Invest NI to outline the measures it intends to implement to deal with a series of actual and potential job losses in the north-west.”

I am glad that the amendment has been accepted. There was some uncertainty about the number of jobs being lost. Seagate employs 930 people, but, on further investigation and after several meetings with the management of Seagate in Limavady, it transpires that two other companies directly employ more than 80 people who will also lose their jobs. That takes the total number of jobs being lost to more than 1,000.

I hope that Members across the Assembly agree that the sequence of events is unprecedented, and the motion and the amendment seek to outline the measures that Invest NI must establish. The largest employer in the Limavady area announces its closure; the second-largest employer — Magilligan Prison — is at risk; and there have been other announcements, including the closure of HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd over the weekend.

Limavady has a population of some 30,000, and Belfast has a population of 300,000, which is 10 times that of Limavady. If there were a series of job loss announcements, and the potential threat of closure from a significant employer, in the Belfast area, the pro rata number of job losses would be approximately 12,000 to 13,000. If that were to happen in the Belfast area, “crisis” is not the word that would be used, and the situation would merit urgent action by all the statutory authorities. However, that is an indication of the magnitude of the series of blows that has hit the Limavady area. As has been pointed out, the crisis has spread, because Seagate is a regional employer that employs people from Coleraine, Londonderry and the Irish Republic in high-value jobs.

Employees feel that Seagate has offered a reasonably helpful redundancy package. That is good progress, but it is not enough. Some 1,200 to 1,300 people will be looking for life after Seagate and H.

We must ensure that Paul Goggins, the Minister of State with responsibility for prisons, takes the right decision and retains Magilligan Prison, thus preventing a further 350 job holders from being added to the lengthening dole queues in Limavady. I understand that that decision is due in the next month or so. I am sure that the NIO follows proceedings diligently, so I hope that, when Mr Goggins reads Hansard, he will take into account the effect that further job losses would have on the area.

2.00 pm

We must ensure that that series of events is addressed. Unfortunately, in the past, I have had cause to be critical of Invest Northern Ireland. I refer to a response, which has proven to be ironic, that I received from the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Barry Gardiner to a question for written answer in the House of Commons. In April 2004, I asked:

“how many visits have been made under the auspices of Invest Northern Ireland by potential inward investors to the East Londonderry constituency within the past 12 months; and how many jobs have been created as a result.”

His response, on 28 April 2004, was that, from April 2003 to March 2004, there had been two visits — to the entire constituency, that is, not to Limavady.

Mr Gardiner's written answer continued:

“While these have not led to investment to the area, Invest NI continually seeks to build on the recent successes, which has seen a re-investment by Seagate Limavady”.

I am sure that the irony will not be lost on the people of Limavady.

Earlier this year, I asked the then Under-Secretary of State Maria Eagle, also in a question for written answer:

“how many potential inward investors have been to (a) Limavady and (b) Coleraine council area at the invitation of Invest Northern Ireland during 2006.”

Her answer, on 19 February 2007, was straightforward. She did not avoid the question but answered it deliberately and specifically. She wrote:

“During 2006 there were no visits under the auspices of Invest Northern Ireland to Limavady and Coleraine council areas by potential inward investors.”

We begin to see the nature of the problem, and I hope that the Minister will deal with it. He has made endeavours and efforts since taking office; however, Invest NI must be seen to produce the goods. It must respond, so that people see tangible, effective results on the ground. I assume that that is the reason behind the motion. It is certainly the reason behind the amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): First, on behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I acknowledge the Minister's prompt attendance at the meeting on 6 November to brief Committee members on developments. I was in the United States, so the meeting was chaired by the Deputy Chairperson, Paul Maskey. On that occasion, the Committee shared the Minister's regret and huge disappointment at the impending closure of Seagate Technology in Limavady, with the loss of more than 900 jobs, and the consequential impact that that will have on other firms. Since then, further job losses in Limavady have been announced.

The Committee was happy to receive assurances that the Department will do all that it can, in conjunction with its own and other agencies and with other Departments, to provide support mechanisms for Seagate employees. The Committee took note of Members' concerns by writing to the Minister, urging him to consider support for agency workers. Mitchel McLaughlin mentioned that point in proposing the motion. Moreover, Members wanted the needs of migrant workers who will be affected by the closure to be taken into account.

At that same meeting, the Committee heard from the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce, which highlighted the urgent need to find a replacement for Seagate in Limavady. The direct impact that the closure will have on other firms was mentioned, as was the indirect impact on the wider economy. Members have recognised that the closure affects not only those who live in the East Derry constituency but those in Foyle, West Tyrone and, in a couple of instances, North Antrim.

Taking account of the impact that the closure will have on local suppliers and retailers and the local housing market, the Committee shares the concern of the Chamber about the overall economic impact on Limavady and the wider north-west. Of course, that has been further compounded by the decision in respect of HÜCO in the last week.

Proposing the motion, Mitchel McLaughlin rightly said that this is not a problem that we should dump on each other's laps, whether as Ministers, Departments,

agencies or parties. In asking the Minister to consider what measures are necessary to lessen the impact on the local economy and to seek further investment for the Limavady area, the Committee has a view to being as supportive as possible of all the local efforts and those of the Minister and his agencies. As has already been said, we are conscious that the US/NI (United States/Northern Ireland) investment conference might afford a timely opportunity to seek potential investors for the area.

We know that there is a quality workforce. Their performance and productivity did not contribute to this decision, which was made on the basis of cost margins that the workforce could not control. On the basis of the quality workforce and the quality estate available at the Seagate plant in Limavady, it seems that a featured and focused sell would be particularly appropriate in the context of the US/NI investment conference. I do not think that anyone would take that focus as being untoward or in any way discriminatory against the interests of anyone else. It would be an honest and genuine response to a dire situation.

The Committee also welcomes the stated intention of the Department to pursue clawback consistent with the contractual arrangements. The issue highlights once again the need, not just for an active concentration in pursuing FDI (foreign direct investment) that gives us employment scale, but also to make sure that the role of Invest NI in helping indigenous small business start-ups to expand is further reinforced. That has been brought into sharp relief by the scale of the impact of the Seagate announcement. We will be using the US/NI conference, I hope, to try to address the issue of FDI. The Committee will be at pains in the coming weeks to ensure that the focus on indigenous enterprises is not lost either.

Mr Cree: I sympathise with all those in the Limavady area and further afield who will lose their jobs as a result of Seagate's closing its plant at Limavady. We are told that this action was necessary as a result of significantly lower wage costs in Asia, foreign exchange and shipping costs. We have heard that many times; it is a problem that will be with us for some time to come.

It is disappointing to lose these high-tech jobs. The situation clearly illustrates the need to increase our efforts to attract new, high-value-added jobs. That has already been referred to, and is anticipated in the draft Programme for Government and the investment strategy. We need to obtain new jobs quickly in order to alleviate the situation in the north-west. It may be that Invest NI should review its strategy on FDI to ensure that, as far as practicable, publicly-funded jobs are protected, bearing in mind our experience with Seagate.

The Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee referred to the Minister's visit to the

Committee, when a useful exchange occurred. I will not cover the ground again, except to say that everyone agreed the need for action. The Ulster Unionists will be supporting the motion as amended.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the debate. It is now some weeks since the announcement was made, but the urgency of dealing with the matter remains.

I understand how the people of Limavady are feeling. In the early 1980s, Carrickfergus, my hometown, suffered a major setback when three major factories closed within a short time, with the loss of some 8,000 jobs. Importantly, when those factories closed, the local council was prepared to take the initiative. Realising that it was important to do something, it adopted a multi-agency approach. The situation did not change overnight, and it took some time to restore people's confidence in the Carrickfergus economy. What worries me about the situation in Limavady is that people could lose confidence in the future. That must not happen, because it is important that people have that confidence.

We live in a global economy, and we are all aware of the issues associated with our doing so, some of which Mr Cree has already mentioned. However, Invest Northern Ireland must provide safeguards that reduce global companies' opportunities to pull out on a whim, which is what is happening in Limavady. We all know that the economy's development is not the sole responsibility of a single Department but must involve others, such as DEL (Department for Employment and Learning) and DOE (Department of Environment). I propose to the Minister that Invest Northern Ireland try to investigate other uses of the Seagate factory site when it is vacated. That is what we did in Carrickfergus way back in the 1980s. The relevant Departments and the workforce must also remain focused on the issue at hand.

Finally, I suggest to the Minister that he set up a Seagate foundation, similar to the Enkalon Foundation that was set up in Antrim a number of years ago. The establishment of a foundation would help to ease the problems that the pull-out creates. As I have said, I welcome the debate, from which I hope something positive will emerge.

Mr McQuillan: In recent years, I have become increasingly frustrated as I watch more and more jobs disappear from East Londonderry. The loss of the Seagate operation is on a scale of unimaginably damaging proportions. Seagate is the largest employer in the area, and its loss is creating an employment and economic problem that must be addressed with the utmost urgency.

The loss of that one employer could do more economic damage to the area than 35 years of terrorism did. It could force the leisure and retail sectors into a crisis that would undoubtedly lead to more job losses and economic deprivation. I fully recognise and accept that other areas of Northern Ireland will also feel the impact

of Seagate's withdrawal, but East Londonderry will bear the brunt of the economic damage.

Some perceive Invest Northern Ireland as being focused on creating jobs in Belfast. Indeed, it is often referred to in East Londonderry as "Invest Belfast". That trend must be stopped, unless the most northerly part of Northern Ireland is to become an employment and economic wasteland. That is an outcome that my party colleagues and I will not accept and will work tirelessly to prevent. Therefore, it must become a priority for Invest Northern Ireland to put together a package that aims to make East Londonderry its number one concern for investment.

As rural employment shrank and the countryside became a dormitory area for the towns, the more rural areas of my constituency — for example, Garvagh, Kilrea and Dungiven — were always glad of the employment opportunities that factories such as Seagate provided. Invest Northern Ireland (INI) must therefore take a long, hard look at supporting businesses in rural areas as well as in the main population centres, and that support must form an integral part of any strategy that is devised and pursued.

2.15 pm

Like my colleagues, I am grateful to the First Minister and to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for taking the time to visit the plant in person to talk to management, staff and local representatives. That alone reassured many that the oncoming economic storm was being treated as a matter of urgency at the very highest level of Government. I am confident that the Executive understand the gravity of the coming problems and will make every effort on behalf of the East Londonderry constituency.

I am happy to support the call for the rebuilding of Magilligan Prison at its current location. If the Westminster Government permit the closure of what will be the area's largest employer after Seagate's departure, I, for one, will roundly condemn them as loudly and as publicly as I can. Our MP, Mr Campbell, has raised the issue many times at Westminster, and I am sure that he will continue his efforts with renewed vigour in the light of recent events.

In his reply to Mr Campbell at Westminster, Paul Goggins stated that the issue of the location of the new policing college was closed, as a site had been identified. I ask the Executive and our MPs to ensure that the case for locating the college at the former Shackleton Barracks, for example, be reopened and emphasised in the strongest possible way to the appropriate Ministers in London. An excellent case can be made for the protection and enhancement of employment opportunities for all East Londonderry residents — regardless of their religious or political beliefs. I support the amendment.

Mr McCartney: Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. All of us who live in the north-west are only too aware of the impact that losing 900 jobs in Seagate will have on the region. As has been stated, Seagate is the largest employer in Limavady, and it is estimated that up to 450 workers come from the Foyle constituency. The closure will have a knock-on effect for north and west Tyrone, County Donegal and, as Mark Durkan pointed out, north Antrim, so the impact on the economy is obvious.

There is a focus — indeed, an expectation — on the Assembly, the Executive and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to deal with the matter in the coming months. Therefore I welcome the Minister's presence this afternoon.

I commend Mitchel McLaughlin's suggestion that INI and the Department should prioritise matching the skills of the workers with the needs of corresponding companies; that option should be explored fully. I have no doubt that the Minister will consider that suggestion, and I hope that he will report to the Assembly in the weeks and months ahead. We must avoid letting the workforce break up in the meantime. When the redundancy package is in place, people might not wait to see what happens, and if the signal is not sent that the intention is to match skills with suitable companies, the workers might vote with their feet.

The Assembly, the Executive and the relevant Ministers should follow every possible avenue to ensure that, in future, the impact of a firm's closure on an area should not be dictated by the firm alone.

Members should reflect on the example of Molins in Derry several years ago, where the workers took the initiative. They were faced with the inevitability of the firm's closure, but they showed that there was another way. They used their skills to set up a new company and acted as a supplier to Molins, which was leaving the area.

It is important to note that the company responded by gifting the factory to the workers and providing funding. I understand that Seagate owns the machinery and the building, and the Minister should investigate what will happen to them in the weeks ahead.

The appropriate Department at that time also provided funding and the workers bought into the company. The new company was a success; not only did it supply its parent company, Molins, but it diversified and supplied other companies. The workers demonstrated in the clearest terms that closure is not inevitable.

When I met representatives of Seagate recently in Derry, they said that they would take on board such a community renewal initiative. I hope that the Minister will also explore it when he talks to the company and INI.

We should send a signal that the Assembly, the Executive and the Department do not see redundancies as inevitable and that if anything can be done to avoid them, they will do it. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr T Clarke: I support the amendment. Not only during this debate, but in conversation, I have listened to the comments of my colleagues Gregory Campbell and Adrian McQuillan, who represent the area that is affected by the closure of Seagate Technology.

The only way that I can comprehend the economic damage that will result from the forthcoming closure is if I compare it to a similar, hypothetical situation in my own constituency. For example, if a firm such as the Camden Group in Antrim, which has a workforce of over 1000, were to close, there would be immense damage to the local economy. Therefore, my views on the economic damage that such a scenario would create in South Antrim are based on that hypothetical situation.

Given that another firm that is in the same locality as Seagate Technology announced its closure, there is a real and immediate need for Invest NI to develop and implement an economic-regeneration plan for East Londonderry, which is suffering most as a result of the closures. I share the worries about the future that the Members who moved the amendment expressed. It is only through the co-operation of Invest NI that a manufacturing base can be re-established and the economic future safeguarded.

I urge the Assembly to support the amendment and to show the people of East Londonderry that we, as Members of their Assembly, recognise their plight and that we are determined to assist in every possible way. People in any area who are suffering as a result of such a devastating blow would expect their Government to seek solutions to the problems that that created. Those solutions must come via a body such as Invest NI, and they deserve the support of all Assembly Members.

I was stunned to hear of the negative and politically based opposition in Limavady Borough Council to the positive approach that is employment protection and creation. However, I am glad to hear that the Members opposite have adopted a different stance to that of their colleagues on Limavady Borough Council: perhaps the decision-making of the councillors in Limavady was coloured by the fact that DUP Ministers, MLAs and councillors took the lead when the closure of Seagate Technology was announced.

It is blatantly obvious to everyone that the area has many positive points to interest employers. The strategy for future economic investment in the area must be based firmly on those positives. I support every effort to bring investment and employment to Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, I share the views of my colleagues that the race, colour, class or creed of any employer or

employee is of no importance whatever. The most important factor is that employment is available in every area — there should be no ifs, buts or maybes about that.

The DUP has demonstrated its wish to work for the benefit of all Northern Ireland's people, and it has exposed the hypocritical political stance of others.

I have pleasure in supporting the amendment.

Mr McClarty: I support the amendment. The afternoon of 29 October 2007, when the employees at Seagate Technology's Limavady plant were informed that they were about to lose their jobs, was a black day for Limavady and for the Northern Ireland economy. Once again, Northern Ireland has lost jobs as a result of the significantly lower wages and shipping costs that exist in competing Asian countries.

The impact of the Seagate Technology job losses not only had a shocking and distressing affect on its workers, but it had a seriously negative impact on the entire community in Limavady. The news was truly devastating for Northern Ireland's economic ambitions, and it has led to considerable concern about the economic future of Limavady and the surrounding north-west region.

Unfortunately, the news got worse for an already beleaguered Limavady community when HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd, an electronics firm, announced that it will close in January 2008, with the loss of a further 70 jobs. That closure brought the total number of manufacturing jobs lost within weeks in Limavady to a staggering 1000. That should be deeply worrying for the Assembly and the new Executive.

I want to put on record my firm belief that the Seagate Technology job losses were in no way a reflection of its employees, who are fantastically skilled, motivated and inventive. In 2002, Seagate Technology's Limavady plant was the recipient of two awards: the company's media substrate operation was awarded the internationally recognised Mark of Excellence for quality management, and, in a separate scheme, it was granted the Business in the Community Award for Social Responsibility. Therefore, it is evident how big a shock it was to learn that 930 jobs were being lost at a firm that employed some of the UK's most skilled and talented workers in their field.

The economic consequences for Limavady and the north-west continue to be of serious concern. It is estimated that unemployment could double in the area. Furthermore, it is also reported that the latest redundancies could mean that an estimated £4 million to £5 million per annum will no longer be spent in the Limavady area.

In the 'Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005', Limavady was ranked as the sixth most deprived council area in Northern Ireland: Londonderry was ranked third. The closure will have a further negative

impact on those economically deprived areas. The north-west has experienced considerable job losses in the past few years, namely, the closure of the Desmond & Sons Ltd factory at Dungiven, the Daintyfit Foundation Wear Company at Limavady, FarmFed Chickens Ltd in Coleraine and the ongoing threat of public-sector job losses in the area. That paints a very bleak picture.

What governmental response is needed? The work of assisting the Seagate workforce to re-engage with the labour market — having regard for their skill profile and geographical location — is already under way. That is extremely important. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, along with Invest NI and the Department for Employment and Learning must work diligently to find alternative employment for the Seagate employees who want to remain economically active. Those workers are extremely talented and must be given every opportunity to avail of retraining and educational programmes to enable them to remain in employment. I would welcome a progress report from the Minister on that. Furthermore, I would be interested to learn from the Minister what progress he is making, even at this early stage, in achieving potential replacements for the Seagate factory in the near future.

I would also be grateful if the Minister would inform the House whether, as a result of the Seagate job losses, there were any renewed plans to promote the north-west of Northern Ireland as a prime location at the investment conference to be hosted by the Executive in the spring of next year.

The Executive and the Assembly must act now so that we can offer hope and economic prosperity for this already beleaguered and fraught community.

I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question time will begin at 2.30 pm, so Members may take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Binge Drinking/Illicit Drug Use

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education to detail the role that her Department will play in developing and expanding programmes to educate young people on the dangers of binge drinking and illicit drug use. (AQO 856/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. I recognise the dangers facing young people and, indeed, adults from binge drinking and illicit drug use. Schools have a role in addressing those issues, but they cannot provide an answer on their own. I hope that every person who is in a position to influence young people will do their best to avoid such danger. I am impressed by the work that schools do in that area. Last week, I saw another example of that at a prize-giving in Armagh, at which the principal gave a very strong message to the young boys and girls not to drink and drive.

I am committed to ensuring that everything that we do for education and youth promotes the well-being of our young people, as well as their academic achievement. Alcohol and drugs are difficult challenges facing everyone, which require the support of families, schools, youth and community groups as well as other key voluntary and statutory agencies — for example, in the area of health.

My Department has a range of policies to help to educate young people about the risks associated with drug and alcohol misuse, including a requirement for all schools to have a drugs policy, which must include a focus on alcohol. We have issued drugs misuse guidance to all schools as part of drugs and alcohol education. Additionally, the revised curriculum is designed in a way that will give every young person an opportunity to learn about the dangers of binge drinking. It will also help them to develop the skills that they need to deal with peer pressure, and an understanding of the problems that may lead them to drugs and alcohol in the first place.

Those interventions are supported and complemented through each school's pastoral care arrangements, including the new counselling service, which is proving to be successful, with 95% of post-primary schools

availing of it. The eight schools that do not use our counselling service already have existing counselling provision in place. Outside school, the youth and community sector has a number of programmes in place that target those most at risk of drugs and alcohol misuse to help them to make healthy choices.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister explain why that serious subject is covered by the public service agreement 8, objective 3 of the Programme for Government, but the Department of Education is mysteriously not named as one of the Departments contributing to it, bearing in mind the horrendous effects that illicit drugs and binge drinking have on our children and young people?

Ms Ruane: I reiterate that the Department takes the subject very seriously. It is not possible to put every single action in the Programme for Government. One of the major programmes that we have brought in is the counselling service in schools. In order to deal with the issue seriously, we must deal with prevention, and that is one of the most dynamic and innovative programmes that has taken place. The fact that it is not mentioned does not mean that we do not take seriously; we do — and I take it very seriously.

Mr Campbell: Given that there has been a series of incidents of illegality ranging from alleged intimidation in the Markets area, which the Minister may have heard raised in the Chamber this morning, to murder in the Republic, which emanated from south Armagh — a place she referred to earlier — will the Minister give an unequivocal and unambiguous response outlining her attitude to support for the police in such circumstances, the giving of information to the police in order to bring those responsible before the courts, and the need for everyone to do likewise in order to bring lawbreakers to justice?

Ms Ruane: In any instance where there is wrongdoing, Sinn Féin calls on people to bring information to the police.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware that suicide is one of the biggest killers on this island — 500 people took their own lives through suicide in one year. What action is the Department of Education taking to address suicide among young people as a result of drugs overdoses, including alcohol abuse?

Ms Ruane: This is a very important issue facing our society. Suicide is a difficult issue that faces the entire community, as recent tragic deaths have reminded us. I have been in many schools throughout the North where teachers and pupils are reeling from young people having taken their own lives. The promotion of pupils' emotional health and well-being has been identified as a priority for action at ministerial level. I am a member of the suicide prevention team.

As I said earlier, professional counselling services are now available for young people in schools to support them during difficult and vulnerable periods in their lives. Young people can refer themselves to the service or be referred by their schools. Schools in the post-primary sector report that the availability of the counselling service has been a major boost to their capacity to support young people. Although it is good that there has been huge uptake, it shows that there is much work to be done during 2008 in order to examine how to increase that uptake in schools. A strategy for the provision of counselling is being developed. It is hoped that the service may, eventually, be extended to primary schools in order to deal with issues that concern younger children where that is appropriate.

Work has also begun to develop an emotional health and well-being programme for pupils in partnership with all key stakeholders and interested parties, which will focus on pupils' health and well-being, support systems for pupils who are under stress and support for schools in the event of a crisis. The boards have a crisis response team that can be brought into schools.

Suicide prevention is a key issue for society; and it is one that the Assembly cannot run away from. I welcome the work that has already been done. However, much more must be done. An all-Ireland strategy on suicide prevention is needed. We must build young people's confidence and self-esteem and ensure that they leave the education system as confident, articulate and creative individuals who feel valued by society.

Mr Speaker: Before I invite Mr Ford to ask his question, I remind Members that all supplementary questions must relate to the original question.

Education in Comparative Religion

2. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce education in comparative religion to all schools in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 854/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. It is important that all young people understand the major religions of the world, and I believe that young people are keen to do so. From September 2007, a revised core syllabus for religious education is being phased into all schools. As well as Christianity, it includes new requirements for young people to study at least two other world religions at key stage 3 and to study Christianity from both a Protestant and Catholic perspective at key stage 4. As it is the core syllabus, teachers also have flexibility beyond that to offer additional learning that is focused on religions other than Christianity.

During the development of the core syllabus, the four main Christian churches, who were charged with drafting it, consulted schools and other religious groups. The

Department also consulted representatives of other religions as well as young people and schools during its equality impact assessment of the core syllabus.

We live in an increasingly diverse Ireland, in which there are people of many faiths and of none. There should be a culture of respect for all religions. The revised core syllabus for religious education provides the basis for schools to meet those changing needs. I must stress that the core syllabus is exactly that: a core syllabus. In keeping with the principles of the revised curriculum, it gives schools the flexibility to build on it in a way that suits their pupils' needs. Every school will be different, and I encourage schools to build on the core syllabus by including more content on religions other than Christianity in order to reflect and respect the increasing diversity in Ireland.

Schools have the flexibility to build on the core syllabus and link it with aspects such as citizenship and personal development. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Churches have also set up a representative working group, which includes representatives of religious minorities, to advise on guidance materials to support teachers. That will include material on world religions, prejudice, sectarianism and reconciliation. I consider that to be a welcome step forward.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response, as far as it goes. She mentioned increasing diversity in society. Given that that also extends to primary-school pupils, it would seem that the core syllabus is lacking if it only addresses those issues at key stage 3.

The fact that the core syllabus was drawn up some years ago by representatives of the four main Churches may have been a step forward. However, it totally fails to recognise the increasing diversity that exists these days — a point that has been made by such varied people as the Examiner of Statutory Rules, the Bahá'í community and the Council for Integrated Education.

Does she accept that there will be a real problem if those issues are not addressed in every school — as part of the core syllabus — and that we will, increasingly, marginalise those who come from the non-Christian sector?

Ms Ruane: I agree. It is important to ensure that people who come from different parts of the world — with religion, and without — have their beliefs respected. The revised curriculum has also been adopted in primary schools. I know, from visits to schools, that children in many of those primary schools do study world religions. It is important, as our society becomes more diverse, that we respect all religions. One has only to look at parts of the world where there is conflict to know that we need to build a culture of respect and tolerance, rather than one of intolerance and prejudice.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Minister accept that, while learning about all world religions is important to a pupil's knowledge and understanding, a concentration on Christianity is even more important?

Ms Ruane: I take my section 75 duties seriously — they are important. At the risk of repeating myself, there is a welcome for all cultures and religions on our island. It is important that we respect those religions and understand them. I hope that people from the Muslim culture, the Jewish culture, and the Baha'i faith will understand the Christian faith, and vice versa. We are trying to build a new society that is based on tolerance and respect.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has the Department taken any steps to ensure that the core syllabus complies with equality and human rights legislation?

Ms Ruane: Last December, the Department carried out an equality impact assessment and consulted widely with a variety of groups throughout society. There are issues that we need to deal with as a Department. Those are issues that we will take seriously. The bottom line is that we must build an education system that puts each child at its centre, and that values all of our children.

Academic Selection

3. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to bring forward proposals to replace the 11+ with an alternative form of academic selection. (AQO 823/08)

Ms Ruane: It is well known that I do not favour academic selection and, therefore, I do not intend to bring forward proposals that simply replace one form of academic selection with another. However, I will bring forward proposals that offer all children equal access to a quality post-primary education. Rather than have a form of transfer based on two short high-stake tests that each last one hour — which results in a sense of failure for far too many children at a formative stage in their development — it is better to base such decisions on the preferences expressed by a young person who has experienced three years of post-primary education and who has received valuable teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance. By that stage, a young person will have begun to form a clear picture of his or her preferred career pathway, and will be capable of expressing preferences for an appropriate mix of academic, professional, and technical courses.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that we have a schools estate that is capable of sufficient flexibility to accommodate those preferences. I will address that issue when I bring forward my proposals.

Mr Hamilton: In the past, and again today, in stating her opposition to academic selection, the Minister has spoken of her belief that the test is stressful for schoolchildren. Is she aware that the biggest cause for concern and stress for parents, pupils and teachers is the uncertainty that she has caused by her failure to bring forward an alternative form of academic selection? Her inaction leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that she is callous and uncaring as regards schoolchildren in this country.

Ms Ruane: Absolutely not — I do not accept that at all. I care deeply about every child in the North of Ireland. I will ensure that we bring forward proposals that put every child at the centre of education, rather than starting with institutions and matching children to them. My proposals will be designed to build on the strengths of our system. I am modernising a 1947 institutional model — one that would not be acceptable in any other part of the world. The 1947 model matches children to one of two school types. A twenty-first century model would match children to provision. We will continue to match academically gifted pupils to suitable provision, just as we will match all children to suitable provision. However, it will be done on the basis of equality.

That will be done on the basis that every child deserves a fair chance. We cannot continue to tell the majority of our children that because they have failed a test, certain schools are not open to them. That is wrong, and changes must be made to the system.

2.45 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that those who advocate the retention of academic selection have a very narrow and elitist agenda that enables only a very few to succeed? *[Interruption.]*

It would be far better if those people advocated the promotion of academic excellence rather than academic selection. Does the Minister agree that rather than lowering standards, abolishing academic selection would raise standards in our schools?

Ms Ruane: I agree. It is very important to find a way of matching our education system with children's needs. At the moment, children must sit two one-hour tests at a very young age. As I said, I would prefer that children make their selection at 14. Our young people naturally make choices at that age; Members who have children will know that it is at that age that children decide whether to choose maths or science or which vocational courses they should take. There are some very innovative models and there is collaboration between schools. Rather than make a political football of the issue, people should work to create a system that best meets the needs of all our children so that no child

is left feeling that they are a failure as a result of two one-hour tests.

Mr B McCrea: Northern Ireland has the best education system in the world, and it does not need to be broken by people who do not know what they are talking about.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister agree with CCEA that 31 January 2008 is absolutely the last date by which a decision can be made on a transfer test or alternatives to it? Will the Minister say whether she intends to bring proposals to the House before that date, or will she simply let the clock run out so that there can be no discussion on the matter?

Ms Ruane: I am very disappointed by Basil McCrea's remarks. I wish that he had been with me the other day in Coleraine or three weeks ago on the Shankill Road; I wish that he had been with me when I met principals in north Belfast or when I was in Mount Vernon. People need to wake up and smell the coffee.

Mr S Wilson: Is that Colombian coffee?

Ms Ruane: It is fair-trade coffee.

Basil knows that we fail 4,000 of our young people every year and that they leave school with poor qualifications, poor literacy and poor numeracy skills. What chance do they have? If we have such a world-class education system, why do we fail so many young people? We need to create an education system that provides every child with a fair opportunity. I will do that.

Some Members: When?

STEM Subjects

4. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to increase the uptake of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, as referred to in PSA 2, Objective 4 of annex 1 to the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011. (AQO 862/08)

Ms Ruane: Over the past decade, there has been a 31% decline in the number of A-level students taking maths, chemistry and physics in combination. In addition, as a result of the falling age profile, it is likely that there will be a reduction in the number of students taking any science, technology, engineering and mathematics A levels after 2009.

In further education colleges the number of students achieving an engineering qualification decreased from 3,526 in 2001-02 to 3,130 in 2005-06. The number of students taking maths and computing science also decreased from 13,920 to 9,970. That represents a 28.3% decrease over the same period.

In light of the effect that declining numbers might have on the science base of the economy, my Department

and the Department for Employment and Learning are jointly carrying out a review of STEM subjects to produce a strategy for the development of STEM subjects through schools and further education colleges.

That review will identify progression routes to higher education and employment, and emphasise the links to the skills and innovation needs of the wider economy. The review will also consider how to enhance pupil uptake in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and increase the number of qualified teaching staff in those subject areas so that the North of Ireland can compete in the global marketplace, particularly in the area of the knowledge economy.

Furthermore, I am pleased to inform Naomi Long that, on 8 November 2007, in one example of good practice, Norbrook Laboratories announced a partnership with St Paul's High School, Bessbrook, and St Colman's College, Newry, which will upgrade and develop new science laboratories and provide both schools with equipment no longer required by the company. Norbrook personnel will be in contact with the students throughout the academic year, both to assist their science studies and make them aware of the availability of future employment possibilities. The company will also provide opportunities for work experience for pupils.

Several schools and colleges have collaborated through the vocational enhancement programme to make engineering more relevant and interesting for young people. Queen's University in Belfast has launched a scholarship scheme — the first of its kind here in Ireland or in Britain — which will help to ensure future economic competitiveness and attract high-quality students. The scheme offers awards of £1,000 to all students who achieve three A levels at grade A and who, in 2008, go on to study a STEM subject, other than medicine or dentistry, at Queen's University.

Gender imbalance in the uptake of STEM subjects must also be tackled. It is important that the STEM review and the various initiatives that I have mentioned result in more women and girls being encouraged into STEM-related professions.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. As someone who studied those subjects and qualified as an engineer, I have a particular interest in the matter. However, although the Minister has outlined the length of time over which uptake of those subjects has declined, and has described activities being undertaken by other agencies, I am interested to know how soon the Department will produce its own proposals to tackle that decline at the earliest stage — in the classroom. If there is to be an increase in the uptake of STEM subjects, we must begin by introducing those subjects to children currently in primary school.

Ms Ruane: I agree absolutely that it is important to find ways of stimulating young people from an early

age. I am very pleased with the revised curriculum: I visited one school in which it operates very well for the youngest children, where they learn science through play. The curriculum is carried out as a literacy programme and as a science programme, but involving play. It was easy to see that the children found it stimulating. The revised curriculum will make a big difference to the study of mathematics and science by very young children. The review's proposals are currently out for consultation, and will be put to the Assembly in the near future. The Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are both working on the matter.

Mr Newton: Earlier, the Minister gave us some information on illicit drugs. However, the FARC organisation was involved in illegal drugs in Colombia, not fair-trade coffee.

Does the Minister recognise the needs —
[Interruption.] If the Members opposite do not understand, I will explain it again in the interest of clarity. The Minister informed us earlier that she was involved in the fair-trade coffee area. On this side of the Chamber —

Mr Speaker: Order. I would prefer that the Member asks his supplementary question.

Mr Newton: I am thanking the Minister for a piece of information, Mr Speaker. We believed that she was involved — I am sorry — we believed that FARC were involved in illegal drugs. The Minister informed us that they are involved in fair-trade coffee.

However, given her answer to Naomi Long, does the Minister recognise industry's need to be involved in research and development and innovation? How will the Minister specifically address the identified needs of industry in the education system?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his comments. I am delighted that fair trade is top of the agenda. On Friday 16 November 2007, I organised a meeting in Warrenpoint, which signifies, I hope, the starting point for Warrenpoint's becoming a fair-trade town. I am sure that the Member will be interested to know that Newry is a fair-trade city and that there are now 24 such towns and cities across Ireland. We do not discriminate on countries; we support fair trade from whatever part of the world it comes.

It is important that my Department works with industry on the economy's needs and on how those can be developed in the curriculum. I met representatives from the Institute of Directors and the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) to discuss the curriculum. Those bodies are pleased about the revised curriculum, and they see the need for more flexibility in the curriculum. The Member will be glad to hear that they also see the need for changes to the 11-plus system.

Mr Attwood: In the Minister's opening reply, she said that there had been a 31% decline in maths, physics and chemistry uptake over the past 10 years. Given the catastrophic collapse in the uptake of those subjects, does the Minister agree that the target that is outlined in annex one of the draft Programme for Government for a 5% increase in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects over the next three years is not very ambitious? Does she agree that she should be setting much more ambitious targets and that she has not stretched herself on STEM subjects in the draft Programme for Government? Will she reassure the House that, given her Department's moderate ambitions on STEM, the commitments made by DEL and the Department of Education to implement a strategy to address the shortage of skills by 2011 will be realised?

Ms Ruane: The STEM review will make proposals. Terms of reference have been drawn up for that review, which is being taken seriously by my Department and by DEL, of which Reg Empey is the Minister. The review will recommend how schools and further education colleges should progress with pedagogy, curriculum and coherence across subject areas. Part of the review will consider how to promote interest in, and understanding of, the importance of STEM subjects to society and how to make them interesting for young people so that they are not turned off science or engineering. A small steering group has been set up to oversee the review. Dr Hugh Cormican, former managing director of Andor Technology, and Dr Alan Blair from the Association of Colleges in the North have been appointed as project manager and secretary respectively, and there will be three different working groups. The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have set the targets to which the Member referred. We will meet and, I hope, exceed those targets. There is a nice little saying in Ireland: *Tús maith leath na hoibre*. — a good start is half the work. If we were to exceed the targets, that would be good, but there is nothing worse than not meeting the targets that one sets.

Integrated Education

5. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Education whether she will explain why no reference to integrated education was included in the draft Programme for Government and the associated public service agreements.

(AQO 853/08)

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief.

Ms S Ramsey: Supplementary questions need to be brief.

Ms Ruane: The draft Programme for Government reflects the careful consideration that the Executive have given to priorities. When education is named in

the draft Programme for Government, it refers to all sectors. Irish-medium education is mentioned in the PSA (Public Service Agreement) because a review is under way, after publication of the Bain Report. I take seriously the statutory duty that is placed on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. It has been my pleasure, as Stephen Farry knows, to visit a number of integrated schools and to speak at several NICIE (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education) conferences. During those visits, I have been impressed by staff commitment to the education and development of children in their care and to the openness of the sector in its approach to seeking collaborative opportunities with schools in other sectors.

Integrated education, and integrating education, plays an important role in the vision that is outlined in the Bain Report, which highlights the need for greater integration and collaboration within the wider education landscape.

3.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I must announce to the House that, unfortunately, time is up for questions to the Minister of Education. *[Laughter.]*

ENVIRONMENT

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have made a ruling that points of order cannot be made during Question Time, but I will be happy to hear them afterwards.

Ministerial Communication

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of occasions on which she has communicated officially with her ministerial colleagues since taking office; and to outline the general nature of those communications. (AQO 813/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I would not be able to do justice to that complex and detailed question in the 30 minutes that are available to me. If the Member is content, I will write to him with the detail that he has requested. To give him a flavour of it: I have had 25 ministerial meetings and 51 correspondence cases with ministerial colleagues, mostly about cross-cutting issues. However, on occasions, Ministers have written to me about constituency issues. For example, I have received 11 letters from the Minister for Social Development on constituency matters.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her offer of a written response, which I accept. Will she focus on

contact with her colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on 10 September? Which of her official communications with that Minister may have led to his abandonment of the public-sector scheme for the visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway on the same day that she announced that she was minded to approve a private scheme?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that. I have had three correspondence cases with Minister Dodds; none were about the Giant's Causeway. As the Member is aware, from memory I had a meeting with the Minister in August on his return from holiday. If the Member will bear with me, I will check my records. I had meetings with that Minister on 21 August about the Giant's Causeway and on 7 June to discuss cross-cutting issues. All that information will be sent to the Member in writing.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míe maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail the number of occasions on which she has communicated officially with her ministerial counterpart in the Twenty-six Counties, John Gormley? Will she outline the general nature of those communications?

Mrs Foster: I do not have that information in front of me, but I am happy to write to the Member. The work was carried out with my ministerial colleagues in the Executive.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Storey to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Storey: I have no supplementary question, Mr Speaker.

Mr O'Loan: I also have a question about communications between the Minister's Department and DETI about the Giant's Causeway. Following a question for written answer, she informed me that DETI had made no representations to her in support of the Seaport Investments planning proposal. However, it is now known that the DETI and DOE Ministers came to a shared understanding in June in favour of a private-sector proposal. Does she now accept that there is a legitimate public demand for transparency in her decision-making process? In particular, will she tell me why I have not received a response, which was promised by 9 November, to my freedom of information request? What is her Department attempting to hide?

Mrs Foster: I am somewhat surprised that the Member has asked me that, given that he told the 'Ballymena Guardian' on 14 November that I am not in control of my Planning Service. If that is the case, I am at a loss to understand how I can answer the question.

He is well aware that on 10 September I made a statement, from which I will now read to him and the House. Given the amount of attention that the statement

attracted, I am amazed at the great deal of talk that there has been about it. It was:

“I have asked my officials to engage with the developer and key local stakeholders on some aspects of the proposal so that I can make a formal decision on it at the earliest opportunity.”

There is nothing to hide in that statement, and the Planning Service has nothing to hide. I cannot understand why a new story runs every week when, in fact, there is nothing new in the story. Mr O’Loan and other Members would do well to concentrate on getting a planning application, of whatever nature, for the Giant’s Causeway visitors’ centre so that we can have world-class facilities —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mrs Foster: —at the Giant’s Causeway, which we do not have at present. That should be the main concern for Mr O’Loan and other Members.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Tree Preservation Orders

3. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the possibility of implementing automatic tree preservation orders for native trees over a certain size or age to ensure that they cannot be cut down without prior permission. (AQO 847/08)

Mrs Foster: Tree preservation orders are used to protect specific trees, groups of trees and woodlands with amenity value, where their removal would have a significant impact on the local environment and on public enjoyment.

As part of the area plan process, the Department is designating local landscape policy areas that identify areas of landscape importance in and adjacent to settlements, including areas with significant trees. Importantly, native criteria alone would exclude many of our visually significant trees with high-amenity value, such as beech, horse chestnut, lime and most pines that are not native. I have no plans to introduce automatic tree preservation orders for all native trees in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her response. In 2002, the Committee for the Environment considered strengthening tree preservation orders as part of a planning Bill that it was considering before suspension. As a result of suspension, the Bill went through Westminster as an Order in Council, and a weaker approach was taken. Will the Minister re-examine what the Committee considered then to see whether anything can be done to strengthen the Order? It is an important issue.

Mrs Foster: It is an important issue, and I am more than happy to re-examine what members of the

Committee for the Environment said at that time. The power to make tree preservation orders will be passed to local government under the review of public administration. New councils will be the appropriate bodies to deal with the matter; they can include tree preservation orders in their new local plans.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister undertake to explore the potential for green development, as exemplified by cities in Germany such as Rostock and Dresden, where housing densities are maintained at a high level to meet the legitimate demand for town and city homes, while, at the same time, integrating them with a green environment? Will she ensure that, in future, native trees and others that are almost native to this country will be included in any density planning?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to consider that suggestion. Perhaps the Member could share that information on Germany with me. Recently, I paid a nice, informative visit to Poundbury, where I saw high-density planning that deals with the issues that the Member mentioned. I would be happy to share my experience in Poundbury with him.

Mr Wells: We welcome the Minister’s commitment to strengthening the tree preservation legislation. How many tree preservation orders are there in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: In Belfast, which is the area to which the Member’s question relates, 124 tree preservation orders have been made. So far in 2007, 93 tree preservation orders have been made; in 2006, 149 tree preservation orders were made. They are a useful tool for dealing with these issues. Many of our deciduous trees are not native to Northern Ireland, and as Rev Robert Coulter said, wider consideration must be given to the trees that we deal with.

Christmas Road Safety Adverts

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the frequency with which the proposed adverts in relation to road safety will be shown on television over the Christmas period; and to indicate whether there will be a series of adverts dedicated to drink-driving. (AQO 832/08)

Mrs Foster: I will deal first with the anti-drink-drive campaign. The anti-drink-drive campaign Just One will launch tomorrow, 20 November. It will continue throughout the Christmas and new year holiday period and will end on 12 January 2008. The campaign will consist of a 60-second television advertisement; washroom posters displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants throughout Northern Ireland; radio adverts; and an electronic-message system on motorways carrying the strapline “Never, ever drink and drive”.

The Christmas and new year anti-drug-driving campaign, Smashed, will launch 1 December 2007 and continue until 13 January 2008. The campaign will consist of a 40-second television advertisement; washroom posters displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants throughout Northern Ireland; and an electronic-message system on motorways carrying the strapline "You will get smashed if you drive on drugs".

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her very positive response on how she will deal with the issue.

Will the Minister state how much will be spent on those advertisements? Will she tell the House how often they will appear on TV? Will she also tell the House whether the traffic branch of the PSNI will work in tandem with the advertising campaign to ensure that those who are under the influence of drink and drugs will be caught and taken to court?

Mrs Foster: The Department has an effective and good working relationship with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and it will continue to do so.

The Budget allocation for road-safety advertising for 2007-08 is £1.739 million. Spend on advertising over Christmas and the new year will be £242,028, of which £185,000 will be spent on anti-drink-drive television advertising; £7,000 on intervention radio; £40,000 on anti-drug-drive television advertising; and a further £10,000 will be spent on anti-drink-drive and anti-drug-drive poster advertising in pubs, clubs and restaurants.

I cannot be specific about when those advertisements will be aired. It would not be practical to provide the exact detail of when ads will be put on air; however, they will appear at peak viewing times. I know that because there has been some very good feedback on the ads that are broadcast at this time of the year.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister have any evidence about the success of the road-safety adverts? Further to that, does she know whether they are reaching their target audience?

Mrs Foster: It is difficult to measure the sole, unique contribution that any specific road-safety strategy, including advertising, makes towards reducing casualties. That is because a range of interventions and factors can have a positive, or, indeed, negative impact on road safety. However, the research that was carried out on behalf of the Department of the Environment shows that our advertising is influential in improving driver attitudes and in producing positive changes in behaviour.

Mr Cree: Given the persistence of road deaths, is the Minister minded to introduce any new regulations on blood-alcohol levels or any other measures that will deal with driver impairment or fitness to be in control of a vehicle?

Mrs Foster: I told the House at the previous Question Time that I attended that the limit in Northern Ireland is currently 80mg of alcohol for each 100ml of blood. Most other European countries have a limit of 50mg for each 100ml of blood, and some have a limit as low as 20mg for each 100ml of blood.

The Department is considering the issue in the ongoing road-safety review. Clearly, I want to bring that review to a conclusion as quickly as I can, and I hope to be able to say something about it early in the new year. However, just because a review is going on does not mean that we are not actively considering what we can do now. That is the reason why we are considering the drink-drive limit and are hoping to come to the House with something more on it in the near future.

3.15 pm

Review of Public Administration

5. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the opportunities for stakeholder views to be taken on board, prior to conclusions being reached, in relation to the review of the decisions of the review of public administration on the functions that will be transferred to councils. (AQO 834/08)

Mrs Foster: As I said in response to the Member's question on 22 October, my ministerial colleagues and I are committed to working in partnership with local government, business and the community and voluntary sectors to prepare for, and deliver, the change that will achieve the strong, effective and efficient local government that we all want. Following the publication on 19 October of the emerging findings of the review of the RPA decisions, as they relate to local government, a major stakeholder event was held in Cookstown on 25 October and attended by over 120 delegates.

Additionally, in response to earlier representations and to ensure that as many stakeholder representatives as possible would have the opportunity to discuss and share their views on the emerging findings in a focused forum, four subregional events were held last week in Armagh, Limavady, Omagh and Lisburn. The consultants who facilitated those events will prepare a report on the views that were expressed during the focus discussions in the breakout groups and the plenary sessions.

As I have indicated previously, stakeholders have also been invited to submit written comments on the emerging findings and initial proposals, if they feel that that is appropriate. The views expressed at the stakeholder events, in any written responses and in last Tuesday's Assembly debate — and those that I receive from the Environment Committee — will all inform the discussions in the Executive subcommittee and any bilateral meetings that I have with ministerial colleagues.

The Department wants to ensure that those views are fully and carefully considered as the thinking on the three strands is drawn together before final recommendations are made to the Executive.

Mr Weir: In regard to a timetable for the review, how confident is the Minister that the Executive will be able to announce a final decision in January 2008?

Mrs Foster: We are very much aware of the timetable. I said that I wanted the review to be tight for a number of reasons, not least due to the uncertainty for the staff who work in local government — we must all be mindful of them. There has been a slight delay, but I aim to conclude the review and report to the Executive before the end of January. I want to make a statement to the Assembly as early as possible — hopefully in February.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she guarantee that additional money and adequate resources will be made available to the new councils established under the RPA?

Mrs Foster: The money, resources and functions for the new councils have not been finalised. I listened carefully to the debate last week in the Assembly; some good and considered views were put forward. Bilateral meetings with my ministerial colleagues begin tomorrow, and we will be considering the functions that we believe must be looked at again. Members must approach this in a creative and innovative way, because our colleagues in local government — many Members have served in local government, and continue to do so — were the only elected representatives in Northern Ireland, apart from our MPs, during 35 years of trouble. Those people provided a democratic voice for many of us, and I want to acknowledge what they did in the past and look to the future and a strong local government for them.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that one of the best measures of the potency and credibility of local government is the overall budget that it controls? If so, does the Minister accept that there is a gaping disparity between Northern Ireland and England in overall budgets given to local government, and can she estimate the increase in the percentage spend for each of the powers being considered for devolution to local councils under the emerging findings document?

Mrs Foster: We do not need to do what they do in England, we need to do what is right for the people of Northern Ireland — Members should be cognisant of that. When the first review of public administration was carried out — the report of which was published in late 2005 — there was no functioning devolved Administration. We have to deal with the context of where we are now. Local councils, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), the National Association of Councillors (NAC) and all the other stakeholders know that the Department must work in the current context, and they are very supportive.

Members must decide what is right for Northern Ireland now and, instead of focusing on budgets, find the right way to deliver services so that they make a difference to people.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

6. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on proposals for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQO 852/08)

Mrs Foster: My Department has received only one planning application for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. Since my press release of 10 September 2007 on the matter, my officials have been engaged in discussions with the key local stakeholders and in giving further consideration to various aspects of the proposal. When that process has been completed, I will make a formal decision on the planning application.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her answer. She has already said that nothing new is emerging about the visitors' centre, but last week, I — along with others — was concerned to learn that a private investor might benefit from a major grant from the public purse. Can the Minister assure the House that any planning permission will not endanger the Giant's Causeway's status as a world heritage site?

Mrs Foster: That is one of the key issues surrounding any planning application that comes before me in relation to the Giant's Causeway. As Mr Neeson is aware, the Giant's Causeway is our only world heritage site. There are only three natural world heritage sites in the United Kingdom, and I had the opportunity to visit one recently — the Jurassic Coast along the Dorset and east Devon coastline. It was an informative visit. The third natural site is St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides: I do not know whether the Committee for the Environment wants to accompany me to the Outer Hebrides.

I am aware of the world heritage site designation, and I am in correspondence with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in relation to it. The Giant's Causeway's visitors' centre is a member state issue, and that Department is the body through which we speak to UNESCO, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister colour in for the House who are the key local stakeholders with whom her officials are engaged? What aspects of the proposals are under discussion? Can she also clarify how a planning Minister — whose policy function, we are told, strictly relates to land use and not to any other policy area — somehow appears to be the lead Minister on a significant aspect of a region's tourism portfolio and the important tourist development that all Members want to see there?

Mrs Foster: I do not know how many questions the Member has asked, Mr Speaker, but I will attempt to answer them. I have already mentioned my statement of 10 September 2007 in which I said that I asked my officials to engage with the developer and key local stakeholders.

Mr Durkan's first question queried who the key local stakeholders are. They are the National Trust and Moyle District Council, and I gave an undertaking that we would have meetings with them. If the Member is interested, I can share with him information about the discussions between the Planning Service and the two local stakeholders. His colleague Mr O'Loan said that the Planning Service is acting as my postman with regard to details on the Giant's Causeway site — or did he say that it was acting as Seymour Sweeney's postman? I am trying to get the issue brought to a head. We have sat, paralysed, for seven years, unable to do anything about the world heritage site.

Mr Durkan says that the matter is the responsibility of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. With respect to the Member, when I have a planning application before me, I will deal with it. I will not be told what to do by the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; I will do what is right for the planning application that is before me.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ciúnas, le bhur dtoil. According to a BBC report last week, the Minister has asked her departmental legal advisers to examine statements that I made on the Giant's Causeway site. Will the Minister confirm whether she will use her Department to take legal action against me, and, if not, will she recognise that the role of departmental legal advisers is not to take part in political witch-hunts against Members of the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that the Minister may not be willing to answer that supplementary question. I advise the House that there are complications for the Minister in answering the question. I advise the House to be aware of that issue.

Mrs Foster: There is a hymn in the Church of Ireland hymn book called 'Tell Me the Old, Old Story'. I know that the Member is not an Anglican, but I am happy to give him the hymn reference number and he can look it up. Frankly, every time I come to the House, he asks the same question.

I am seeking legal advice on his statement of 8 November and, therefore, I will not make any further comment. I am sure that the Member will be hearing from either me or the Departmental Solicitor's Office in the near future.

Review of Public Administration

7. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the progress that has been made in relation to (a) the number of councils; and (b) the system of governance within the proposed new councils, in light of the decisions of the review of public administration.

(AQO 837/08)

Mrs Foster: Discussions are continuing in relation to the number of councils and configuration that can best deliver our vision for local government. The issues are complex and require the most careful consideration, and there is a considerable volume of material and commissioned research to inform the discussions. While there is a need for, and benefits to be drawn from, reducing some of the existing diversity between councils, at the same time, there is a need for that to be balanced by creating councils of a scale that promotes the abilities of communities to identify and interact with local councils.

One of the decisions of the previous RPA process was that a system of council governance, with appropriate checks and balances, would be developed and placed on statute. The Executive subcommittee remains committed to that position, and believes that if everyone is to have confidence in the new councils, there must be a statutory system of safeguards. The proposals for the system of governance in the new councils will best be informed by the decisions on the number of councils and the functions to be transferred to local government flowing from the current review. The development and testing of detailed governance models will, therefore, be taken forward as part of the implementation programme to deliver the changes to local government.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of concerns that minorities have — particularly unionist minorities on nationalist-controlled councils — given their harsh experiences in some instances, irrespective of any token appointments that may be made in those councils, and the need for governance arrangements to be put in place that would deal with very partisan and discriminatory practices that occur from time to time.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his point. He will know, as he was in the House when the issue was raised during the Assembly debate last week, that governance is mentioned in paragraph 49 of the emerging findings paper. I was disappointed last week when some Members across the Floor thought that it was funny when we were talking about unionists in the west, but did not think that it was very funny when we were talking about nationalists and republicans in the east. Equality — if it is to mean anything in governance — is for everyone in Northern Ireland. It should not be seen as a threat to anyone. I hope that it will not be a controversial issue in the RPA.

Training for Driving Examiners

8. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she is taking to ensure that driving examiners are trained in sufficient numbers; and are available within reasonable distance, to facilitate the needs of learner drivers with disabilities. (AQO 805/08)

Mrs Foster: All driving examiners are trained to an approved UK standard prior to conducting driving tests. The testing of disabled candidates is included as an integral part of their overall training. As such, all 74 driving examiners provide the service at 16 of the Department's 17 test centres. The Mallusk centre does not conduct driving tests, as it deals exclusively with vehicle tests.

I had useful meetings recently with two of the approved driving instructors associations, where we exchanged ideas and discussed, among other things, changes to the driving test process. The Department for Transport in Great Britain is considering improvements to the driving test, and my officials are liaising with their counterparts in GB to consider whether those proposals can be brought to Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member be brief, as the time for questions to the Minister of the Environment is almost up?

Mr Dallat: My supplementary question relates specifically to people with disabilities who are not facilitated in all the driving test centres. For example, anyone living in Coleraine has to travel to Derry, and that is three hours out of a working day and causes additional costs. Will the Minister ensure that people with disabilities are treated equally everywhere?

Mrs Foster: That is news to me. I will look into the matter immediately.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

STEM Subjects

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he was taking to increase the uptake of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, as referred to in PSA 2, Objective 4 of Annex 1 to the Draft Programme for Government 2008-11. (AQO 863/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The draft Programme for Government identifies economic growth as the Executive's top priority over the next three years. The objective is

to develop a dynamic, innovative, modern economy that can hold its own in a fiercely competitive world. In order to make the transition to a knowledge-based economy, we need a good supply of appropriately trained and skilled people.

The decline in the number of students who opt to take science-related subjects at an early age is a matter of concern. That is why my Department is fully engaged in the work that is being led by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to review the position on science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, and to produce a strategy for their development through schools and further-education colleges. That work will identify progression routes to higher education and employment, and will emphasise links to wider economy's skills and innovation needs.

I am pleased to say that we are not alone in tackling that issue. The private sector has recognised that it has a role to play, not only in highlighting businesses' future workforce needs but in being part of the solution. I look forward to the outcome of next year's review and to contributing to the formulation of the new strategy.

Mr Lunn: As part of its remit to promote foreign direct investment, what role will Invest Northern Ireland play in the promotion of STEM subjects?

Mr Dodds: Invest Northern Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have roles to play in that area. A senior DETI official is leading the Government stream of the STEM review, which is tasked with ensuring the coherence of Government policy in promoting STEM subjects in society and in defining the links between STEM subjects and schools, further-education colleges and the Executive's skills and innovation strategies. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI are working on a new regional innovation strategy action plan, in which the promotion of STEM subjects is a key objective.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answers. He has touched on a subject that is close to my heart. Does the Minister have any plans to liaise with his fellow Ministers in the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education in order to encourage entrepreneurial awareness in schools and further-education colleges?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the Member's question, and I am aware of his interest in that area. It is important for parents and schools that we place greater emphasis on those subjects. As I said in my reply to the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Lunn, my Department is fully engaged with the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education and is liaising with them in their work to review the position on STEM subjects and to produce a strategy.

Mr S Wilson: When the Minister of Education was asked earlier about the promotion of STEM subjects in schools in Northern Ireland, she indicated that, in the draft Programme for Government, her Department envisaged a 5% increase in spending on STEM subjects, even though there had been a 31% decrease in spending in the past 10 years. Given the low target that the Minister of Education has set for her Department — about which she seems to be pleased — is the Minister happy that there will be sufficient investment in those subjects in order to ensure that industry's future needs will be met by school-leavers?

Mr Dodds: The Member referred to what the Minister of Education said, and I am sure that he is aware that PSA 2, objective 4 in annex 1 to the draft Programme for Government aims to increase skills and careers choices in STEM subjects.

As he mentioned, the proposal is to increase by 5% the number of people studying those subjects.

Those are minimum standards; the public service agreements and the objectives set out in the Programme for Government set minimums, not maximums. We aspire to greater increases in all those areas. The outcome of the current review, which is being carried out with the involvement of the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education and my Department, will lead to outcomes that will encourage increasing numbers of people to take up those subjects and carry them through secondary school and into further and higher education.

Start a Business Programme

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the Start a Business programme and its contribution to encouraging enterprise. (AQO 884/08)

Mr Dodds: Since the launch of the Start a Business programme in September 2001, 44,000 individuals have accessed some elements of the training that it offers, and 17,000 people have completed the full programme and started their own business. That has resulted in the creation of approximately 22,000 new jobs — something that is important to emphasise in the context of the discussion about foreign direct investment.

Seventy-eight per cent of the businesses started are still trading three years after they received the initial support, and that compares favourably to the UK average, which is 73%.

Those impressive statistics demonstrate the considerable contribution that the programme has made to encouraging enterprise across Northern Ireland. Its value has been further endorsed by a recent independent evaluation.

The evaluation recommended that, given the need to raise the overall level of entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland, a business start-up programme should continue to be available to all. However, despite the considerable success of the current programme, the evaluation concluded that improvements can be made to deliver even greater value for money and provide a more flexible support package for the client. It is envisaged that a revised programme that takes into account the review's recommendations will be launched in the autumn of 2008.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am impressed by the number of people who have been through the scheme. It is vital for Northern Ireland. In towns in my constituency, such as Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, the programme has been deemed very successful. However, is the Department running down the Start a Business programme in anticipation of transferring the matter to local government as part of the review of public administration (RPA)? How will the Minister ensure that the enterprise agencies and Enterprise Northern Ireland will continue to play a role in any RPA process?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his remarks. The programme is a very positive one, and I assure the Member that it is not being run down. He is right to point out that we envisage transferring the programme to local councils. In the context of the discussion on the RPA, I am happy to say that this is one area that can, perhaps, be more appropriately dealt with at that level.

I assure the Member that under no circumstances is it envisaged that whenever that transfer takes place the programme will be run down at all.

Mr Beggs mentioned also the role of Enterprise Northern Ireland. He will be aware that any future roll out will have to be tendered for through the normal processes. However, it is right to take the opportunity to say that the programme has been very successful. The review and evaluation will introduce, from the autumn of 2008, a better, more flexible programme, which will increase value for money all round.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for the information that he has provided. Does he agree that the positive impact of the Start a Business programme reflects great credit on the local enterprise agencies that have done so much — often under difficult, uncertain and changing budgetary circumstances? Will the Minister underline the assurance that any future devolution of the programme through the RPA will not mean its demotion? Many people fear that INI gives the impression of already having withdrawn psychologically from the areas of social-economy activity and local enterprise.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, for his contribution. I reiterate the point that, as regards

business start-ups, for obvious and topical reasons, there is much discussion and emphasis on foreign, direct investment.

My Department and I put enormous emphasis on local indigenous companies. They must be a major part of our focus, as are business start-ups.

In the Member's constituency of Foyle, there were 146 business start-ups per 10,000 of the adult population, which compares well to the 113 in Northern Ireland as a whole. That figure does not take account of FDI, but it shows the level of activity.

I assure the Member that as far as my Department is concerned, there is no withdrawal from the social economy. I have had meetings with a number of groups, including the Social Economy Network (Northern Ireland) Ltd and Enterprise Northern Ireland. I listened carefully to what they said, and I am aware of the enormous contribution that they make.

The Department's role and a future strategy are being considered. However, there is no intention to change the current position regarding business start-ups.

Mr Simpson: Will the Minister outline some of the recommendations from the evaluation of the Start a Business programme that will be included in the revised programme?

Mr Dodds: Several recommendations will be incorporated into the new programme. The idea is to make it more relevant to the needs of entrepreneurs and more flexible, and to produce greater value for money. Part of that entails ensuring that potential entrepreneurs can access only those elements of the support package that are appropriate for them, instead of having to take the entire package. Additional resources will be skewed to those start-ups with growth potential, and an initial online diagnostic tool will be used to differentiate appropriate levels of support for each client.

Members will be aware that the universal grant element — which currently stands at £400 per start-up — will be withdrawn and reinvested in training and mentoring to make better use of the available resources. Some 84% of participants who were surveyed for the evaluation stated that they would have completed the programme and started their businesses even if no grant had been offered. Money saved through the withdrawal of that grant will be reinvested for enhanced mentoring, more training courses and better online resources. That will improve all aspects of the programme.

Belfast City Hall/Ulster Museum

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail whether or not his Department had carried out a study to assess the long-term effect of the closure of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum on tourism in Belfast, and in particular, on visitors' impression of the city. (AQO 881/08)

Mr Dodds: Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum are important to tourism in Belfast. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board have met all relevant organisations to discuss what can be done during the periods of closure. However, the marketing and promotion of Belfast, including the provision of visitors' services, is the responsibility of Belfast City Council and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB).

Although no study has been carried out by my Department, next year's tourism monitor survey, which will be conducted by Belfast City Council, will include questions aimed at gauging visitors' impressions about the closure of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum.

While the City Hall is being refurbished, the Waterfront Hall, Malone House and Belfast Castle will be available for functions, ranging from small-scale events to conferences. The grounds of the City Hall will remain open for visitors and events — as I am sure Members are aware — including the popular Continental Christmas Market and the new attraction, the Belfast Big Wheel.

National museums have put in place a significant outreach programme that is designed to continue engagement with existing museum audiences by taking artefacts to the people. In addition, a full marketing and communication plan has been in operation since the Ulster Museum closed. That has included TV and radio coverage and the distribution of over 160,000 events and exhibition booklets.

Belfast City Council and the BVCB have undertaken to encourage tourists to visit Belfast by considering opening out of season or extending their opening times so that visitors can still find plenty to do in the city. There are also additional places to visit in Belfast because of the new attractions. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board also continues to support the Belfast Welcome Centre and the information desks at two local airports that welcome people as they arrive in Northern Ireland.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Given the success of the World Rally Championship last week, can more be done to promote the Stormont Estate — for example, by providing tour operators for the general public?

3.45 pm

Mr Dodds: The Member raises an interesting point. All of us who attend the Assembly on a frequent basis will be aware that both Parliament Buildings and the grounds are already popular places to visit. The exposure that this place gets on TV and radio encourages people to visit. Perhaps not all the visitors come to look at the Building: some come to look at the inhabitants of the Building as well, and come away with mixed views.

The Member's question is obviously a matter for the Assembly authorities and, in particular, the Assembly Commission, which is in charge of the use of the Building. The Commission will be aware of what the Member has said, and I will ensure that his comments are relayed to the appropriate authorities.

Ms Lo: Earlier, the Minister mentioned the Belfast Wheel. Is there any plan to keep the wheel as a permanent feature? It is very popular, as he said.

Mr Durkan: Go round in circles on it.

Mr Dodds: As the Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has said, I should avoid the temptation to go round in circles in answering this question.

The question as to whether the Belfast Wheel remains as a permanent fixture is a matter that lies outside my Department's remit. It is for others to decide — I am sure that Belfast City Council has a view on it. The Member is right to point out that it is already a very popular attraction. There is much talk of innovation and imagination: this is a good example of what these qualities, applied to the tourist industry, can bring. I am in favour of the use of the grounds of Belfast City Hall for this type of activity. The Christmas market, which I mentioned earlier, has also proved to be very popular. There is clear evidence that people are coming into Belfast primarily because of these new attractions. Obviously, that is to be welcomed.

Mr McCausland: Does the Minister agree with me that when Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum reopen in 2009, they will greatly enhance the tourist potential not only of Belfast but of the rest of Northern Ireland, as Belfast is both the capital city and the gateway to Northern Ireland for tourists?

Mr Dodds: The Member shares with me a vested interest in ensuring that the City Hall, when reopened, looks even better than ever. He is right to point out that Belfast is a major player in the tourism market. Northern Ireland Tourist Board statistics show that, last year, 793,000 visitors and domestic holidaymakers stayed at least one night in the Belfast City Council area, and that there were 5.6 million day trips to Belfast in 2006. The other day, I noticed a survey in the newspapers which ranked Belfast second only to London as a destination for weekends away and short city breaks. Combined with the 'Lonely Planet' description of Northern Ireland as a must-see destination for 2007, that shows the enormous potential that exists for growth of tourism from an already promising position to something that will drive the economy forward.

The Member has mentioned the closures of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum; both reopen in 2009. As he knows, in that year we will welcome back to Northern Ireland the Tall Ships. In 1991, the arrival of that tremendous attraction provided an enormous boost to Northern Ireland. It is regrettable that both the City Hall and the museum are closed at the one time. Unfortun-

ately, work had to be carried out to both buildings for health and safety and other reasons. However, when they reopen in 2009, they will provide an enhanced visitor experience for those who come to our city and to the Province.

Women in Business

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what his plans were to encourage more women to become involved in business in Northern Ireland. (AQO 836/08)

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he was taking to encourage more women to become involved in setting up their own business. (AQO 818/08)

Mr Dodds: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 6 together.

Invest Northern Ireland is committed to increasing the level of female entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland. The agency's Go For It campaign, its enterprise and education programmes and the Investing in Women programme all seek to encourage more women in Northern Ireland to start businesses or grow their existing businesses.

Investing in Women provides awareness programmes, role model promotion and sponsorship of conferences and events, in which more 4,000 women a year are engaged. Additionally, a further 16,000 young women are involved in various enterprise and education programmes. The women's enterprise taskforce was announced in February 2007 by Margaret Hodge, the then Minister of State for Industry and the Regions. The taskforce aims to increase the quality and quantity of women's enterprise across the UK over a three-year period.

Northern Ireland is represented on the taskforce by the vice chairperson of Invest Northern Ireland. Over the period 2002-07, the proportion of female-driven start-up businesses supported by Invest Northern Ireland's Start a Business Programme, to which we have just referred, increased from 35% to 47%, which is very encouraging, as I am sure Members will agree.

Miss McIlveen: I am encouraged by the trends that the Minister outlined. Will he give us an assurance that further research will be carried out to ensure that we build on progress? Furthermore, has he plans to transfer the Investing in Women initiative to the new councils under RPA?

Mr Dodds: I am happy to confirm that the Department proposes to transfer both the initiative and the budget associated with it to the new councils, as Members who are involved in local government will be glad to hear. It is an important programme that focuses on supporting women starting businesses that operate

primarily in the local market. Therefore, it is entirely correct and appropriate that that should transfer to the remit of local authorities. The Department continues to engage in research into female entrepreneurship. There has been and continues to be research into how women who are already in established businesses may develop their businesses further. I have been encouraged by the increase in the number of women who are starting up businesses; this must be promoted even more in the future.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his reply, which addresses an important issue. Northern Ireland is eleventh in 12 United Kingdom regions where women are involved in early-stage entrepreneurial activity, and we must improve on that. With that in mind, is the Minister satisfied that enough is being done in schools to ensure that teachers have the knowledge to talk to children about becoming involved in the business world? I realise that that is a cross-cutting matter.

Mr Dodds: The Member has touched on an issue that we discussed earlier in Question Time in relation to STEM subjects. The matter is cross-cutting in the sense that career advice and the encouragement of entrepreneurship in schools is primarily a matter for the Department of Education; however, it is cross-cutting as it impinges on the work of the Department for Employment and Learning and of my Department.

We must give careers advice in schools — for which a new strategy is being devised — much greater emphasis than heretofore; we need to invest in up-to-date information and proper research for careers guidance. If we do not, we will fail our children; stereotypes will continue, and kids will go into professions and follow courses because of tradition. We must present them with the opportunities of the global economy. Those who encourage women into business or who encourage people into science, technology, engineering and maths, for example, must make clear the tremendous opportunities available in business and entrepreneurial activity.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers to both questions, which are encouraging to women. Given that the Minister has accepted that women are under-represented in business, has he or have his officials had discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that women are offered the correct courses so that they are better equipped to set up their own businesses?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for her comments. I assure her that my Department works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning. In general, it is vital that my Department has a good relationship with that Department on skills and so on. I will certainly ensure that the areas to which the Member referred will continue to be explored with the Department for

Employment and Learning. She is correct to put emphasis on that and can be assured of my support for it.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister tell the House how many women were in receipt of grants to help with business start-ups during the previous financial year? Will he indicate whether he has met with the Women in Business network recently? They are concerned about their ability to tender for public procurement.

Mr Dodds: I assure the Member that I will provide the specific information that she has requested for the previous financial year as soon as possible. I will write to her and will, obviously, share that information with the House. I have met several people with regard to the general issue that the Member has raised and I am aware of the concerns that exist. She can be assured that the Department is examining the issue. I will write to her with the information that she requests.

New and Emerging Markets

5. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he had to identify new and emerging markets for indigenous business.

(AQO 861/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest NI focuses actively on developing business opportunities for local companies in new and emerging high-growth markets. During the current financial year, Invest NI expects to assist 200 companies to explore export markets for the first time and a further 400 companies to explore markets that are new to them.

Invest NI puts particular emphasis on high-potential new and emerging markets, such as India, China and the Arabian Gulf states. Two trade missions, involving 32 companies, visited India in 2007. Companies that have enjoyed success there include Telestack International Ltd and CDE Ireland. In addition, Invest NI now has a permanent presence in Mumbai, India, in order to seek new trade and investment opportunities.

Invest NI also supported 30 company representatives to visit China in May 2007. That visit will be followed up later in November when Invest NI will take 40 local companies to China — the UK's largest mission to that market in 2007. The agency has opened an office in Shanghai to further exploit the potential that the Chinese market presents for Northern Ireland companies. Delta Print and Packaging Ltd and Wrightbus Ltd are examples of local companies that have secured substantial new business in China already.

In November, Invest NI will publish its 2008 trade events programme, part of which is the agency's plan to take Northern Ireland companies to trade fairs and on missions to countries as diverse as China, India, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, Thailand and the USA. In 2008, it

will facilitate over 50 market visits, many of which will be to new and emerging markets.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer to my question. Earlier, he said that although FDI gets a lot of attention, he does not overlook indigenous business. What is the Minister's view on the balance in Invest NI's current strategy between the promotion of FDI and the promotion of emerging markets for indigenous business? Will he set job creation targets for indigenous business, such as those that have been set for job creation in the FDI sector?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for her question. She may wish to stay in the Chamber for the remainder of the debate on the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, during which I am sure that the matter will be explored in more detail.

I am apprised of the essential need for balance between those matters. That has already been discussed. However, with regard to the assistance that has been offered during the past five years from 2002-03 to 2006-07, Invest NI's contribution to indigenous companies was 54% and to international companies 46%.

When the enormous work that has been done on business start-ups is added to that, it shows that while it is easy to put all of the focus on FDI — and it is important that we do attract FDI and that targets are set for that, because every economy in the world is doing so — we must not lose focus on the important role of ensuring that more new local companies are created and that our small and medium-sized companies are encouraged to grow and export more.

In that regard, we are setting targets: 45 brand new companies to begin exporting globally in the period up to 2011; 300 to begin exporting outside Northern Ireland; and in the same period, between 2008 and 2011, 600 existing companies to begin exporting for the first time. Those are challenging and hard targets, but I am determined that we should try to meet them. That is on the indigenous front, not leaving aside FDI.

4.00 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time for today.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to raise a point of order that was deferred until after Question Time. Earlier, you said that Members should ensure that their supplementary questions relate to their original question. Despite the fact that you reminded Members of that instruction, others continued to make statements that had nothing to do with the question that was laid down. May we please have a ruling on that issue?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for her point of order. I have made it clear many times that, as far as possible, supplementary questions should relate to the original question. I have gone as far as to rule Members

out of order, which has resulted in their not being heard. Once again, I say to Members on all sides of the House that it is vitally important that supplementary questions — as far as possible — should relate to the original question.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today you made a ruling on the subject of parliamentary language. Will you also make a ruling on the use of the term "the North of Ireland"? It is confusing when a Minister, who represents the Executive, uses the term "North of Ireland". In my estimation, that refers to Malin Head and nowhere in Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, will you make a decision on the Minister of Education's continual use of the first name of a Member of the House? It is part of parliamentary procedure that a Member should be referred to by constituency. While the Members on the opposite side of the Chamber try to give the impression that a love-in is going on in the House, I assure you that I would prefer that they referred to Members by parliamentary constituency rather than by their first names.

Mr Speaker: Mr Storey has raised two points of order. As regards the first point of order, unfortunately, I do not have the power to dictate how a Minister — or any Member — might ask a question in the House. On the second point of order, it is the convention that, when Ministers or Members are speaking, they refer to other Members by their surnames, and if not a surname by his or her constituency. That is a clear convention not only in this House but in another House.

Mr McCartney: If I refer to the Member for Foyle, I might be referring to any one of six Members. That would be not be clear for the Hansard report — someone could be wrongly named.

Mr Speaker: When a Member refers to other Members, whatever constituency they represent, they should be addressed as, for example, Mr Hamilton, or Mr Robert Hamilton. The Member's surname might be used — not his or her Christian name. As I have already said, that is a clear convention not only in this House but in another House as well. There are seasoned politicians in the House who know that fact, and they were learned on those issues, long before I was.

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The second member of the Robinson clan was expelled from the House earlier today.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I told Members that they should be careful about how they might address the House, and about how and why they might address the House. The Member should be careful about how he starts his point of order.

Mr K Robinson: Further to that point of order, and the admonishment from the Chair, Mr Speaker. I have been expelled from the House on a previous occasion.

Having the same surname as the person who left earlier today, and considering the fact that there are several Robinsons in the House, I take it that it is in order for our Christian names to be used as a means of indicating which Robinson is being called?

Mr Speaker: I am not too sure whether that is a point of order. Certainly, when I call any of the Robinsons, I call the Member by his or her first name: Mr Peter Robinson; Mr Ken Robinson; and Mrs Iris Robinson. The point of order that was raised concerned Members using Christian names only. That is wrong.

Mr K Robinson: I thank you for that clarification, Mr Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Closure of the Seagate Operation in Limavady

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the impact on the economy, particularly in the north west, of the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, with the loss of 900 jobs; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to agree a co-ordinated strategy to assist Seagate workers back into employment. — *[Mr McLaughlin.]*

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “loss” and insert

“of 1000 jobs; and calls on Invest NI to outline the measures it intends to implement to deal with a series of actual and potential job losses in the north west.” — *[Mr Campbell.]*

Mr Dallat: I hope that no one gets jilted until we have resolved the serious problems in the north-west. We must all work together to address this issue.

Such is the momentum of job losses in the Limavady area that the motion is already outdated. As well as the 900 jobs losses in Seagate, 70 jobs are to be lost at the HÜCO Lightronics plant. Furthermore, some 300 civilians are employed at the army camp in Ballykelly. The SDLP had hoped to propose an amendment to the motion, which called for the setting-up of an economic task force. That amendment was deemed not competent. However, I am pleased that a similar motion was passed by Limavady Borough Council last week, although I regret that it was not supported by the council's Sinn Féin members.

The SDLP remains convinced that it is absolutely essential to have a specific plan dedicated to the particular needs of East Derry. If we simply ask for support, or call on the indulgences of an outside body such as Invest Northern Ireland, we may as well shout until the cows come home. A hands-on approach is needed to address the particularly difficult problem that now besets the people of that area.

I believe that, sooner rather than later, an economic task force will be set up. That task force will have a time-limited work programme, and it will involve academics, particularly from the University of Ulster at Coleraine and Magee College, as well as local businesspeople, the trade unions, and community and regeneration groups. It is not rocket science. Such task forces have worked successfully in parts of the Republic that were devastated by the withdrawal of large multi-nationals. They have worked successfully in Canada and elsewhere in the world. We must believe that we can tackle this problem as a team. We must be united in our efforts rather than trying to score party political points.

The motion refers to 900 job losses, and the amendment to 1,000. It does not matter whether the figure is

900 or 1,000. Both those figures are fundamentally wrong, because those direct job losses will lead to many other jobs being indirectly displaced, particularly in the service industry. I spoke to a women's group in Limavady on Friday, and its members were concerned that those who worked in the service industry would lose their jobs. Obviously, when the main employer goes out of business, businesses that rely on that employer go out of business, too. A geographical economic analysis of where the jobs have gone in the past and where they have been lost is needed. That was promised in a response to a parliamentary question, and it is needed if we are to identify East Derry's particular problems.

The whole infrastructure in East Derry is weak. Broadband technology is not available everywhere in the constituency. Some emerging job-creation initiatives are not available there either — for example, the “live/work” concept that provides employment to people involved in architecture, IT and suchlike who live in rural areas.

The area's infrastructure is also weak, with the roads a particular problem. Dungiven has the distinction of being the most poisoned town anywhere on these islands because the promised bypass will not be built until 2015. I must, of course, mention the rail infrastructure. No capital expenditure will be spent on the Coleraine-to-Derry line until 2011.

When I was young, I remember that my father had trouble finding jobs. His steadiest employment was working on the building of the M2 motorway. Of course, that motorway has neither reached Derry nor the rest of the north-west.

The motto that is inscribed on the coat of arms that is on display in the University of Ulster's Coleraine campus reads “Build Anew”. At the conclusion of the debate, we should promise each other that collectively, we will build anew from the devastation that has occurred in the East Derry constituency and that has had an impact on that of Foyle, on Donegal, most certainly on Coleraine, and, indeed, on Mid Ulster.

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

Dr Farry: The closure of the Seagate Technology plant in Limavady has been a sobering experience for us all. In one sense, it illustrates the perils of a globalised economy. In saying that, however, we must recognise that Northern Ireland can survive and prosper only as part of such an economy. Therefore, we must appreciate the opportunities that globalisation presents and the major challenges that the mobility of capital creates. At the same time, we must appreciate the impact that those can have on communities such as Limavady.

Most of my remarks will apply to what we do in Northern Ireland as a whole. The implications of and the lessons that can be learned from the Seagate experience

apply to our entire economy, and they will affect how we proceed in the coming years.

However, before doing that, it is important to reflect on the impact that the closure will have on a particular community in the north-west of Northern Ireland. In the long term, it is important that we treat the Northern Ireland economy as a single entity and ensure that investment and new economic opportunities are secured in the areas in which they can bring most prosperity. In the short term, however, we must be conscious of the impact that those job losses will have on that particular community and of all the consequent difficulties that may arise in the social fabric of the area.

In general, we must be conscious of what the situation means for the Assembly's overall economic strategy and for the work of the Executive. Indeed, my party has some reservations about that. As a region, Northern Ireland is dependent on the UK economy as a whole. Despite the Labour Government's worthy and often-spoken words about an active regional policy — words that often came from the Conservative Government as well — the fact is that growth in the UK economy is based around what happens in London and the south-east. All the other UK regions, including Northern Ireland, are left in a dependency culture. Nothing is done to upset the apple cart by giving those regions the ability and means to try to make jobs more sustainable. As a consequence, we have a large public sector and a small private sector. It is difficult to argue that we have the means to overcome that situation.

Invest Northern Ireland has, effectively, been left with a strategy of trying to attract foreign direct investment by awarding grants, thus leaving us prone to attracting only the low added-value end of the investment spectrum. As a result, we are left with jobs that are not as sustainable as they would otherwise be. The nature of inward investment into Northern Ireland can be contrasted with that in the Republic of Ireland.

We await the outcome of the Varney Review, but the indications are not very hopeful. However, it should be restated that this part of the world needs effective fiscal measures to attract a new type of investment. Short of that, along with encouraging entrepreneurship innovation, much worthy work can be done in investing in skills, which is a key element in dealing with the immediate situation. Nevertheless, those measures can have only a limited impact in the absence of a broader strategy to attract inward sustainable investment. We must examine closely the contents of the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget and ask ourselves whether they are sufficient to make the step change in the Northern Ireland economy that we all want to see or whether we should seek simply to do more of the same. Although some FDI may produce successes, the downside is that some other foreign direct investment will be lost to us.

The job losses at Seagate must be used as a clarion call for some fresh thinking about what can be done to make FDI jobs more sustainable.

4.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I thank Mr McLaughlin and Mr Brolly for tabling the motion and giving me the opportunity to provide an update on the matter of Seagate's proposed closure of its Limavady plant. I welcome the approach of all the Members who have spoken today. The debate has taken a constructive approach, and has had the common theme of ensuring that we all work together as much as possible for the benefit of the people who, sadly, have been put out of work, and for the benefit of the Limavady and north-west area in general.

I am sure that I speak for everyone when I say that the shock of the announcement is still very real. We all appreciate the anxiety and uncertainty that it has brought for the employees and their families, as well as others who indirectly rely on Seagate's Limavady operation for much of their business or income. In addition, as other Members have mentioned, the plans of HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd to cease manufacturing will release many of the 70-strong workforce in January. As has been mentioned by several Members, it has been of some, albeit limited, comfort that the timelines of the redundancies at Seagate Limavady are longer than is often the case in such situations. Therefore, there is an opportunity for Government and the community to take stock of the implications and ensure that everything possible is done to try to redress the balance and re-establish the economic potential of Limavady and the wider north-west region.

I assure the House that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning, is making strenuous efforts to minimise and, it is hoped, eradicate the negative effects of the planned closures by ensuring that those currently employed at Seagate Limavady and HÜCO are provided with all the available support and advice to ensure that they move as seamlessly as possible into new employment or self-employment opportunities. I will later return to the practical implications of that joint approach.

In addressing the motion as amended, it is useful to put on record the quantifiable economic contribution that Seagate Limavady has made over the years and, consequently, the potential impact that the closure may have on the local Northern Ireland economy. I have given the figures to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I appreciate the remarks that were made by the Committee's Chairperson about that. However, it is important to put the figures on the record of the Assembly Hansard. Moreover, it is important to realise that I outline a worst-case scenario

as I am confident that, for the reasons that I will outline later, we will be able to minimise some of the potential effects.

Seagate established its Limavady facility in 1996 to produce aluminium substrate platters that are used in the manufacture of computer hard disk drives. In the intervening 11 years, the company has invested over £120 million in capital at the facility. It has created employment for an average of 900 people each year, and that has resulted in a payment of a total of £216 million in wages and salaries over that period. In addition, many other companies, as has been identified, have benefited from Seagate's business activities in the region. For example, in the year to June 2007, the company spent £7.8 million on on-site contractors and a similar amount on products and services with other Northern Ireland-based operations. Undoubtedly, the loss of the Seagate business will be a serious blow for many of those companies and their employees.

In recent years, the annual wage bill for Seagate employees has been in the order of £22 million, excluding social security and pension payments. It is recognised that much of that income is then spent by individuals in their local communities. It is important to note that, over that period of 11 years, some £16 million has been paid back in the form of income tax, national insurance and corporation tax. When the money that Invest NI has put in is considered, all of those figures, including the return from taxation, must be taken into account.

It is important to point out that the make-up of the workforce is drawn from a wide geographical base, as many Members have acknowledged. Two hundred and sixty-one of the permanent employees — or 34% — come from Limavady.

A further 327, or 42%, come from Londonderry, and 120 temporary staff also live in the Londonderry/Limavady corridor. Unless alternative, good-quality opportunities can be found to replace those jobs, the loss of wages to the local economy will have a considerable effect, because the primary impact of the closure is across the north-west.

Other towns that are home to the remaining workforce include Coleraine, Dungiven, Claudy, Ballymoney, Portrush, Magherafelt and Strabane, although in many cases only a small number. However, it is important to consider that geographical distribution because, in one sense, it is positive: people seeking re-employment will necessarily cast their net across a wide area of the north-west.

It also means that employers new to those areas, or companies seeking to expand, will have access to a workforce that has a track record of employment with a major US company and that, with appropriate training or retraining, will be ready and eager to make

a significant contribution to the success of other organisations based in the north-west. I mention that to re-emphasise the point that has been made so often: council and constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets. Members know that from experience and by looking at the number of people who work in Belfast city centre; they do not all live in Belfast. The same applies to any council area or to any investment that Members care to mention.

Nevertheless, the news from Seagate will have a massive impact on Limavady. A significant proportion of the workforce resides there, will continue to do so and will be seeking alternative employment. To set the Seagate closure in context, I want to highlight to the House several recent investments in the north-west. Only 10 days ago, AXA Insurance announced plans to create 153 new jobs in Londonderry. Firstsource Solutions opened its second Northern Ireland operation, again in Londonderry, in November 2006 and is well on its way to employing 570 people by early 2008. Stream International plans to increase its workforce by 300 over the next two years, bringing the total number of employees to 950.

Londonderry is not alone in benefiting from such successes. Northbrook Technology, which is involved in financial technology services, will expand its presence in Strabane by a further 110 jobs in 2008, taking its total number of employees in the town to 360. That workforce will be drawn not only from Strabane but from further afield. Northbrook has done much to redefine the economy in Strabane by moving it from traditional textile-based businesses to the new economies of international tradable services.

I was pleased to attend the recent announcement of an investment by Fujitsu Services, which is a prime example of the type of investment that Invest Northern Ireland must increasingly focus on and seek to win for Northern Ireland. Fujitsu Services is a leading IT services company and part of a world-class organisation. Its £18 million investment in Northern Ireland will create 402 high-value jobs, the vast majority of which will be in the north-west, with the remainder in Belfast. Much of the investment will be in the new managed IT services centre of excellence in Londonderry.

Over the next three to four years, therefore, more than 800 new jobs for the north-west are already projected and committed to. The combined annual earning potential is in excess of £15 million. Those growth projections create a demand for employees from many disciplines, possessing a range of skills and abilities — a point to which I will return shortly. The announcements have already taken place, and many of the companies are involved in the planning and running of recruitment campaigns.

Other activities in the north-west will contribute further to the recovery of the economy. People have talked about action plans and task forces, but we already have the north-west action plan. Phase 1 of that plan has already achieved or exceeded its targets for 2003-06 for investment leveraged, the number of new jobs created and the level of interaction with new and existing businesses. It also delivered over £80 million of Invest Northern Ireland assistance that was committed to the north-west region by 31 March 2006; the original target was set at £60 million. It has also led to the establishment of the £20 million centre of excellence for intelligent systems at the University of Ulster. It is an innovative, world-class centre of excellence that I had the pleasure of opening on my first day in ministerial office. Invest Northern Ireland invested a substantial sum of £8 million in that centre.

Timber Quay, which was a £10 million speculative building project in Londonderry that was supported by Invest NI, is now the site for Fujitsu Services' foreign direct investment project. An enterprise hub consisting of 23,000 sq ft of high-specification flexible work space has been established at Skeoge Enterprise Park. I also had the pleasure of being involved in its launch.

Phase 2 of the north-west action plan was set up to build on the capital and infrastructural investments of phase 1 by focusing on joint initiatives with the councils in the north-west, under the three key themes of innovation, internationalisation and business development. Under phase 2, a number of initiatives by the five council areas in the north-west are due for completion in January 2008.

Notwithstanding those achievements, Invest Northern Ireland will continue to seek new investment opportunities across the globe. It is aware that a significant labour resource and high-specification facility will be available in the Limavady area in the near future. Invest Northern Ireland and I are keen to match the skills, accommodation, and so forth, with any potential investors, should the opportunities arise in the coming months.

Last week, I visited the United States to help to prepare for a major investment conference in May 2008. I had meetings with business colleagues and others in the political and civic world across four cities, and I was overwhelmed by the level of interest, goodwill and willingness to help that was expressed by representatives of many major companies.

There is enormous potential for Northern Ireland to build on the exceptional capabilities and work ethic of our labour force and to develop an economy that will benefit our entire current and future population. Some Members mentioned that the emphasis must be on skills, expertise and the knowledge-based economy. They pointed to the fact that that has been emphasised in the Programme for Government, the investment

strategy for Northern Ireland and the Budget for the next three years. That is absolutely right. We talk about a radical rethink and a different new approach, and when people examine the Programme for Government, they will accept that that is exactly what we are about.

In setting the targets for foreign direct investment, we talk about the promotion of new jobs, 75% of which will provide salaries above the Northern Ireland private-sector median and 2,500 of which will have salaries that will be at least 25% higher than the Northern Ireland private-sector median. The idea is to get to high-value-added jobs that will be based on the skills and knowledge of our people and that are, therefore, not as easily transferable on the grounds of labour costs. We have seen important advances in that regard, but we must emphasise that even more as we move forward.

I reiterate my earlier commitment that Invest Northern Ireland and the Department for Employment and Learning are working together, and the Minister for Employment and Learning has been here throughout the debate. We are working closely together to ensure that all possible assistance is provided to help the workforce to prepare for the new opportunities that will undoubtedly arise.

4.30 pm

I do not want to suggest that this is going to be easy or that it will be without significant challenge. I recognise that many of the instances that I mentioned earlier about new investments will not immediately read across to the existing skills that are present in the current Limavady workforce. As a result, the provision of appropriate and targeted, retraining opportunities will be a priority for the combined, cross-departmental effort.

To that end, senior officials from Invest NI and the Department for Employment and Learning have commenced interaction with Seagate management to establish a joint plan of action. The objective is to best-equip employees for the future through a co-ordinated approach in partnership with the Social Security Agency and the local further-education college. Based on an assessment of the existing and future skills needs of the workforce, employees will be given advice on employment opportunities, job search, training and education opportunities, as well as information on careers and benefit entitlement.

The Department for Employment and Learning has well-established procedures to assist those facing redundancy, which are now being put in place to match the timetable for closure and the specific needs of the workforce.

On-site services will include group sessions and job clinics through which workers can avail of one-to-one counselling and guidance, and arrangements will be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the range of

employee shift patterns and the company's production schedules, and will be timed to reflect the potential closure date of the company.

The company is committed to working closely with my Department, Invest NI and the Department for Employment and Learning to assist the workforce to the maximum degree possible. The provision of on-site facilities, targeted, time-flexible training programmes, and one-to-one assistance with self-employment guidance are all options that are being explored.

This is an opportunity for the Government, the company and the workforce to work together to assist the employees to prepare for the future in the labour market at the appropriate time, and I am satisfied that Invest NI, the Department for Employment and Learning, social services and further-education colleges are already engaged in the co-ordinated strategy called for in the motion, as amended.

For example, both Departments have already engaged with the company to identify the composition of skills profiles in the workforce and the geographical location of the employees, an issue that was raised by a number of Members. By cross-referencing that information against the known opportunities that exist in the market and the knowledge of skills best suited to our emerging economy, it will be possible to provide targeted and relevant training and advice that will be planned to meet the needs of individuals in a timely fashion. None of us in the House want to mislead, or send out any false signals, about the economic challenges presented by the closure of the Seagate and HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd operations.

Several Members have raised other issues that are relevant to the Limavady and north-west area such as road infrastructure and the future of Magilligan prison. Although the latter lies outside the remit of not just of my Department but of the Assembly, I will ensure that the remarks made by Mr Campbell and other Members from the area are brought to the attention of the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office.

I assure Members that Invest NI will continue to put resources into the north-west. It is important to note that the north-west received £513 of Invest NI assistance per head of adult population in the last five years, compared to £439 for Northern Ireland as a whole; and £2,328 planned investment per head of population in total, as against £1,912 for Northern Ireland.

When all of the issues and facts are looked at it is important that we work together. Nothing can be gained by putting up false arguments about what people are doing, or attempting to do. We must continue with the approach that we have seen evidence of in the House already, which is one of working together as elected representatives with local government, the local Chamber of Commerce, the local workforce, Invest NI, and the

Department for Employment and Learning to do our very best for the workforce, recognising that what we have in the north-west is an opportunity to build on what are very positive advances thus far.

However, there is still much more to do; that is the challenge for me, for Invest NI, for the Assembly, which all of us can work together to accomplish for the people of the north-west.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the Minister and commend his proactive commitment to the north-west and the Limavady area where I come from. I also commend Sir Reg Empey for his proactive approach. It was good to hear the unanimous support for the people of Limavady and East Londonderry; I am sure that they will be grateful to know that there is such support for them in the Chamber. I also welcome the acceptance of the DUP amendment by the proposer of the motion.

There were many of useful contributions: the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan; the Member for North Down Mr Cree; the Member for East Antrim Mr Neeson; the Member for East Londonderry Mr McQuillan; the Member for Foyle Mr McCartney; the Member for South Antrim Mr T Clarke; the Member for East Londonderry Mr McClarty; the Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat; and the Member for North Down Dr Farry. All those Members made a valuable contribution to the debate, but I only have five minutes so I will not go through each one.

However, I take exception to what Mr Dallat said: I brought two proposals to Limavady Borough Council, one in support of the retention of HMP Magilligan, and the other regarding the site of the policing college. Unfortunately, Mr Dallat's colleagues, along with Sinn Féin, did not support them.

All Members appreciate that the loss of the largest employer in any area will have devastating consequences for its economy. People are already worrying about their mortgages, providing for their families, and how to gain new employment in an area where job losses — not gains — have characterised the past few years. In Coleraine, 400 jobs were lost at the Farm Fed Chickens processing plant; the AVX factory has a much reduced workforce compared to a few years ago; and there has been a steady drip of job losses from County Hall. Limavady has lost Ministry of Defence jobs due to the forthcoming closure of Shackleton Barracks, and last Thursday another 70 jobs were lost with the closure of HÜCO Lightronics. The Daintyfit clothing factory has been closed for several years.

The bright lights for those two council areas were the Seagate operation and HMP Magilligan. Now the largest of those employers, Seagate, is relocating to another country leaving an employment and economic crisis in its wake. I am also aware that the closure has ramifications beyond my East Londonderry constituency —

North Antrim, Foyle and Mid Ulster will also feel the effects of the closure. However, the major impact will be felt in East Londonderry, Limavady and Coleraine.

It is essential that Invest NI urgently draws up a strategy for the area's employment and economic future to deal with the aftermath of such an announcement. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has publicly given me a commitment to assist in any way possible to support new employment in the area. I thank him and the First Minister for visiting Seagate on the day that the closure announcement was made — we called it black Monday. That enabled the workforce and the people of the area to see that — in the aftermath of the announcement — there was genuine concern and a concrete determination to address the resulting problems. That has also been demonstrated in the Chamber today.

I want Invest NI to make a strenuous, determined and urgent effort to locate new businesses in East Londonderry. There are many reasons for locating a business there: there is an efficient road network, even if it does need major upgrading; Eglinton airport is an underused asset in the import and export of raw materials and finished products; and there is a proven, hard-working, well-trained and willing workforce at the ready. I appreciate that training, or retraining, may be required, but I am sure that the Minister for Employment and Learning will put the means for that to happen in place. He has referred to that today.

Given that we have some of the most spectacular coastal scenery in the world, there is huge potential to develop and extend the area's tourism industry.

Northern Ireland is renowned for its small, specialist firms that produce quality products for niche markets. Therefore, we must encourage our entrepreneurs to supply such small units. I firmly believe that Seagate Technology should hand over its factory site — free of charge — to DETI (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment) or to the local council so that the facility can be utilised for such a purpose. I appeal for that to happen. The vast Shackleton Barracks site will also be vacant soon, and it should be signed over to DETI or the local council — also free of charge — following vacation by the Ministry of Defence. That would also be an ideal site for small industry or tourism projects, or even for the proposed new policing college.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Francie Brolly to make his winding-up speech.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the attendance of Minister Dodds and Minister Empey at the debate. I support the motion and the amendment.

The motion, which was moved by my colleague a Member for South Antrim, was tabled immediately after the announcement of the closure of Seagate Technology.

The motion reflected both our concern at the announcement and the need for urgent action. I am happy to say that those views are shared by all the Members who contributed to the debate. Mitchel McLaughlin, rightly, was brief in his comment on the looming closure of Seagate Technology. However, he asked what steps Invest Northern Ireland might have taken to prevent the closure or to attract a new tenant. He also asked whether Invest Northern Ireland will try to recoup as much of Seagate Technology's grant aid as possible. The Minister put that question into context for the House.

Mr Campbell was critical of Invest Northern Ireland's apparent reluctance to invest in the East Derry constituency. He detailed accurately what could be described as the culture of neglect that that area has endured over the past five years. Mr Durkan welcomed the Department's assurances that it will do all that it can to redress the huge loss that the impending closure will mean, not only for the employees, but for the economy of the north-west. He reiterated Mitchel McLaughlin's comment that hope for the future lies in the fact that it is an excellent plant and that a well-trained and disciplined workforce is immediately available.

Mr Cree offered his sympathy and best wishes to those who are set to become unemployed, and he declared his support for the motion and the amendment. Mr McQuillan — a Member for East Derry — shared his thoughts on the neglect of the constituency and suggested that the relevant Departments and agencies might turn their backs on Belfast and look west now and again, especially towards East Derry. Mr McCartney, who is a Member for Foyle — I have to be careful how I describe the Members — raised the question of Seagate's ownership of the Aghanloo plant. That is a valuable property that is set in 17 acres of land. He advised that we should begin negotiations immediately to persuade Seagate to return the factory to the community. Such a gesture would not be unwarranted, and it would help us in our efforts to attract a new manufacturer.

David McClarty, who is another Member for the constituency, referred to the fundamental reason for the departure of Seagate Technology: lower labour costs. The significant cost difference in this case is best illustrated by considering that manufacturing the company's product in Malaysia will cost 60 cents less for each item.

As well as referring to the closure of Seagate Technology, John Dallat — another Member for East Derry — mentioned the loss of HÜCO Lightronic NI Ltd and the closure of Ballykelly Army camp, which provides a significant economic spin-off for the village and the wider region. He did not mention the fear of a recession in the building industry, but he referred to the unacceptable, substandard road network and its contribution to the lack of inward investment in East

Derry. He also made special mention of the appalling and ridiculous delay in building a bypass at Dungiven.

4.45 pm

Mr Farry made the important point that, although Seagate, Limavady, is the focus of today's debate, we should look at the general economy here and our overall investment strategy. He was critical of our over-dependence on the public sector and the lack of a vibrant, revenue-creating private sector. Aghanloo should be a wake-up call for all of us.

The Minister gave us figures, which we were very glad to receive, as there is some confusion about where the investment went to, how much was invested, how much Seagate invested and, in particular, whether there will be any payback from Seagate. However, the Minister has not given us any great hope that there will be payback. He also made the point that it is not a loss only for Limavady; the loss is spread over a wide area of the north-west, including Glenshane. The local labour market is mobile and, as the Minister said, people travel easily from the west to work in Belfast; it is no longer considered a terrific burden.

The Minister's good news is that jobs have been created, and are about to be created, in the north-west region. That is heartening because, recently, it has been all doom and gloom, by any standard.

I attended the launch of the Timber Quay site, and I am delighted to see that it is up and running.

However, notwithstanding the achievements that the Minister outlined, he said that Invest Northern Ireland is keen to work on the twin values of the Seagate facility and its employees to attract a new tenant to the site. I had a meeting with some of the workers from Seagate, and their priority is to get the site up and running again with a new tenant. Inevitably, that wonderful, modern, up-to-date facility would deteriorate very quickly if it were untenanted, unused and unheated.

I urge the Minister, as his single priority, to reopen the Seagate plant with a new tenant. He should look to America, China or wherever is necessary to get a new tenant in the Seagate plant. That is what the workers want. The Minister told us that there is no shortage of goodwill in the United States, and we are all aware of that. However, like the Seagate facility, we should not allow that goodwill to dissipate by wasting time over the next eight to nine months.

The Minister and Invest Northern Ireland are committed to helping the workforce to avail of the new opportunities that will inevitably arise in the absence of Seagate's reopening. However, he cautioned that, although everything will be done to create jobs for the unemployed, it will not be easy. Employees will be given all the advice and guidance possible from all the relevant Departments and agencies — everything to

help them to get back to work. The Minister urged us all to work together.

I will finish with the old shibboleth: united we stand, divided we fall.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the impact on the economy, particularly in the north west, of the closure of the Seagate operation in Limavady, with the loss of 1000 jobs; and calls on Invest NI to outline the measures it intends to implement to deal with a series of actual and potential job losses in the north west.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 20 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order. As it is the sixtieth wedding anniversary of our sovereign, Her Majesty The Queen, is it in order for this House to formally congratulate Her Majesty and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, for the fine example that they have given to the nation and on this magnificent milestone in their married lives?

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member has said, and I am sure that he could bring a motion to the House if he so wishes.

Mr Storey: Mr Speaker, I ask you to rule on an issue. Yesterday, in the House, there was a vote on a motion on the Irish-medium club-bank arrangement, which was moved by my colleague Michelle McIlveen. If you check the Hansard report, you will notice that a Deputy Speaker of this House voted. That same Deputy Speaker was in the Chair during the debate on that motion. I believe that it is stated in Standing Orders that Deputy Speakers should not vote on such occasions.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You may recall that I was a Deputy Speaker in the previous Assembly. Throughout that period, when I sat in the Chair during a debate, I did not vote, even if that was prejudicial to my party's interests. I notice, as Mr Storey has pointed out quite rightly, that Mr Molloy did vote. That is against the protocol that was established in the House.

Mr Speaker: I understand what both Members have said. I have looked at the Hansard report and I know that the Deputy Speaker was in the Chair for a few moments during the debate. However, the key point is that he was not in the Chair during the vote.

Mr Wells: The established protocol was that if the Deputy Speaker sat in the Chair at any stage during a debate, even if it were only for 30 seconds, he would not take part in the vote. It is right and proper that

anyone who chairs a debate does not take part in any ultimate decision made on it.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his comments. I ask the House to allow me to come back to this issue at a later date, when I will make a ruling.

However, although I have said that the Deputy Speaker was in the Chair for a few seconds of the debate, the point that I am trying to make is that he was not there for its substance. Let me come back to the House and rule on that matter.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is not the case that the Deputy Speaker was in the Chair for a few seconds; he was in the Chair for the first few minutes of the debate when my colleague Michelle McIlveen was moving the motion. The petition of concern was the reason that no vote was taken. I would like you to check who signed that petition of concern.

Mr Speaker: As I have said to both Members, I am extremely happy to come back to the issue and to make a further ruling on it.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I join with other Members in extending warm congratulations to Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh on the occasion of their anniversary? It is wonderful to see that the flag is flying from this Building.

Mr Speaker, I ask you to consider whether you would introduce some method, such as early-day motions, that would allow Members to pass on their congratulations in circumstances such as this. That mechanism is used in another place. It would give Members the opportunity either to extend their congratulations or to acknowledge sporting events such as Northern Ireland's historic victory over Denmark on Saturday night.

Mr Speaker: The Member is stretching his point of order — there is no doubt about that.

However, as Speaker, I understand that, occasionally, there are issues that Members want to acknowledge, such as the Omagh tragedy and other events. I assure Members that I am considering a mechanism that allows Members to speak on particular issues about which they feel strongly, provided that they do not abuse the House in doing so. However, I assure Members that we are considering that matter to see how such contributions could be facilitated.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Language Body Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council language body sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the first North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the language body sectoral format that has taken place since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. This report has been endorsed by Caitríona Ruane MLA.

The meeting was held in Altnaveigh House in Newry on Friday 26 October 2007. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Caitríona Ruane MLA, the Minister of Education, also attended. The Irish Government were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

I chaired the meeting, and matters that related to the language body and its two constituent agencies, Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch — the Ulster-Scots Agency — and Foras na Gaeilge — the Irish-language agency — were discussed.

The meeting opened with the chief executive of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, Mr George Patton, and his colleague the chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge, Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh, reporting how their agencies have developed since the Council's previous language sectoral format meeting on 26 June 2002. We noted the progress that both agencies have made since that meeting, and I will now summarise the main points of that progress.

The two agencies have worked jointly on several projects, including jointly funding the post of arts development officer for language arts — in tandem with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland — and the post of cultural officer of Altnaveigh House Cultural Society in Newry. In addition, they piloted a joint lecture series on our shared heritage, and that was made available to several bodies.

The Ulster-Scots Agency successfully introduced the first-ever Ulster-Scots summer schools in 2006. That led to 33 summer schools being held in 2007, and in the past year, 120 primary schools have received a school drama production. The agency also piloted Ulster-Scots after-school clubs in several locations.

As regards Ulster-Scots culture, there has been major growth in interest in dance and musical tuition.

Following the appointment of a youth-development officer in 2006, which is a post that is funded by the Irish Youth Foundation UK, the Ulster-Scots Agency is working with young people in inner cities.

We noted the chief executive officer's report on the work of Foras na Gaeilge, especially the significant advances made in the e-government area by the agency, with the development of an online database of terminology — www.focal.ie — and the launch, with Microsoft, of an Irish-language version of Windows XP and the development of an accreditation scheme for Irish-language translators. A successful three-year local community support scheme, which provided funding to 20 groups in both jurisdictions has been extended to 2010. The success of the scheme has led Foras na Gaeilge to widen the scheme to post-primary level this year. The issue concerning the board minutes being made available on the Foras na Gaeilge website was also discussed.

The Council discussed Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch community programme and the significant progress that has been made in music, dance and drama and in work with young people. We also noted that the body will establish a new development grant scheme beginning in February 2008. The Council recognised the positive reception given to Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington earlier this year. It noted the planned activities associated with the four-hundredth anniversary of the plantation of Ulster and has invited the agency to bring forward a proposal for a programme to develop links and culture exchanges with the Ulster-Scots community in Scotland and North America. Ministers also asked officials to clarify the position regarding the remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency and to report at the next NSMC meeting.

The Council noted the progress made in relation to the NSMC decision of March 2006 that 30 Foras na Gaeilge staff posts should be located in Gweedore. We agreed that a working group will be established, with representatives from Foras na Gaeilge and the two sponsor Departments, to reach agreement on a staffing submission from Foras na Gaeilge, in particular to quantify the financial implications in 2008 and subsequent financial years. That staffing submission concerns the filling of posts in the organisation, including those posts earmarked for Gweedore. We also agreed that the working group should seek to progress agreement on a number of key posts identified in the submission that can be met from existing financial allocations in the shortest possible time frame.

The Council approved the proposal to transfer the functions of Bord na Leabhar Gaeilge — the Irish language books board — to Foras na Gaeilge. That non-statutory state body was established in 1952 to assist writers and publishers in supplying Irish-language

material for the general public. The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs will continue to have sole responsibility for funding that organisation.

The Council discussed administrative and governance issues arising in relation to Colmcille. That organisation is funded equally by the Administrations in the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland and Scotland to develop stronger links between Gaelic speakers. We noted that work has been undertaken in relation to possible new arrangements to take that work forward under the aegis of Foras na Gaeilge in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and the Bòrd na Gàidhlig in Scotland. The Council asked officials to continue their work in examination of the issues arising and future options and agreed to consider the matter further at its next meeting on the basis of a report prepared by officials.

We were given progress reports in relation to the publication of the annual reports and accounts of the language body. We noted that the agencies are up to date in the submission of individual accounts but that clearance of consolidated accounts is awaited, and we requested that the chief executives, with the support of the sponsor Departments, seek progress with the Comptroller and Auditor Generals, North and South, as a matter of urgency. We have asked for a progress report at the next NSMC meeting in the language sectoral format.

We discussed the draft future plans for both agencies and have requested that they, along with the sponsor Departments, work together to finalise the 2008 business plans and the 2008-10 corporate plans urgently for approval at the next NSMC meeting in the language sectoral format.

In closing, Minister Ó Cuív stated his intention to host the next NSMC meeting in the language sectoral format in a location that would have significance for the work of the language body. The Council agreed to meet again in the language sectoral format in January/February 2008.

10.45 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas agus roimh an chruinniú fosta. Is maith an rud gur tháinig na hAirí le chéile seo ar an ábhar seo. I welcome the statement and, more importantly, the fact that the meeting took place. It was the first meeting of its kind since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly, as the Minister said. I am also glad that it took place in Newry. Newry could fit Éamon Ó Cuív's description of:

“a location that would have significance for the work of the language body”

There is a very strong Irish-language community in that area, and nowhere could be more suitable.

I note that the meeting took the form of reports from Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. I would be interested to hear more about the three-year community support scheme, which has been extended until 2010. What groups have received funding and support from that scheme?

To return to my point about the meeting's taking the form of reports from the two bodies, my question to the Minister is whether, following on from the St Andrews Agreement and the obligation on both Governments and on this Administration to take forward a proactive strategy aimed at enhancing and promoting the Irish language, he sees a role for himself in the matter — or for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) as a parent Department — or whether he is merely leaving it to the bodies.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question and note his comments about Newry's being a suitable location because of the Irish-language culture in that area. It should be noted that the event actually took place at Altnaveigh House, which is an Ulster-Scots society. I am glad to note that Ulster-Scots culture is also alive and kicking in the Newry area, even though the Committee Chairman did not recognise that.

Do I see a role for us in the development of an Irish-language strategy? That question is not relevant to this morning's statement, which dealt with the work of the North/South language bodies. The development of an Irish-language strategy is a matter for this House, the Executive and the Minister — me — who is answerable to the Committee and to the House.

Mr Speaker: I remind all sides of the House that questions must relate to the statement.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the statement and want to ask two questions, one in relation to Ulster Scots and one in relation to Irish.

There was mention in the Minister's statement of after-school clubs and the extensive work that is being undertaken with schools. I note that the Minister was accompanied by Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education. Did she make any commitment to put some resources into that work? She funds a very extensive — and, some might say, expensive — Irish-medium sector, but there does not seem to be much money put into Ulster Scots. In fact, in one year, the Department put in absolutely nothing at all, and in another year it was about £69.

My second question is in relation to Foras na Gaeilge. There was reference to its website and the minutes of its meetings. Can the Minister explain what is being done to achieve transparency by having the minutes, both in Irish and in English, on the website?

Mr Poots: In relation to the first question, Ms Ruane did not give any commitment at the meeting. I

suggest that the matter of what support the Department of Education may give to Ulster-Scots summer schools and other activities would be best taken up directly with Minister Ruane as Minister of Education.

I raised the issue of the minutes of Foras na Gaeilge, and discovered that not only are the minutes not made public in English, neither are they made public in Gaelic. I asked for that issue to be addressed, and I received support from Minister Ó Cuív. I understand that the board is coming to the end of its lifespan — it has two more meetings — and the issue will probably be dealt with by a new board.

However, when a public body has more than £13 million to spend, it is important that it makes its minutes publicly available. To determine how those funds are being spent, Foras na Gaeilge must demonstrate an openness and willingness to submit itself to public scrutiny.

Mr McNarry: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement and appreciate his bringing it to the House. After the first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the language sectoral format, is the Minister confident that his Republic of Ireland counterpart is committed to promoting Ulster-Scots heritage, culture and language in that jurisdiction?

Mr Poots: Mr Ó Cuív is very committed to the Irish language, in which he is fluent. When I have discussed anything to do with Ulster Scots with him, I have found him to be nothing other than co-operative. That is the current nature of our relationship. I trust that that will continue and that we shall make further progress in the development of Ulster Scots, not only in Northern Ireland, but in the entire nine counties of Ulster and further afield.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Seo í mo cheist ar an Aire. Ba mhaith liom fiafraí den Aire cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le cúrsaí foirne i bhForas na Gaeilge ó bhí an cruinniú ann ar 26 Deireadh Fómhair na bliana seo; go háirithe i dtaca leis na heochairphoist a aithníodh in aighneacht Fhoras na Gaeilge. Ba mhaith liom fáil amach cén uair a dhéanfar cinneadh ina thaobh. Since the meeting on 26 October, what progress has been made on Foras na Gaeilge's submission on staffing? I particularly refer to the key posts that the body identified. When can we expect a decision on those posts to be taken, given that the Minister has just said that progress would be made:

“in the shortest possible time frame”?

Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Poots: The staffing complement was actually agreed in 2001, but, thus far, only about half the posts have been filled.

The decision to locate Foras na Gaeilge's new premises in Gweedore in the Gaeltacht formed part of

a wider decision to move Civil Service jobs away from the east and towards the west of Ireland. However, that decision has caused some problems. Foras na Gaeilge has found it difficult to fill the positions in Gweedore, because of its location. I understand that there are also insufficient individuals with the relevant Irish-language skills and qualifications to do the jobs. Therefore, the staffing issue has proved challenging, all the more so since use of the Irish language became more widespread. For example, it is now used in the European Parliament, and Foras na Gaeilge has found it more difficult to find translators with the requisite skills. Foras na Gaeilge has given a commitment that it will fill the posts. Moreover, it has the available funds — no additional funding is required. However, it needs to find personnel who have the key skills to do the jobs. That is where the problem lies.

Mr McCarthy: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I also welcome the good working relationship that exists between Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord O Ulster-Scotch. In his statement, when outlining joint ventures, the Minister mentioned the joint lecture series “Our shared heritage”, which was made available to a variety of bodies.

In view of some unionist representatives' continuing negative attitude to the Irish language, would the Minister consider making available to a wider public — for example, councils, public representatives and schools — the contents of that lecture series? Were he to do so, everyone could acknowledge where we have come from and where we all wish to go together.

Mr Poots: Schools are a matter for the Department of Education and not for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. However, should the Department of Education need the assistance of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in delivering some of its key projects, that is a matter for discussion among officials, who will then bring it to the two Ministers.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for a clear and positive statement concerning the Ulster-Scots language. He mentioned the Ulster-Scots community programmes, referring specifically to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, and to the four-hundredth anniversary of the plantation.

What plans does the Minister have to develop the capacity of the Ulster-Scots Agency as an organisation, and to develop its links with Scotland and America?

Mr Poots: It is recognised that, for a considerable time, the capacity of the Ulster-Scots Agency has been increasing significantly. That has enabled me to release additional funding; for example, £750,000 for the incoming year. That will help to put on the ground projects such as the successful summer schools, which I mentioned earlier.

The capacity is being developed, and, hand-in-hand with that, the finances are being raised to meet it. As further capacity is developed, further projects can be

delivered, and it is up to us to seek and identify the funding mechanisms to ensure that that situation continues.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Could he elaborate a little on the successful local community support scheme? I appreciate that that has been extended until 2010. Who were the 20 groups that were funded by the scheme? Where were they based, and what were their activities? If the Minister does not have that information to hand, I would appreciate a written response. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: Locations were in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I shall be happy provide the information in writing.

Miss McIlveen: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. What increases in resources will be allocated to the Ulster-Scots Agency and to the Irish language agency? Furthermore, will the Minister agree to engage with the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council, as the representative community body of the Ulster-Scots Agency, to consider the creation of a parallel initiative to the Colmcille initiative?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for her question. There will be an increase of £750,000 over the baseline in funding to the Ulster-Scots Agency for 2008-09. There will be a further increase of £1 million in 2009-10, and an over-the-baseline increase of £1,250,000 in 2010-11. Those will considerably narrow the funding gap between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. There have been no further commitments to Foras na Gaeilge for additional spending.

With regard to Colmcille, there has been a proposal, which has not yet been agreed to, to bring Colmcille under Foras na Gaeilge. Moreover, there is a suggestion that there may be an opportunity for the Ninian initiative, which was referred to in 2001, to be established in the Ulster-Scots Agency. Matters are still at discussion stage, and no decision has yet been taken on either of those two proposals; however, they have been given consideration.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his report. Some Members referred to the location of the meeting. Altnaveigh has a particular relevance to my community.

11.00 am

Does the Minister agree that the excellent work of the Ulster-Scots Agency — particularly in the expansion of its summer-scheme programme, the involvement of 120 primary schools in an agency-commissioned school drama, and the innovative and expanding number of Ulster-Scots after-school clubs, and in light of the impact in the US of the Smithsonian event — must be matched by equivalent levels of enthusiasm, ingenuity, energy and funding on the part of his officials to

redress the poor-relation status of Ulster Scots compared to the rapid progress and generous funding enjoyed by the Irish-culture community? Will he undertake to encourage the extension of those Ulster-Scots schemes into large housing estates, as well as the inner-city areas that he referred to in his statement?

Mr Poots: The outworking of those schemes is a matter for the Ulster-Scots Agency, which will report on its successes or otherwise, and, in its capacity as a competent body, the delivery of such projects should be left to the agency. If Members wish to have such schemes developed in their areas, it is for them to encourage the agency.

We are addressing, and will continue to address, the poor-relation status of the Ulster-Scots Agency, although that will not be dealt with in one year. However, we are working towards providing equal funding for both bodies.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement and the continuing co-operation between the two Governments. I wish to refer to the Ulster-Scots Agency's programmes, particularly those commemorating the 400th anniversary of the plantation. As Derry was one of the first towns to be planted, Derry City Council clearly has a role to play. My question to the Minister is also directed to the Speaker, who is aware of the city's bid for world heritage site status. How can the Assembly support Derry in its bid to be added to the UNESCO list?

It is appropriate that the Minister of the Environment — who has had discussions with members of Derry City Council — is here, and the Speaker will also be aware of Derry City Council's work to retrieve The Honourable The Irish Society's plantation artefacts, which are in storage in England. What are the planned commemoration activities, and what are the funding arrangements for them?

Mr Poots: I am happy to speak to people about such matters. In fact, I recently spoke to people from the University of Ulster who are studying the period in our history that encompasses the flight of the earls, the Ulster plantation, and the roles played by The Honourable The Irish Society and the city of London in the establishment of the city of Londonderry, and I am happy to work with city-council representatives. That history offers huge potential for tourism. Looking at London 2012 and the links to Londonderry, there is a huge opportunity for people in that city to gain some significant benefits from the 400-year link that has been established there.

Mr Speaker: As we conduct today's business, a number of Members will want to speak in their capacity as Chairperson of a Committee. I warn those Committee Chairpersons that when they get up to speak, they are speaking on behalf of their Committees. If they wish to make personal statements, they must alert the House of that intention.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Environment Sectoral Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council language body sectoral format —

Sorry, I apologise to the House.

We will start again; we will get it right.

I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council environment sectoral meeting.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

Mr Speaker, it is with some relief that I make a statement on the first North/South Ministerial Council environment sectoral meeting to be held since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. The meeting took place in the Manor House Resort Hotel, Killadeas, on 26 October 2007, and the following report has been agreed with Minister Ritchie.

As Minister of the Environment, I chaired the meeting and, with Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by John Gormley TD, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

We noted and welcomed the progress that had been made since the last meeting in April 2002, which included over 175,000 waste fridges and freezers being recycled under a joint Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland contract; a successful cross-border waste awareness campaign; and joint work on implementing the EU Water Framework Directive to enhance water management on a co-ordinated cross-border basis.

The EU Water Framework Directive requires that member states maintain high-status waters — where such waters exist — prevent any deterioration in the existing status of any waters and achieve, at least, good status of all waters by 2015. The key aims and application of the directive were highlighted in an informative joint presentation that was made by my Environment and Heritage Service and the Environmental Protection Agency.

We welcomed the progress that had been made on the implementation of the directive for shared waters, and we agreed that the single management plans for each international cross-border river basin district should proceed for the north-western, Neagh/Bann and Shannon international river basin districts. We noted that key water management issues for each river basin district had been published in documents using the generic title

‘Water Matters — Have Your Say!’. Those documents are available for public comment until December 2007 and will form the basis of the next stage of developing river basin plans. Therefore, we agreed that officials should report on progress at the next meeting.

We welcomed the progress that had been made by the North/South market development steering group, which was set up in January 2002. The steering group aimed to provide a co-operative approach to the development of the waste and recycling market in both jurisdictions. To build on that progress, we agreed to the re-establishment of the newly mandated steering group to drive forward a programme based on specific deliverables of mutual benefit, which will exploit opportunities to benefit from economies of scale.

We agreed that the steering group should require the market development delivery agencies in Northern Ireland and Ireland to develop proposals for a joint market development action programme, and we agreed that proposals should be guided by the respective strategies and programmes in both jurisdictions and brought to the steering group for approval. The group should be chaired by a representative from the business sector and should include members from the business sector and non-governmental organisations.

We also recognised the continuing joint work on the possible establishment of a paper mill, which is contingent on mobilising private-sector support and funding. We requested that a report on progress be presented to our next meeting.

We welcomed the significant progress that had been made in tackling the movements of illegal cross-border waste and the recent joint enforcement actions designed to prevent such illegal activities.

We also endorsed a road map document that had been developed in response to a request by the European Commission. The road map sets out the responsibilities of both countries in the context of the relevant legislation. It outlines a step-by-step approach for the removal and disposal of waste that has already been illegally dumped and sets out a series of joint enforcement actions that are designed to prevent future illegal movements. A regular update on implementation will be provided at future meetings.

We approved the commissioning of a review of the North/South website of environmental research — aNSwer. As it was launched in April 2002, we agreed that it was timely to commission a joint review of the website, which includes a shared register of environmental database sources. The review should consider cost-effective options for the website’s long-term management.

We also welcomed the intentions of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Environment and Heritage Service to determine potential opportunities

to co-ordinate joint environmental research. We look forward to the outcome of the review at a future meeting.

We were pleased to note the range of activities that have been undertaken to exchange information and run environmental-awareness campaigns. In particular, a very successful cross-border waste awareness campaign was undertaken in 2004 at a cost of £2.1 million.

The objective of that campaign was to reduce the volume of waste that goes to landfill sites and to increase the recycling of waste materials in the border area. We requested that officials explore the scope for further work, including environmental-awareness campaigns and funding options. The Council agreed to meet again in that sectoral format in either March or April 2008.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for her statement. What scope is there for future co-operation on environmental impacts on agriculture?

Mrs Foster: I do not want to tread on the toes of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. That is an issue that she will be discussing with me, and we will consider ways to deal with waste, including illegal waste that comes from the South. Furthermore, we will discuss how she wants her Department to deal with waste in the agriculture sector.

Some good work has been carried out on the issue of water pollution that occurs in districts near river basins. That is often a problem in agriculture. Additionally, the public has had input into the development of those river basin international district plans. I am pleased with the way in which that is moving forward.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate both jurisdictions on the possibility of the paper mill. It is important to have an outlet for recycled materials.

Will the Minister give her opinion on how successful the educational process and awareness campaigns have been? Will those schemes now transform from education and awareness into actually getting machinery on the ground that will deal with waste in the future?

Mrs Foster: The Member is well aware from his work on the Strategic Waste Board that part of its education campaign in Northern Ireland relates to communication with the public, and to realising the importance of dealing appropriately with waste.

As I said in my statement, we did have a successful cross-border Wake up to Waste campaign. When the Strategic Waste Board makes its decision regarding its new communication strategy, I assume that there will also be some discussions on those issues with its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

A study was carried out regarding the paper mill issue; however, it was some time ago. Therefore, more

work needs to be carried out to assess the economic viability of a paper mill, and we are currently doing that.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to ensure that their mobile phones are switched off.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister agree that large amounts of illegal waste from the Republic of Ireland are still dumped in Northern Ireland, and that it comes from large-scale operations to purpose-built unofficial dumps, and, on a small scale, to local council civic amenity sites? Does the Minister have any estimates of the amount of such material?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately illegal waste continues to be a problem. In my statement, I mentioned the road map, and we hope that that will develop to enable us to repatriate waste that can be identified as coming from the Republic of Ireland. There is a commitment that the waste should go back to wherever it came from.

Waste from a site in Belleek was repatriated to Ireland in January 2007. It is intended that similar operations will take place under the methodology that was set up in the road map. Two sites, containing a total of 14,500 tonnes of illegal waste, are being examined for priority attention. We have formally asked the Republic of Ireland to repatriate that waste. We are in discussion with Dublin City Council, as it has been identified as the appropriate authority to take back that waste.

11.15 am

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the Minister's statement and thank her for bringing it to our attention. Much important work is being done, and that work underlines the importance of taking an all-island approach to the environment.

I have two questions for the Minister, the first of which concerns the possible establishment of a paper mill. We have had reports on that before, yet the Minister's statement contains nothing new on its progress. It is, however, an important concept. Will the Minister enlighten us as to whether the project has stalled, or is there potential for progress to be made?

Secondly, I welcome the road map document on the removal of illegal waste. The Minister spoke about the repatriation of waste. As other Members have said, illegal waste remains a big problem. A simple, all-Ireland solution would be to introduce a smart-card system to monitor the movement of waste from collection to disposal, and anywhere in-between, at any time. Is the introduction of such a system included in the road map document? If not, will the Minister bring it to the attention of both Governments at the next appropriate meeting?

Mrs Foster: I will deal first with Mr Gallagher's question about the establishment of a paper mill and why that work is taking so long to conclude. A

feasibility study was published in August 2006. That study needs updating to reflect the current market view, and that is being done. The business case for a new mill will focus on synergies with the waste management industry. We must take cognisance of the work of the Strategic Waste Board in Northern Ireland, to which I have already referred. Extensive stakeholder consultation will also be necessary. All options for the establishment of a paper mill must be tested.

Mr Gallagher also asked about future co-operation on the illegal cross-border dumping of waste. As Mr Elliott mentioned, joint enforcement activities to tackle small-scale movements at an operational level are ongoing. Large-scale illegal movements have mostly ceased; we are now dealing with small-scale activities. There is continued vigilance on either side of the border, and further covert cradle-to-grave operations are planned.

The Member referred to the use of a smart-card system to track the movement of waste from start to finish. We are planning covert operations to deal with the movement of waste across the frontier as well. Those targeted actions are a strong deterrent and a means of rigorous assessment. That is how we plan to tackle the dumping of illegal cross-border waste.

Mr Ford: I also welcome the Minister's statement, on which I have two questions. In referring to management plans for river-basin districts, she highlighted the Neagh/Bann area. Given that the Lower Bann drains about 40% of Northern Ireland and a few dozen townlands in north Monaghan, will the Minister assure us that the necessity to seek cross-border co-operation will not curtail her Department's essential work to ensure the highest standards in Lough Neagh are maintained?

The Minister also welcomed progress made by the North/South market development steering group on recyclables but did not spell out what progress had been made. Can she provide Members with some detail?

Mrs Foster: I have no difficulty in giving the Member the assurance that he needs about the Department's work at Lough Neagh. We will continue to monitor its water quality. One benefit of the river-basin management plans is that we have been monitoring water quality closely.

The Member also asked about the market development of recyclables. I do not have that detail to hand, but I am happy to write to him with that information.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she clarify whether the important issue of climate change is mandated for North/South co-operation or is the matter dealt with in a wider, UK context?

Mrs Foster: I welcome the opportunity to clarify the matter as there are reports in the press today that a

new North/South steering group has been set up as a result of the Minister of Agriculture's statement in the House yesterday.

No new steering group on climate change has been set up — climate change is not a mandated area for co-operation on a North/South basis because targets under the Kyoto protocol and at European level are set at member state level. Such actions would involve a mix of reserved matters — for example, fiscal policy, and devolved matters — and it would, therefore, be natural that our policies would have a Westminster focus and not a North/South focus.

Recently, the Executive have opted into the United Kingdom's Climate Change Bill. It is important that we are part of that Bill, which is at an advanced stage. I believe that it was published last week and may be in the House of Lords.

The Irish Government have similar arrangements to that Bill, but they are not at a similarly advanced stage. Therefore, I am happy with the progress that has been made in relation to climate change.

Mr Shannon: What discussions has the Minister had, through the North/South bodies, with local councils about the significant input that they may have on recycling and on the paper mill? Have there been any discussions about where the paper mill may be located?

Mrs Foster: The answer to the latter question is no, because we are only at the feasibility stage and are not yet at the stage where we can identify where the paper mill should be located. We are carrying out economic appraisals to see whether it would be workable, and what the level of private-sector interest in a paper mill would be.

As regards the Member's point about council involvement with such a paper mill — such involvement would be through the Strategic Waste Board, which is at a crucial stage, having been given finance proposals through the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, indicating how much capital it will receive for its plans for strategic waste. Therefore, it is through the Strategic Waste Board that the councils will make contact about how to dispose of waste.

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

Mr K Robinson: What discussions, if any, took place regarding the Erne/Shannon link and the water quality therein? If discussions have not taken place, are there any such plans for the future?

Mrs Foster: The only discussion that took place in relation to the Erne/Shannon link was about the Shannon international river basin district. Only 2.5 square kilometres of that river basin district is in Northern Ireland; therefore, there was not much focus

on that. If the Member has a specific issue that he wishes me to raise, I would be happy to do so.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill Final Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill [NIA 6/07] do now pass.

I have asked for the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill to be introduced by accelerated passage in order to repeal a provision in article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which had been determined in judicial review proceedings to be incompatible with human rights legislation. For that reason, it is vital that we repeal the article.

My proposal was supported by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Executive, and the various stages of the Bill have passed to the final stage without challenge or amendment from the Assembly. I thank all those who have endorsed the introduction of the Bill for allowing it to pass through all the stages so quickly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are no other Members to speak on this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill [NIA 6/07] do now pass.

Legislative Programme 2007-08

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The First Minister will propose the motion. All other Members will have five minutes in which 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.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Legislative Programme for the 2007/08 session, as agreed by the Executive on 18 October, and conveyed in the letter of 19 October 2007 from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the Speaker.

I want to preface my remarks with words of the strongest condemnation on the attacks at the weekend against certain Roman Catholic priests. Such attacks must be condemned. I hope that quick action will be taken to bring the people who perpetrated those attacks to justice, and that they will pay the price for breaking the law.

In Cookstown, two men broke in through a window at the parochial house on Convent Road, where two priests live. They ransacked downstairs, woke one of the curates, and threatened him with a knife before taking cash and a car. Another such incident occurred in the city of Belfast. I utterly condemn those attacks. The people of Northern Ireland must put those who are responsible in the corner. I am sure that my expression of worry, sadness and condemnation on the matter is supported by every Member of the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: Mr Deputy Speaker, the motion that the deputy First Minister and I have laid before the House asks the Assembly to note the Executive's legislative programme for the 2007-08 session. The House will be aware that we wrote to the Speaker on 19 October, immediately after the Executive had discussed and agreed their legislative programme. We did so in recognition of the House's keen interest in, not to say impatience to receive, the details of its content.

The deputy First Minister and I believe, moreover, that it is important to afford Members an opportunity to consider and express their views on the overall content of the programme by tabling a take-note motion. This debate provides that opportunity. I am, however, conscious that the bulk of the Assembly's work on the programme — the detailed scrutiny of each Bill by the Committees and the ultimate debates on the Floor of the House — is still to follow.

I am confident that Members will carry out their responsibility to scrutinise the legislation thoroughly

and diligently at each stage in its passage in order to ensure that what comes out at the end of the process is fully relevant to the community's needs. Of course, that is not the only legislation that will be considered by the Assembly. Since restoration, well over 100 statutory rules have been subject to scrutiny by Committees. We do not envisage any lessening of that activity.

Where it is to the Assembly's advantage, provisions for which it is responsible are being included in certain Bills to be brought forward in another place. That will, of course, require the approval of the Assembly. Several legislative consent motions will be tabled in order to allow the House to make a final decision on such matters.

The legislative programme — or what some Members saw as the absence of one — has recently been debated in the Chamber. Members have had the opportunity to express their views on the need for the Executive to inform the Assembly of their legislative intentions for the current session.

11.30 am

Without wishing to pre-empt Members' comments or to rehearse unduly the arguments of the previous debate, I echo what the junior Minister Mr Paisley Jnr said on that occasion about the production of a legislative programme. The Assembly and Executive were restored to bring back accountability and to make the work of the Government here more relevant. The Executive could not — and did not — take up office to adopt, without question, the policies and legislative proposals of their predecessors

Against the backdrop of finalising an agreed Programme for Government, Budget and investment strategy, we intend to bring to this process our own thoughts, strategies and policies, and to implement what the public needs and expects us to put in place. The legislative programme is an important part of that process. Undoubtedly, Members will have considered the content of the programme in the period since our letter to the Speaker. However, I place on record the Executive's legislative intention to pass 18 Bills in the current session of the Assembly.

A priority of the draft Programme for Government is to deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services, which demonstrate our commitment to world-class public services that meet the needs of the people of our Province. Therefore, an important part of the programme will be legislation to bring about significant change in the administrative structures of the public sector in Northern Ireland. The Assembly is already considering a Bill to reorganise the library services, and during this session, a Bill will also be introduced to reorganise education structures.

The junior Ministers will present a miscellaneous public authorities reform Bill to the Assembly on

behalf of a number of Departments. The Minister of the Environment is conducting a review of previous decisions on the reorganisation of local government. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is conducting a similar review of health and social services structures and, depending on the outcome, further legislation may be required in due course.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is reviewing the adequacy of existing legislation to tackle animal disease outbreaks. That task has been given added impetus by the recent outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease, bluetongue and avian flu in England. A number of gaps in current provision have been identified and, after consultation on a draft, a diseases of animals Bill will be introduced to rectify those deficiencies by enabling the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to implement appropriate measures to prevent the introduction and spread of disease.

The Assembly is currently considering the detailed provisions of the Taxis Bill. The Minister of the Environment also intends to introduce legislation on goods vehicle operator licensing to ensure the safe and proper use of goods vehicles, fair competition in the industry and protection of the environment around operating centres. It will also enable more effective enforcement in order to contribute to the fight against organised crime.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel will, as usual, seek statutory approval for the 2007-08 Supplementary Estimates and a Vote on Account for 2008-09 in the Budget Bill in February, while approval of the Main Estimates for 2008-09 will be sought in a further Budget Bill in June.

In addition, following consultation on a draft, a presumption of death Bill will be introduced to allow for the registration of a death in circumstances where a missing person is presumed dead but the body has not been recovered. The issuing of a death certificate in such instances will help to tackle some of the difficulties that arise in such tragic circumstances, including administering the estate and claiming benefits and life insurance.

The Finance Minister will also introduce two further Bills to modernise building regulation procedures and to make arrangements for civil registration.

The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill was introduced in the Assembly before the summer recess and the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill was passed by the Assembly earlier today. In addition, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety intends to introduce a short, technical public health amendment Bill to allow the Department to make regulations in connection with contamination

and thus comply with World Health Organization international health regulations.

The Minister for Social Development has already introduced a Pensions Bill to improve the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension and to introduce some simplification measures for private pensions. She will also bring forward a further three Bills.

A major charities Bill will overhaul the entire system of charities regulation in Northern Ireland and provide for the establishment of an independent charities commission and compulsory registration.

For people who contract a particular, invariably fatal, form of cancer usually caused by exposure to asbestos fibres, a Bill will provide for lump-sum payments to be made to them or their dependents within six weeks of making a claim. That will give sufferers some comfort in those tragic circumstances by ensuring that they can receive some compensation while they can still benefit from it, and, at the same time, that their families will be secure in the future.

Finally in relation to the Department for Social Development, a child maintenance Bill will reform the present child-support system by creating a simpler system that enables and encourages parents to make their own arrangements, but that delivers firmly and more effectively for parents who need help in arranging maintenance.

I hope that the House will accept this programme as evidence of the Executive's intention to make a positive difference to the community. As I said at the beginning of my speech, Members will have the opportunity to undertake detailed scrutiny of the legislation in the appropriate Committee setting when each Bill is introduced. It may not, therefore, be either possible or appropriate for me to respond today on matters of detail that are still to be determined or that will be subject to change, and, in a number of cases, to the agreement of the Executive. Nevertheless, I will ensure that Members' views on particular proposals are brought to the attention of the relevant Ministers of the Executive.

The introduction of legislation is not an end in itself. It represents one, albeit important, stage between policy development and implementation. We are at the beginning of a process which, over the session, should, with the advice and support of the Assembly, result in important and beneficial changes for the people of Northern Ireland. I commend this programme to the House.

Mr Ford: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“; but expresses its regret that the Programme represents little new thinking or innovation on the part of the Executive, and that key matters requiring legislative action remain unaddressed.”

Although the motion is a take-note motion, its mood is somewhat self-congratulatory. That is why I take great

pleasure in moving the amendment in my name and those of my colleagues on the opposition Benches.

This is the first of three key debates that we will have over the next week or so: the others will cover the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, but this is our first opportunity to see the limits of the Executive's aims and ambitions. What we have been presented with is so modest that a harsh person — though not me — might describe it as pathetic.

In his statement, the First Minister said that:

“The Executive could not — and did not — take up office to adopt, without question, the policies and legislative proposals of their predecessors.”

However, there is virtually nothing in the legislative programme just outlined by the First Minister that is anything but what went before.

Let us have a quick look through the 18 Bills that make up the legislative programme. Issues such as libraries, education structures and reform of public authorities have been floating around in the review of public administration for several years. Legislation on diseases of animals could easily have been introduced under direct rule. Taxis were being discussed before the Assembly was suspended in autumn 2002, and road freight licensing legislation has been delayed for nearly as long. There have been two Budget Bills: well, we all know that nothing is more certain than taxes, and that those Bills will happen.

The Department of Finance and Personnel has produced three tidying-up Bills, dealing with presumption of death, building regulations and civil registration. The health (miscellaneous provisions) Bill is a modest undertaking. The Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill, which we have just passed, complies with obligations under human rights, and the public health (amendment) Bill complies with the requirements of the World Health Organization.

The tidying-up of charities legislation, though welcome, has been floating around for ages and is long overdue. Legislation on pensions, mesothelioma and child maintenance are being introduced simply to achieve parity with the relevant law in Great Britain. Therefore, to suggest that their programme is one of significance and substance rather stretches the imagination, given what we have come to expect from the Executive.

The programme is a mixture of legislation to achieve parity with GB, matters in long gestation, routine business that could have been done at any time, and issues such as the Taxis Bill, which was first drafted as an Order in Council for consideration at Westminster. Almost the entire package could have been written by Shaun Woodward, or, even worse, by Peter Hain. We have been fed a line in the Chamber — the deputy First Minister has used it to me at least twice — that

all that matters in relation to the concept of a shared future is the sight of an Executive governing together. Yet, not a single departmental Minister is present in the Chamber to discuss the legislative programme. The deputy First Minister and the two junior Ministers arrived during the First Minister's speech: not one other Minister is interested in being here to take part in what is supposed to be one of three key debates. That shows the paucity of the proposals contained in the legislative programme.

There has to be more to devolution than is contained in the programme. There must be more to the concept of a shared future than the sight of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister doing their well-renowned "Chuckle Brothers" act. Anyone who was in the Chamber earlier today, never mind yesterday, having seen the way in which Back-Bench Members from their two parties sniped at each other, would conclude that they are a long way from coming together and building a shared future as parties.

The issue is now one of delivery, because devolution has to be about delivery. What have the Executive done since 8 May 2007? They have produced a list of legislation that could have been produced by Shaun Woodward. Of course, it is not about what they have done since 8 May. All four parties in the Executive had special advisers funded by Peter Hain since the side deals made alongside the St Andrews Agreement. What have they done with the time that their special advisers had to prepare a Programme for Government? What happened in those meetings of the Committee for the Programme for Government last autumn and winter, from which we were excluded, but in which four parties supposedly set down a Programme for Government? All they have done is recycle what Shaun Woodward or Peter Hain would have done anyway.

If Peter Hain ever looks back to his time in Northern Ireland, I wonder whether he speculates on whether he got any value for money for the expenditure that he incurred here.

11.45 am

At last week's Question Time, the First Minister urged me to use my talents for the benefit of the Assembly. He described my talents as "vast", but I am not sure whether he "does" irony. I am prepared to use my talents, such as they are, for the benefit of the Assembly, but not to pretend that the failing Executive are achieving anything under devolution, because they are not.

The Alliance Party will diligently scrutinise the legislative programme, as the First Minister has urged. However, much of what is being proposed is parity legislation and, therefore, will not be subject to normal Assembly scrutiny. The Alliance Party will take the responsibility of opposition rather more seriously than the Executive are taking their responsibilities.

Mr Neeson: If there is to be an Opposition in the Assembly, as is currently provided by the Alliance Party, it is incumbent on the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP to join us in providing a real, effective Opposition.

Mr Ford: I thank my friend for his contribution. As always, he demonstrates the benefit of having over a quarter of a century's experience in an Assembly.

The performance of the previous Executive was poor. However, Members are now receiving a list of Bills, as though a high number equates to quality or illustrates innovative thinking. Had a similar exercise been carried out during the previous mandate, adding up the number of Bills and comparing us with Scotland might have resulted in a dubious impression of what was happening. On one occasion, the Scottish Executive abolished feudal land tenure and we changed the name of the Department for Employment and Learning. I suspect that the current Executive's ambitions are even lower.

The Assembly could, for example, examine some of the motions that have been passed in the Chamber, and perhaps Ministers could take note of those. Perhaps I should not mention the Agricultural Wages Board, lest I embarrass the deputy First Minister's colleague. Outstanding issues include the registration of landlords and a legislative equivalent to the Football (Offences) Act 1991 — the Assembly could, at least, start the preparatory work on that. Several issues have been floated and widely supported in the Chamber, such as the appointment of a commissioner for older people and associated carers' responsibilities, and nothing has been heard since.

I prefer to go back to some of my own party's proposals: for example, what has happened to the single equality Bill that has been floating around? Is it too embarrassing for the Executive to introduce a Bill that has been floating around for years without any sign of legislation? What about a Bill to deal, not with the structures of education, but with essential reforms to the education of our children and young people? Those children are suffering as they wait to see what will happen, but there is nothing coming from the Executive about dealing with the aftermath of the 11-plus debacle. Those vital issues are being ignored, but they matter in the lives of ordinary children and their parents.

Alternatively, take a few examples from the field that I have concentrated on in both previous and current mandates. At the time of suspension in 2002, a private Member's Bill on marine conservation had been prepared, but now nothing is happening. The Committee for the Environment had been giving detailed consideration to the Planning (Amendment) Bill and other issues, such as tree preservation orders. My new constituency colleague from South Antrim Dr

McCrea and I had been dealing with the issues, but nothing has come back.

The Department of the Environment acknowledged that the legislation that it pushed through in the form of an Order in Council at Westminster, after the previous Assembly was suspended, did not adequately deal with areas of special scientific interest (ASSI). However, no action has been taken since on that — never mind the fundamental issue of an environmental protection agency, which the Assembly supported in principle just a few weeks ago.

What has happened to the vital issue of mental health, and the matters that flowed from the Bamford Review? Everyone pays lip service to those in the Chamber, but there is no sign that the Executive will act.

In 2001, the Assembly voted in favour of the principle of free personal care. However, a year later, the amendment proposed by my friend Kieran McCarthy was voted down. Suddenly, all the parties reinserted the issue into their manifestos, but where is it now? Nowhere. Outside the Chamber, people might use unparliamentary language such as “hypocrisy”, but, of course, I will not do so. However, many Members say one thing when it is convenient to do so and vote to the contrary when the chips are down in the Chamber.

We have a lowest-common-denominator Executive: nothing goes through unless it does not offend the sensibilities of the DUP or Sinn Féin. That is not a recipe for good Government. It is not a recipe for a shared future. It is not a recipe for devolution delivering.

It is a recipe for stasis. The amendment represents a challenge, not only to the two main parties on the Executive, which are signally failing, but to the parties that sit at this end of the House. Are those who aspire to be, or who masquerade as, the Opposition willing to listen to the nonsense that has come from the First Minister, and that will no doubt come from him again during his winding-up speech, or are they willing to show that they believe that the Assembly must be about real business and delivery?

The only way in which the Assembly can send a message to the Executive that they report to the Assembly and not vice versa is by voting in favour of the amendment. The alternative is to accept that nothing will happen unless it can be squeezed through, as the lowest common denominator, by the advisers to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. However, that will achieve nothing for the people of Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the Executive’s legislative programme for 2007-08. The Executive agreed the programme on 18 October 2007, and it was conveyed to the Speaker on the following day. It can be viewed

as a progressive step to greater things, but it will take many years to measure its success.

The legislative programme is a fundamental and imperative document for the Assembly, and, as elected representatives, we should welcome it. After all, we have been elected to this body to legislate. Our duty to the electorate is to introduce, amend and implement legislation that will benefit Northern Ireland and its citizens. We must aspire to meet the challenging but achievable targets that are contained in the legislative programme. If such a programme is managed, steered and directed effectively, it will provide significant long-term benefits to the economy, to society and to businesses, for future generations.

The 18 Bills that the Executive have noted and recorded cover a wide range of economic, social and financial issues that all directly affect our nation and specifically tackle the issues facing Northern Ireland. We, as elected representatives, want to improve the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that the legislative programme is a step in the right direction.

The DUP has long advocated that Northern Ireland is best governed locally. Local politicians know the issues that affect homeowners and businesses in their constituencies. For too long, our Province was governed by people who had little or no interest in what was good for Northern Ireland’s citizens. Simply because something was good for someone living in London did not mean that it was good for someone living in Lurgan. The legislative programme has opened up what has traditionally been a closed process. It gives Members and the public foresight of the legislation that the Executive plan to introduce in this session.

There will be an opportunity to scrutinise Bills, many of which will secure real benefits and improvements across the board for the people of Northern Ireland. The proposed charities Bill will overhaul the entire system of charities’ regulation in Northern Ireland, particularly with the establishment of an independent charities commission. The Bill will ensure that Northern Ireland has a robust framework in place for local charities that are committed and dedicated to carrying out good work for some of the most disadvantaged in our communities.

The proposed education reform Bill is important, as it will restructure education bodies and their functions in line with the review of public administration. Such a Bill will afford us the opportunity to focus on local issues and to centre our attention on ensuring that our children and young people experience a locally designed and structured education system. Therefore, I urge the Minister of Education not to falter with that process but to mark it with a note of urgency.

The Budget Bill is also important. It is clear from the recent publication of the draft Budget that the primary focus is on economic growth. Is that not an indication of what is to come? Does that not raise the long-term commitment to building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland? As the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, stated in the House on 25 October:

“For almost 10 years, we have seen very significant increases in public spending in Northern Ireland.” — [*Official Report, Vol 24, No 10, p491, col 1*].

Through the draft Budget, the Executive have set a course that will meet the Province’s needs through ensuring value for money. The draft Budget has laid the foundations for a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

That was demonstrated, and clarified, in the First Minister’s announcement that spending proposals will total almost £10 billion next year and will grow to nearly £11 billion by 2010-11. That is a far cry from the previous announcement of £6 billion. The figures reflect substantial growth in public spending over recent years and demonstrate the benefits of the legislative programme.

The programme contains 18 Bills that aim to meet the rising aspirations of people in Northern Ireland by providing new and better opportunities for all. However, I issue a note of caution: as Members are aware, it will be important to consider the proposed Bills in context and set them alongside other changes taking place. With that in mind, it must be noted that legislation alone will — without doubt — not suffice to meet the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. Instead, it is an imperative stage between policy development and implementation. It is time that the Assembly got down to business and embraced the legislative programme.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the motion.

Members will agree that the worst kind of legislation is not only drafted quickly but does not have the necessary backup to enforce it. Without a proper Budget and the knowledge of what spending is in place, it would be impossible to know what type of legislative programme the Assembly could afford and what resources it would have to support such legislation. Therefore, it is important that the Assembly produces proper and necessary legislation. It is also important that the Assembly reviews and amends certain legislation that was introduced during direct rule. Much of the legislation that was introduced under the old Executive must also be reviewed, particularly the Durkan tax — I mean the water tax — and the rates review.

Members recently expressed concern in the Chamber that the Assembly was not processing enough legislation. However, the same amount of legislation had been introduced —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No; I have no time.

The same volume of legislation was introduced in the nine weeks of the present mandate as was introduced in the first eleven weeks of the Assembly that commenced in 1999. Furthermore, there is no evidence of the Members who voiced those concerns tabling private Member’s Bills, or Bills that could be brought to the Floor through Committees. I sit on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, of which Mr Kennedy is the Chairperson and Naomi Long is the Deputy Chairperson. Until now, the business of that Committee has not included proposals to make or amend legislation and no ideas on how to do so have been suggested.

Sinn Féin supports the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) motion, which has the endorsement of all members of the Executive, on the understanding that it only represents the beginning, and seeks the listing of the single equality Bill in the future. Members must also table motions that propose changes to legislation or call for the introduction of new legislation that reinforces the Executive’s Programme for Government commitments — for example the motion that called for a single equality Bill.

OFMDFM must ensure that the Executive’s legislative programme is built on hope and opportunity. Without doubt, good governance cannot be measured by the number of laws that are made, and the Assembly should not implement legislation willy-nilly that direct rule Ministers had planned. As the First Minister said, the Executive have brought forward their thoughts, strategies, policies, and post-consultation outcomes. Implementation should reflect what people need. For some who work in the system, the preferred option might have been to simply extend the current patterns and follow the policies of direct rule Ministers. Thankfully, those days are over and done with. The introduction of a legislative programme is not an end in itself, but instead represents one — albeit important — stage between policy development and implementation.

Legislation that is based on inadequate policy development and consideration is bad legislation and will lead to problems when it is implemented. It is therefore right that Ministers are fully satisfied about the purpose, effect and intention of legislation before they bring it to the Chamber. Sinn Féin fully endorses that process.

12.00 noon

As an MLA who represents Derry — and in the context of the Stand up for Derry campaign — I want to see a future roll-out of policy that will tackle regional disparities. I want to see the creation of more jobs; the building of more social and affordable housing; and investment in health, education and infrastructure in the North's second-largest city — Derry. That is what the Budget and the investment strategy must do to support the Programme for Government commitments and the basis on which legislation should be built. We have a Programme for Government that affords us many opportunities in the time ahead, which legislation can make realisable. People in my city were heartened by the First Minister's comments last week that the investment strategy would tackle regional disparities. We are sure that the evolving legislative programme will reflect that — and much more. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I thank Dr Paisley, the First Minister, and the deputy First Minister for responding to the successful private Member's motion, in my name, that demanded that a legislative programme be laid before the House before the Halloween recess — merely one week after the debate took place. I will not labour the point, but until that Ulster Unionist Party motion was passed, we had been waiting almost six months for some action. The phrase "better late than never" springs to mind.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No; my time is limited. The legislative programme laid before the House covers animal health, road freight, building regulations, the Budget, Main Estimates, Supplementary Estimates, the presumption of death, civil registration, children's emergency protection Orders, contamination legislation and a range of other measures. That is in addition to the three Bills that were recently introduced on health, taxis and libraries. The legislative programme was presented to the public in a fanfare as an unprecedented rush of legislation with 18 new Bills coming before the Assembly. That kaleidoscope of scattered measures addressed a range of issues that had already been flagged up by the respective Departments. Therefore, the legislative programme might be properly described as a major housekeeping exercise by the Executive, and it appeared to be a legislative programme designed by a committee — which, of course, it was.

Suffice it to say that there does not appear to be any central organising principle around which the legislation is structured. It is not so much driven by ideas as by the desire to put something — anything — before the House. Perhaps that is an inevitable outcome of our enforced coalition Government: there is no coherence to the legislative programme that they produce.

Nevertheless, it is an outcome, and we must be grateful for that. Although it does not appear to have any central ideas, there are, at least, some useful measures in it that will improve the way in which Northern Ireland is governed and will progress the process of improved administration in the Province.

The Programme for Government is conservative in nature. It is supposed to be structured around five major objectives: first, to grow a dynamic and innovative economy; and secondly, to invest and build our infrastructure. Those related objectives are said to be at the heart of the Programme for Government, and no one in the House would take issue with those objectives. Rather, Members will want to support them and work tirelessly and earnestly with the Executive for their promotion and realisation. However, nowhere in the Programme for Government is there any legislation related to those objectives, and that is why so many commentators have described the Programme for Government as an aspirational document rather than a concrete legislative programme.

The lack of a wider range of specific business measures may, in part, be a testimony to the Executive's failure to obtain a peace dividend from the notoriously tight-fisted former Chancellor of the Exchequer — now the Prime Minister.

Industrial rates have been held at 30%, which is good. That helps hold down the capital costs of running a business, and I compliment the Minister of Finance and Personnel on that decision. I will be looking for more business-friendly decisions in the months and years to come. The Executive have been described as business friendly, but in the future we will need to see less hype and more indicative measures to allow them to claim that distinction.

In other spheres the Programme for Government is a little disappointing and underwhelming. The Executive's declared objective of promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being is somewhat lacking in the programme. The Pensions Bill and public health amendment Bill are parity measures, as are others. I wonder how many of the Bills that are presented to us as an exciting departure from the torpor of direct rule were, in fact, born in the womb of the Civil Service machine.

Mrs D Kelly: The legislative framework that has been outlined by the First Minister, Dr Paisley, neglected to mention the single equality Bill and the EU gender directive. It is interesting to note that at the meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week we were informed that this House's failure to introduce the legislation in line with the EU directive has financial implications for the whole of the UK. This Assembly, more than any other legislature, seems to have difficulty with equality legislation and, in particular, that which provides

equality across genders and all sexual orientations. That is a great shame on the Executive, and one has to wonder at the silence of the First Minister on that particular subject in his statement to the House.

In the last couple of weeks, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Robinson, has talked about how much of his Budget and the Programme for Government was made in Northern Ireland, and yet, as previous Members outlined, there is very little before us today that has been made in Northern Ireland. I challenge the First Minister, in his reply to the House, to outline which of the 18 Bills are peculiar to Northern Ireland. Which are the brainchild of the Executive and not actually the legislative framework that the direct rule Administration had indicated for the coming year?

The First Minister also said that the programme was particular to the people of Northern Ireland. How much consultation has taken place? How many of the promises — made by Sinn Féin and the DUP in particular in their manifestos — to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland have been transformed into legislation? I see very little evidence of that.

One striking omission, about which there has already been a lot of consultation, and which is the cause of many neighbourhood disputes, is legislation to deal with the issue of hedges and tall trees. It should be simple to address that matter, which causes great angst in communities, but it has not been outlined in today's statement. Where is it? There appears to be no intention to deliver on that.

Martina Anderson the Member for Foyle is a great political revisionist. Not only are we to believe that the last 30 or 40 years of violence did not happen, we are also to believe that Sinn Féin did not play an active role in the previous Executive; did not set before this House a Programme for Government; and did not have anything to do with the past, politically or otherwise.

Lord Morrow: I was interested to hear the Member say that the previous Executive was made up of all the parties. Does she not realise that her party is in the Executive also, and that the SDLP, therefore, has countersigned the legislative programme? When the Member is berating everyone else, she must remember that she is also berating her own colleague.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, unlike many Members of the House, I do not suffer from short-term memory loss or amnesia. I am very much aware that Margaret Ritchie plays a full, active and leading role in the Executive and that she made one of the most courageous decisions — if not the most courageous decision — that the House has ever seen.

Mr A Maginness: Unsupported by the others.

Mrs D Kelly: Indeed, Members — unsupported by many others.

That is very interesting, and Ms Anderson may well note that the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) — which was the brainchild of the SDLP, assisted by the Ulster Unionist Party, and voted against by both Sinn Féin and the DUP — has now taken the lead role in economic delivery and investment, not only in the Belfast area but right across the North.

Legislation to create an independent environmental protection agency was debated in the House, and many Members, including those in the DUP, signed up for it. However, the legislative programme does not mention that agency. In the meantime, however, our wonderful landscape, countryside, boglands, and areas of special scientific interest are being used as dumping grounds, not only by industries across the North, but by those from further afield. It is a great shame that the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has so far failed to protect our countryside and that the Executive have failed to establish an agency that will ensure the protection of the environment.

I concur with David Ford about a shared future. My party deeply regrets that the Executive do not endorse the shared future strategy and that there is nothing in the draft Programme for Government that facilitates building on reconciliation and community relations. Indeed, the draft Programme for Government contains a retraction on funding for community relations projects.

I agree with Mr Ford: the draft Programme for Government is a great disappointment, and it will do very little for Northern Ireland.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the debate on the legislative programme, and I congratulate the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive for producing such a broad-ranging and applicable agenda. It is the task of Members of the Assembly to ensure that, as public representatives, we deliver legislation that is for the betterment of Northern Ireland. It is important that we make a difference to individual lives and show that devolution is working and that it is worthwhile.

Some in the Chamber have sought, on numerous occasions, to undermine the Assembly and the Executive and to erode public confidence in this body. Several of those Members are sitting in the Chamber today. Indeed, the honourable Member for South Antrim Mr Ford has just given us a good example of such behaviour. However, I hope that today will remind Members — including those who describe themselves as being in opposition — that all good things come to those who wait.

I believe that the legislative programme, which contains objectives for improving the lives of our constituents and for improving Northern Ireland

economically, can be achieved. Time constraints and the fact that other Members wish to speak mean that although I will not discuss each Bill individually, I will comment on a couple of items that are included in the programme.

The Pensions Bill will mean that there is real improvement of the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension. It will also mean that the provision of private pensions will be simplified. That will make a difference to the most vulnerable in our society, who see every pound as a prisoner. Indeed, they will gratefully receive those pounds.

Last week, a constituent of mine mentioned the importance of the proposed charities Bill. He said that the regulation of charities was of particular interest to him in his role as a pastor who is involved in both Church and charitable work. He was absolutely delighted to hear that the proposed charities Bill was included in the legislative programme. That is an example of devolution delivering and being responsive to the needs of local people and circumstances.

As has already been mentioned, the Budget is a very important aspect of the legislative programme, in that it provides the resources from which everything else flows. I congratulate my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the excellent work that he has done so far. Despite the growls and grunts of some, the way in which experts across the board have received the Budget shows the Finance Minister in a positive light both here in the Province and further afield.

12.15 pm

In conclusion, this legislative programme is only the first that will come before this House. We have a long road to tread in order to bring Northern Ireland up to the standard to which we aspire. This is a very welcome first step, and I believe that it will be a very good start for all the people of Northern Ireland. I commend and support the motion proposed by the First Minister.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tacaím leis an rún seo fosta.

For some time, there has been a lot of expectation that legislation would be brought forward. I assume that Danny Kennedy was speaking as a Member, rather than as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, when he mentioned the motion that he put forward. We are very grateful, because it was obviously the boost that we all needed.

Mr Kennedy: It was a winner.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fair play to you, Danny.

At times, there has been a lot of impatience, and that has been reflected on occasions when people have genuinely raised concerns about the lack of legislation

coming forward. I am glad that the issue is being debated today. There is an eagerness and a desire for the Assembly to take responsibility for creating and passing legislation.

Even though the Assembly has only been going for six months, 18 pieces of legislation — and, as the First Minister said, over 100 statutory rules — have been introduced. I was not here before, and as one of the new kids on the block I am very grateful to David, Danny and Dolores for reminding me of the successes that they brought —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Yesterday, the Speaker made it quite clear that Members should be referred to by their surname, the prefix “Mr”, or their constituency. Please use that terminology.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Tá brón orm, a LeasCheann Comhairle. David Ford, Danny Kennedy and Dolores Kelly reminded us all of the legislation and business of the previous Executive, and I am very grateful for that. However, that was then; this is now. We need to take responsibility to ensure that within the draft Programme for Government — and it is a draft — we have priorities that will deliver, as the First Minister outlined, high-quality and efficient services to a world-class standard. I do not think that anyone would disagree with that. We need to reorganise services and have a review of public administration, which will affect how local government has been organised and how our health and social services are structured, to mention two examples that have already been debated in the House.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is reviewing legislation to tackle the disease outbreaks that have been witnessed in England. We need to ensure that our agriculture industry is protected as far as possible and that we have robust legislation on the way forward. What is the problem with that?

We need to make a difference in people’s lives. That is paramount, and it should be our central principle when making legislation. This is not just about making legislation for the sake of it. Unless we can produce policies and legislation that have an impact on people for the better, then the cynics in this House, of whom there are many, will be right in thinking that this is just a tick-box exercise — a way of filling time or padding things out. We need to ensure that we are not reusing a script left to us by our direct rule predecessors. We each have a responsibility to come forward with policies, legislation and procedures.

I look forward to the devolution of policing and justice, which is currently under discussion in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. I look forward to the day when we see legislation for the Irish language Act and the single equality Bill. I want to take this opportunity to say that I was disappointed

when the Irish language Act was treated so shoddily by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Having legislation is not the end of the process; it is the beginning. The greatest challenge for us will be in how we process that legislation and how we promote equality and human rights through its implementation.

If we look at the draft Programme for Government and at how we can proceed with the outworkings of the legislation that will stem from it, we will see that that will present a challenge for us all. The legislation will present a challenge for the scrutiny role of the Committees, through which we can look for a better future that is based on equality and objective need, rather than on the rhetoric of a shared future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: No teo lang ago a' cum iver a' saein whut saed if ther is a' wae tae dae ocht better..... fin it this we ken is whut is bein tried oot in this semble.

I recently came across a quotation that said:

"If there is a way to do it better — find it."

Every Member in the Assembly is attempting to do that. We know that Northern Ireland can be run in a better way than it was in the past, and we are working towards finding a new way to deal with things. It is with that reasoning that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have introduced a legislative programme that attempts to put in place a better way of doing things.

We have not been given a clean slate that is without difficulties with which to work. Our turbulent past and often indifferent direct rule Administrations mean that we have many problems that we must sort through. Inherited issues and innate differences have made Northern Ireland's path a sometimes twisting and turning one. However, in the words of Winston Churchill:

"The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

We can therefore see who the optimistic Members are in the Chamber today and who are the pessimists.

We have been given an opportunity to overcome the obstacles and to make Northern Ireland a place where our children do not experience the same problems in life that we had to deal with in the past. That is why a legislative programme has been drawn up that will begin to address the issues with which we must deal. The schedule for that programme incorporates the priorities that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has highlighted should be the first port of call.

It is not hard to see that the many problems and difficulties that the people of the Province go through daily are wide and varying. It has been hard to prioritise one worthy issue over another. However, I believe that that has been done, and I believe that those priorities

are wide ranging and fair. When the Committee was formed, its mission statement comprised five main aims: growing a dynamic, innovative society; building a peaceful, just and stable society; investing to rebuild our infrastructure; delivering modern, high-quality and effective public services; and protecting and enhancing the environment and natural resources. As well as those aims, other priorities were listed, and I am sure that other Members will speak about a few of those.

Anti-poverty strategies have been high on the list of priorities, and it is not difficult to see why. Although people from the Province are famous for their generosity to good causes, we are far from living in a Utopia that has no poverty on its doorsteps. In my constituency, such a Utopian state is, unfortunately, a far cry from reality. A list of the so-called hot spots of child poverty was brought recently to our Committee. I was dismayed to find that Ards and Strangford had the sixth-highest level of child deprivation, with 30% of children there being classified as deprived. Although I was dismayed, I must admit that I was not entirely shocked.

The Assembly discussed child poverty not so long ago. That debate brought to people's attention the fact that children other than those in Third World nations suffer too. In our previous debate on the matter, the First Minister and deputy First Minister committed to making a priority the eradication of child poverty within the next 12 years. I have asked that targets be set along the way in order that we can ensure that we can get a good hold of the position.

I am sure that no Member would argue against setting the eradication of child poverty as a top priority for the Assembly. I have heard it said that the mark of any society is the manner in which it treats its vulnerable, who, in this case, are our children. People in Northern Ireland are noted for having large hearts, and those must be shown first and foremost to our own people, supported by the idea that charity begins at home.

That idea forms the basis of another priority: the elderly people who live in the Province. Indeed, another Member spoke about that matter earlier. Since 2004, energy prices have risen by some 80%, but average incomes have risen by 6% and benefits by 2%. It is clear that the figures do not add up. That means that elderly people must choose between either keeping warm or having food in their stomachs. I am relieved that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have made a commitment to change the awful fact that 1,360 older people in Northern Ireland die each year as a result of cold weather.

I have also recently stated that the way in which widows and orphans and those who have been injured in the Troubles are treated does not do justice to the sacrifice that those people and their families made. It is therefore a right and notable priority to ensure the fair

treatment and fair representation of the victims and survivors of the Troubles.

I could touch upon many issues and highlight the facts that make it imperative that they be treated as priorities, yet time does not permit me to do so. I will leave that to other Members and close with another reminder. We are not where we want to be, not where we are going to be, but thankfully we are not where we used to be. We will get there, and we will make a difference in Northern Ireland.

I commend to the House the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Elliott: I want to put on record my thanks to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for setting out the legislative programme for the 2007-08 session.

The people of Northern Ireland have waited patiently for legislation to flow from an accountable and responsive local Executive. However, I must qualify that by saying that I want to see useful legislation coming forward, and not, as has happened in the past, legislation that is not for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. We have seen far too much legislation flow into some areas, particularly one of which I have some knowledge — agriculture. Quite a lot of the legislation brought forward by direct rule Ministers was detrimental to that industry.

I question, however, whether the legislative programme set out before the Assembly today will deliver the strategic objectives that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister set out in the draft Programme for Government. The Bills that have the potential to be ambitious are outlined in such a vague manner — although I appreciate that all the detail cannot be included at this stage — that I fear that agreement on the content of many of those Bills has not yet been reached.

In the draft Programme for Government, the Executive set out five clear priorities concerning their desire to grow a dynamic and innovative economy. Setting aside the Budget, there appears to be no legislation that deals specifically with any of the key goals outlined for that priority. It is not a legislative programme that will help deliver a more flexible workforce, create higher-value-added jobs or inspire young people either to remain in, or to return to, Northern Ireland.

On the goal of improving the infrastructure, there is no specific legislation in the programme that seeks to facilitate the achievement of that necessary priority. While the Programme for Government and the investment strategy speak grandly of a renewed infrastructure for Northern Ireland, there is little evidence of any legislative commitment associated with that. Questions surely must be asked about the importance given to the infrastructure by the legislative programme.

With regard to the goal of protecting and enhancing the environment and natural resources, I welcome the Executive's amendment to the buildings regulations, which will allow the Department of Finance and Personnel to promote sustainable development and the further enhancement and protection of the environment. However, the current environmental protection system helps only to bring small, minor, discrepancies to the fore and completely misses the big environmental destruction that takes place in the Province.

On the issue of delivering modern, high-quality and efficient services, I welcome — at least to some degree — the Executive's civil registration Bill, as well as the public authorities reform Bill and the education reform Bill, although I still hold reservations about what the exact content of those Bills will be.

I bring to the Assembly's attention the fact that the Pensions Bill is a matter of parity with the UK. The Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill merely brings us into line with the Human Rights Act 1998. The amendments to the public health legislation will merely bring us into line with the World Health Organization's regulations. I reiterate: the programme is lacking in meaningful legislation that will improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. It resembles in places the piecemeal legislation that we had come to expect in the direct rule programme.

The last priority in the draft Programme for Government that I wish to address is the Executive's desire to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being. There is not one piece of legislation in the programme that comes remotely close to addressing the issue of tolerance and inclusion. Where was the tolerance at last night's DPP meeting in south Belfast when it had to be abandoned?

Where was the tolerance at many of our parades during the summer? Where has the tolerance been for many people at the recent shootings of two police officers in the Province and the murder of Paul Quinn? It appears that the two dominant parties in the Assembly are incapable of working together on this issue, and the Programme for Government reflects that. The only way to achieve success in Northern Ireland is for the Executive to be truly committed to a shared Northern Ireland rather than being merely competing spheres of influence.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for presenting this legislative programme to the Assembly. I apologise to them and to the Deputy Speaker for my absence at the beginning of the debate; I had to attend a funeral this morning.

I wish both Ministers well during their terms of office. The SDLP has long sought partnership between this community's two traditions, and we welcome the establishment of an Executive. It is important to support such an Executive, which the SDLP hopes will, at last, provide stability and develop partnership to greater heights. The SDLP also supports the Assembly. These institutions are the only sane way forward for all the people of Northern Ireland. However, the SDLP reserves the right to criticise the Executive for proposing policies or legislation that we find to be wrong, misdirected or inappropriate, or with which we disagree.

The SDLP welcomes the legislative programme as a basis on which the Executive can build and progressively move to a better society for all our people. It would be churlish and negative not to consider the programme as a step in the right direction, putting an end to direct rule from London, which did no service for anyone in this community. We are now masters in our own house and region. That is a constructive development.

However, the legislative programme is a bit like the curate's egg — good in parts. It does not display much imagination and is a disparate collection of 18 proposed Bills that are, in the main, rather dull and prosaic. In effect, the programme is a disappointing collection of proposed legislation. Nonetheless, it is a basis on which to move forward.

Of course, there are some good parts — for example, the proposed charities Bill and Pensions Bill. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the best of the legislation will come from the Minister for Social Development and her Department.

The biggest criticism of this programme is not about what is in it, but what is not in it. For example, there is nothing in relation to the Irish language. Where is the Irish language Act that was agreed to at St Andrews? Why is that legislation not included in the legislative programme, and why is there nothing about a single equality Bill or a shared future? The Executive's legislative programme does not address the cancer that has strangled our community and caused it to go through such horrors.

That is an enormous defect in the Programme for Government and the legislative package.

The Scottish Executive have put great emphasis on tackling sectarianism. Why are the First Minister and deputy First Minister not putting similar emphasis on

that? Why are they not bringing forward legislation to deal with that evil in our midst? I look forward to a situation in which that can be remedied and to this time next year, when we will have a richer, deeper and much more imaginative programme of legislation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is a collection of Bills called an anthology?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the start of the debate; I was attending an Assembly and Executive Review Committee meeting. Since entering the Chamber, I have listened to the discussion intently. A legislative programme is a good first step. The Assembly has been in power for six months. In the eyes of many, it was not going to work; but it is working.

Some Members have set themselves up as the official Opposition or the unofficial Opposition, and then there are those who are not sure whether they are in opposition or in Government but who will make the decision someday. Despite those problems, the Assembly has moved forward. Despite the great difficulties that have existed and will continue to exist, Sinn Féin and the DUP have proven that they are prepared to move forward.

Therefore, in that context, we have the roll out of legislation. We also have the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government, which are out for consultation by Members and the wider community, and from which will flow other legislation as necessary. As has been repeated in the House today, legislation for its own sake would be a mistake. However, the greatest boost that we have given to society so far is an Executive that are up and running and working together.

When I read the Alliance Party's amendment, I thought, OK. It states:

'...but expresses its regret that the Programme represents little new thinking or innovation on the part of the Executive, and that key matters requiring legislative action remain unaddressed.'

I looked for the rest of the amendment. I apologise to Mr Ford for missing his speech, but I must assume that he outlined a lengthy list of legislation that he believes should be brought forward, because it is certainly not in the amendment. The amendment should have included the words, "such as", or, "as well as", or, "including such legislation as...", but it does not.

I wondered whether the Alliance Party intended to bring a raft of legislation through the scrutiny Committees, but it seems that it does not. Opposition is a fine place to be. It can be a comfortable place at times, and it can be a difficult place. However, opposition is about being constructive: it is about offering alternatives.

In previous mandates, in the corner of the Chamber now occupied by the Alliance Party, Mr Bob McCartney used to sit —

Mr Ford: He sat over there.

Mr O'Dowd: In my day, he sat just behind you. His avowed role was to tear down the Executive. The more I listen to the Alliance Party, the more I am convinced that its role is to tear down the Executive. I cannot understand why a party that talks about a shared future and collective responsibility and uses other such fine phrases should want to tear down an Executive that was elected by the people for the people, and which is working for the people. Perhaps that will be explained to me in the later deliberations.

Dr Farry: Read Hansard.

Mr O'Dowd: I have read the Hansard report, and that is why I am making this speech.

The motion is worth reading. However, I am still unclear as to whether the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP support the amendment.

Nevertheless, the SDLP and the UUP have three Ministers in the Executive. I look for the legislative format that those three Ministers are bringing forward. If they wish, they could bring forward a raft of measures prior to the Budget and the Programme for Government, but I see none. There is the opposition within and the opposition without, to which they refer.

Mr Elliott talked about "tolerance and inclusion." Every time I hear the Ulster Unionist Party talking about tolerance and inclusion, I almost have to pinch myself to make sure that it is serious. That party ran the state alone for 50 years, and it did not do so on the basis of tolerance and inclusion. Its reaction to the Irish language — both inside and outside the Chamber — is neither tolerant nor inclusive.

However, the Ulster Unionist Party's two Ministers could propose legislation. Mr Elliott said that this is not a legislative programme, and that it offers little or no environmental protection.

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

Mr O'Dowd: I support the motion.

Dr Farry: The question that a lot of people in Northern Ireland will be asking today is why they bothered with devolution. Devolution was supposed to be about local people taking control of their own futures and innovating on policy. However, the legislative programme that has been put forward by the Executive today offers anything but that.

There was great hope in our society for change; however, at some stage, that hope has to be turned into delivery. The manifestos of the various parties prior to the Assembly election were all worthy documents, and were full of great proposals regarding the issues that they would address once they were in power. We have seen little of that today.

The legislative programme outlines a mere 18 Bills. Those Bills are about parity, and about bringing Northern

Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. Frankly, we could have simply tagged on to those Bills through legislative consent motions. The Bills are about internal housekeeping and bringing matters into line because of human rights implications. Furthermore, there is carry-over legislation from direct rule — measures that direct rulers were going to take in any case. The ball had already started rolling on a raft of proposals that are only now coming to fruition. Where is the new thinking? Where are the fingerprints of the four parties in the Executive on this legislative programme? They are not there.

Mr O'Dowd asked what else could be done. I am not sure what he has been doing for the past six months, or whether he has listened to any of the debates that have taken place in this Chamber, during which people have set out what needs to be done in this society.

Issues that have been discussed include legislation on a shared future and a single equality Bill, which is something very close to the heart of Sinn Féin. Neither of those is anywhere to be seen. Other issues discussed were the Football (Offences) Act 1991; mental-health issues and implementing the Bamford Review; free personal care for the elderly; a marine Bill; and the establishment of an environmental protection agency. Those are only seven issues; the list goes on and on.

The Alliance Party has its own vision of society. We have knowledge of the proposals that this Assembly must adopt to move this society forward. I am afraid that the parties in the Executive lack that vision.

Stephen Moutray appeared to be taking his turn as the DUP Back-Bencher to praise the First Minister without asking any difficult questions.

Martina Anderson contributed to the debate. It is important to welcome Sinn Féin to, essentially, administering British rule in Ireland, because that is what the legislative programme is all about. *[Interruption.]* She talked about people having hope for the future. I wonder if the people in Derry can survive on hope, rather than actual delivery.

Danny Kennedy referred to his private Members' motion and how impressed he was that the Executive responded to that motion so quickly by producing a legislative programme. He answered his own question: it took one week to write.

Dolores Kelly of the SDLP referred to the single equality Bill. That is a crucial matter that the Assembly must take forward. It has been around for a number of years, and it has been discussed by the Assembly. The failure of the Executive to bring that issue forward illustrates their inability to agree on the fundamental issues that face our society.

2.15 pm

The legislative programme is essentially that of the lowest common denominator. Only policies on which both the DUP and Sinn Féin can sign off are included in it. On difficult issues, on which agreement cannot be found, nothing will happen and no action will be taken. The same situation is likely to occur when it comes to policy for post-primary education, on which we still await the Minister of Education's proposals.

Jimmy Spratt referred to attempts to erode public confidence in the Executive — I fail to see how the legislative programme will inspire public confidence. Carál Ní Chuilín talked about our only having been here for six months. The Brown Government in the UK have been in office only since June. Their legislative programme contains more than 20 Bills — substantive legislation — yet ours contains a mere 18. In case Members still think that we have been here only since May, I remind the Executive parties that they have been funded by the Northern Ireland Office. Special advisers were funded, from as early as January 2007 — if not earlier — specifically for the purpose of devising a Programme for Government so that the Executive could hit the ground running. However, we have had nothing but fudge and delay. Crucial issues have been neglected. As a result, the legislative programme requires serious reflection and revisiting. I urge support for the amendment.

The First Minister: This has been a most interesting, and most amusing, debate. I am glad that Members are in good spirits. They seem to be very happy. Some have been talking doom, but they talked it with great glee and joy. If they were sincere in what they were putting forth, they would not have done so in such a joyful way.

Out, beyond the Assembly, down among the men and women of Northern Ireland, there are people who are happy that we are moving in the right direction. Those people should be encouraged. No matter what scorn is poured on our efforts, and no matter what is done to wreck the solid foundations on which we hope to build, those people should take heart and not look on what we have heard today as a true reflection of what the Assembly is about.

Men and women Members of the Assembly want to see it work, and they believe that they have a responsibility to each individual voter. To those Members who made so many wild assertions, I suggest that, if they have such a wonderful legislative programme, they share it with us. If they have all those goodies in their little cupboard, will they not open it? After all, it is coming up to Christmas. Have some Christmas spirit — encourage us to look into the cupboard, take something out and partake of it. However, they will not do that. They stand there, guarding their cupboard and not letting us see what is in it. Surely if they had all these suggestions,

they would reveal them. However, they will get the opportunity to do that. This debate is not for dotting i's and crossing t's; rather, it is a debate that allows us to take a general look at what is before us.

Let us see what contribution is made in Committee by those Members who have such wisdom. Pearls of wisdom — according to their own definition — were dropping from their tongues and their false teeth. Let us hear some definite contributions to the debate on what should be done to help us to move in the right direction.

I remind the Alliance Party, as I do those other parties that criticise, that it is part of the Assembly. It cannot escape the responsibility that has been placed on it.

I know that some of them got here with a not very large number of votes, but they still have a responsibility, so let us hear what they have to say.

A Member: It is in the Hansard report.

The First Minister: I am afraid that despite my having very good glasses, made by the most expert person in east Belfast, and despite my having carefully read the contributions made by certain Members, there is nothing to see. It is darkness and the shadow of death. *[Laughter.]*

However, there is such a thing as resurrection; there may be a resurrection in the Chamber, and Members may start to surprise us. I am told that Northern Ireland has stood a lot of surprises in the past, and on occasions I have been surprised as I sit at this Bench and listen to what is said.

Mr Kennedy: I have been shocked.

The First Minister: I am glad that you were shocked for once, because you needed to be shocked. *[Laughter.]* If the one achievement of my political life is that I have shocked Danny Kennedy, then that is something to write down. I hope that I shall soon receive another honour as the victor in the race.

We must face up to the matters that are on the list. I welcome the fact that the SDLP will take all the glory for what will happen when we come to the important part about people who need help. My Department has had meetings with all the Churches, and we have talked to them about the issues that they are concerned about. The Bill that we have before us is better than any Bill in England, Scotland or Wales, and the Churches are satisfied. We must be doing well to have satisfied all the Churches in this country. That result came about through good, concise, controversial talking among us. Every man produced his goods and laid them on the table, and we made good progress. When the Bill comes before the House, even our enemies will have to admit that progress has been made. Similar progress could be made on all the Bills if we put our minds and energies to it.

I welcome the fact that we will go into Committee and that we will examine and improve the proposals, and add new proposals if necessary, and that the Bills that we will have in this House will be as a result of the consensus of the views that win out in the arguments as we have the debate — a debate that everyone should welcome.

I trust that at the end of this period of entering into the statute book the legislation that has been decided in this way, the House will be at the opening of a door that will open wider, and the opening of a road that is straight and narrow in one sense, but broad in another. That is what we should look forward to, and so I say to those who are dismal, “Cheer up”. The best has yet to come, and the cupboard of the Alliance Party will be open to all this Christmas. Get to it quickly and see all the goodies, and then thank them for stealing the menu from us.

2.30 pm

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 32; Noes 55.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Mr O’Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr W Clarke and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Legislative Programme for the 2007/08 session, as agreed by the Executive on 18 October, and conveyed in the letter of 19 October 2007 from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Dangerous Dogs Legislation

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

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of recent revelations about dog fighting in Northern Ireland, and of attacks by dogs on persons and other dogs in recent years, to review the dangerous dogs legislation with a view to providing enhanced protection in terms of both animal welfare and public safety.

My party colleague Naomi Long has campaigned actively throughout the direct rule years on this issue, with a view to strengthening legislation on dangerous dogs. We are glad of the opportunity to bring the matter to the attention of the House.

The current legislation stems from the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, which applies to the whole of the UK. Its introduction was accompanied by significant tabloid attention, following a series of dog attacks that attracted a great deal of publicity at the time. The Act was supplemented by the Dogs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, which gave power to courts and magistrates to order the destruction of dogs.

It is the opinion of dog control professionals that the 1991 Act was something of a rush job; a reaction to events that had not been properly thought through. It concentrated on banning a limited number of breeds of dog, the only one normally found in Northern Ireland being the pit-bull type, which, incidentally, is not a breed, but a cross-breed or a type that is normally crossed with Staffordshire terriers, mastiffs, or even Rottweilers. The other banned breeds are the Japanese tosa, the Dogo Argentino and the Fila Brasileiro; I am glad that I managed to get through those. The Japanese tosa may be present in Northern Ireland; no one is quite sure. It is a cross-bred type of dog, but the other two are unknown here. There is no mention in the 1991 Act of various other, equally dangerous breeds, such as the Japanese Akita, or, for that matter, Rottweilers, Dobermanns or even Alsations.

Therein lies the first problem: it can be difficult to identify the type of dog, and it is not uncommon for expert witnesses to have to come across from England at considerable expense to support a dog warden’s opinion when there is a dispute about the type of dog involved. The second problem is that many dogs that fall within the pit-bull type description, but which have not been bred for fighting, are friendly and placid dogs. They make great pets, but under the current legislation they are banned and are being seized and destroyed by dog

wardens, quite often against the wardens' own better judgement.

Magistrates in Great Britain have the discretion to deal with situations in different ways. They can order that the dog be neutered, spayed or microchipped, or that it must be muzzled and kept on a lead when it is outside. Furthermore, a magistrate can order that adequate third-party insurance is maintained by the owner. No such discretion is currently available here, and dog wardens have told me about many cases of unnecessary destruction of dogs, simply because they looked like a pit-bull type.

The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 gives limited powers of entry to dog wardens. If a warden wishes to enter a property, a warrant must be obtained from the court, and even then, entry cannot be forced, making investigations of complaints about the existence of dangerous dogs very difficult.

I acknowledge and commend the long-term animal welfare work of the Ulster Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA). However, the organisation is hamstrung by its limited powers. The USPCA requires the PSNI to be present when it executes its duties. It has no power in relation to dangerous dogs, unless those dogs are being mistreated. The existence of dog-fighting rings and the breeding of dogs for fighting in Katesbridge and Rosslea, to name but two areas, have been highlighted recently. USPCA officers investigated those incidents, and, if I may say so, given the nature and mentality of the people who would set one dog on another to fight to the death, they did so at great personal risk, and deserve our highest praise.

2.45 pm

However, as the USPCA operates under the animal welfare legislation, it is permitted to remove only dogs that show signs of mistreatment. Healthy looking pit bull terriers, which have presumably not yet been involved in a fight, cannot be taken. They must be referred to the dog wardens for action, with consequent delay and the possibility that the dogs may be removed and as, I have mentioned, the problems of court orders and access.

A further area of difficulty is the lack of effective legislation in the Republic of Ireland. Pit-bull types are not illegal across the border, which makes import and breeding relatively easy in Northern Ireland. Present legislation makes dog attacks on livestock a matter for criminal prosecution, but not an attack, even fatal, by one dog on another. Recently, there have been well-documented examples in Northern Ireland of family pets being savaged by aggressive types, including one in which a Labrador died while protecting a child from attack.

Professionals would like to see a change in the licensing system. Instead of a laborious process of issuing a £5 licence every year, which probably costs £10 to issue, it would be good sense to issue a one-off,

lifetime licence. Such a licence would perhaps cost £100 and would include a free microchip. I understand that that could be easily done by local councils and would be quite acceptable to them.

For years, it has been widely accepted that the current legislation is unsatisfactory. My party colleague Naomi Long has campaigned consistently for the strengthening of the law, but the Northern Ireland Office has failed to act. Now that we have a devolved Assembly, I hope that the Chamber will support this opportunity for action. The Alliance Party's motion is in the form of a request to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to undertake a review involving all interested parties, local councils, the USPCA, the Dogs Trust, the PSNI and vets.

Enhanced protection for the welfare of animals and public safety must be provided. A workable list of dangerous breeds, which notes that some dogs that are not classified as such are potentially a risk to public safety, must be established. Across the UK, 50% of dog bites that are inflicted on humans are inflicted by German shepherds, or Alsatis. Currently, that breed is not formally regarded as a dangerous dog.

By whatever means, the disgusting practice of dog fighting, and breeding dogs solely for that purpose, must be eradicated. A legislative framework must be provided that can enable effective action. Effective cross-border co-operation is needed to, as far as possible, harmonise the law. A licensing system, which is easily administered, and microchipping of all dogs —

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I have spoken to the Taoiseach about this matter, and he is aware that the way in which dogs can be brought in from the South of Ireland to the North is very dangerous for us all. The Taoiseach promised me that his Government would look into the matter, they have now announced that they are doing so and that they will move in that direction. That is to be welcomed; it is at least one step in the right direction.

Mr Lunn: I am grateful to the First Minister for that clarification. Action on the part of the Irish Government is something that is badly needed.

More attention must be given to the behaviour of dogs and their owners. It is clearly not all down to the dogs. Quite frequently, the owners can encourage their animals to exhibit aggressive behaviour. It is almost a badge of courage to have a dog on a lead that looks, and probably is, ferocious. We must ensure that our children can play without fear of attack, but also that a docile family pet is not condemned purely because of its appearance. I call on the Minister to begin a process of consultation, and I look forward to her response today.

Lord Morrow: The DUP supports the motion, and we commend the proposer and the seconder for securing the debate today on this important issue.

Dr McCrea, the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, regrets that he cannot be present because he is chairing a meeting of that Committee. It was he who pioneered a campaign in the Assembly against dog fighting. He brought the practice to the attention of the Department and asked that it introduce effective legislation. He informed me that he expects the Department to come back to him in early December 2007. The House should take comfort from that, and all Members are looking forward to that day. I commend the motion to the House.

In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there has been a clear focus on the despicable and illegal activity of dog fighting, which is no longer a secret. Recently, 'Spotlight' demonstrated the depth of the problem, and I reiterate my commendation of the BBC for that superb programme. It did a spectacular job, which leaves us to wonder why others could not have done so long ago. The programme demonstrated the BBC's tenacity, and Members owe a debt of gratitude to the programme's producers and particularly to the young lady who went to great lengths to expose the practice.

The grey area of differentiation between pit bulls, and pit-bull types, and, for example, Staffordshire bull terriers must be eradicated. Pit bulls and similar dogs are not pets, and I see no reason why anyone would keep them as such, or why the issue is not being dealt with.

The case highlighted on 'Spotlight' was not an isolated one. In Dungannon, an underground network managed to make three out of four dogs that had previously been noted vanish mysteriously — a spectacular achievement. I was pleased that the magistrate who heard the case was steadfast and arrived at the right decision. He stopped short of imposing a jail term on the perpetrator only because of a last-minute change of plea to guilty.

Sadly, defence protestations that the individual was only looking after the dog and had no part in dog fighting of any nature, were far from the truth, as the 'Spotlight' exposé proved. He was not the only person involved in that dreadful activity but was part of a dog-fighting ring that operated in shady circumstances and made a lucrative income. Many sick-minded individuals consider such brutality to be entertaining but seem not to care that they are creating a potential death trap for the general public.

Dogs are known to be territorial, and protective of those to whom they are faithful. When those characteristics are combined with aggression-enhancing drugs, baiting by other dogs when tethered and heightened training, there is a highly volatile mix of anger. Make no mistake about it: in such circumstances, it would be kinder to the dogs to remove them from their owners. They would shed fewer tears for their dogs than for the loss of cash or the prospect of facing prosecution.

I commend Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council for its clampdown on, and prosecution of, such actions. It is one of few councils, if not the only one, to have gone the distance in tackling the issue of dangerous dogs. Its officials are to be congratulated and commended for the way in which they set about tackling the problem. Council officers operate by carrying out swoops, backed up by the PSNI, because suspects rarely want to admit enforcement officers to their premises, and staff have been subjected to threats. I would have liked to say a great deal more, but my time is up.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When considering the motion, we must take stock of the significant failures in the implementation of existing provisions, including those relating to muzzles, leads and the minimum age limit for handlers. No specific breed of dog is a danger to humans, but certain breeds, such as pit bull terriers, were originally bred to fight other dogs. If such a breed were to attack a human, they would cause serious injury due to their natural aggression and powerful jaws. We must not impose a blanket ban on certain breeds of dogs, as those with no history of aggression will also suffer and be put down. A blanket ban on certain breeds may only succeed in shifting the focus away from owner responsibility.

Any breed of dog can behave well or badly, and a dog's response to a human is often down to the way in which it has been treated. More often than not, the fault lies with the owner and their irresponsible treatment of the dog. The Humane Society in the United States has dispelled many of the common myths associated with dangerous dogs: the typical perpetrator is usually a family pet, not a stray; the victims are usually children under the age of 10; most bites occur while the dog is leashed, fenced, chained or indoors; and almost half of all attacks occur on the street or on the dog owner's property.

Over the years, a spate of sensational media reports has focused on two breeds — the pit bull terrier and the Rottweiler. Those breeds can be aggressive, but statistics show that the best predictor of whether a dog will bite is if it has been neutered: an unsterilised male dog is three times more likely to bite than a neutered animal. The other major indicator is whether a dog has been properly socialised and trained. It is not necessarily the breed that makes a dog dangerous, but the attitude of the owner. For example, a well-trained, neutered Rottweiler will probably make a better pet than a poorly socialised Dachshund. There will always be good and bad dogs among any breeds, and it is impossible to ban all dogs that have the potential to bite. However, it is important to ensure that dog owners behave responsibly.

Sinn Féin promotes an approach to dangerous dogs that includes the rigorous enforcement of existing laws and provisions to protect the public. That should include the use of muzzles, proper restraining leads and a minimum age limit for handlers, particularly when

walking potentially volatile breeds in parks and other public spaces.

All dogs should be licensed and registered, and all owners must provide proper, secure and humane conditions for their dogs. Increased revenue from licensing could provide additional moneys to the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) to ensure better monitoring and enforcement. Measures designed to enhance the traceability of dangerous dogs and to ensure owner responsibility should be introduced, including the microchipping of dogs and the registration of owners' details.

Dog training should be made available and it should be mandatory for listed breeds. Any ban on dogs should have safeguards. An appeal mechanism must be put in place whereby an owner will be allowed to keep their dog if they can establish that they are a responsible owner, that the dog is well behaved and that it has not been the subject of any legitimate complaint to a local council authority. However, owners of listed breeds should be required to have public liability insurance. Councils must be allocated increased funding for additional dog wardens.

On a related issue, regulations governing so-called puppy farms must be urgently introduced and enforced to ensure the humane treatment of dogs and their puppies. Sinn Féin will work for that approach to be implemented on an all-island basis to ensure that the measures contained apply equally to all the people and dogs of the island. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Elliott: I am the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, but I am not speaking in that capacity today.

I thank Mr Lunn and Mrs Long for proposing the motion, as it highlights the significant and serious issue of dangerous dogs in Northern Ireland. Many people believe that the problem should have been tackled a long time ago.

As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, on several occasions, I have made clear my full support for an increase in legislative measures to protect the public — and animals — from dangerous dogs. Public safety must be a top priority for elected representatives in Northern Ireland. My colleagues Lady Sylvia Hermon and Lord Laird have raised the issue of dangerous dogs in the House of Commons and the House of Lords respectively. The Ulster Unionist Party treats the issue of dangerous dogs with the utmost importance. As with any legislation produced by the Assembly, and other legislatures, the control of dangerous dogs must be reviewed and updated regularly.

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

3.00 pm

Given the expansion of the media, and how readily stories reach a large audience, the public appreciation of dog attacks has undoubtedly increased in recent years. It is no bad thing that the public are aware of the risk that dangerous dogs pose. In preparation for this debate, I found an article about a dog attack in August, which some Members may remember; a six-year-old girl from London, who was on holiday in County Antrim, was attacked by two Rottweilers. After the attack, the girl's mother said:

"They were attacking her like a bit of meat, eating her and biting her."

The girl asked her mother if she was going to die. Fortunately, death was avoided in that instance, but the injury was traumatic. The thought of hearing my young daughter say those words — as the result of a dog attack or anything else — chills me to the bone. Attacks like that highlight the importance of having legislation that is true to its purpose of protecting the public. Figures from the DARD (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development) website, which were updated on 8 November, reveal that up until — but not including — the fourth quarter of 2006, 117 owners were prosecuted for minor dog offences, 27 owners were prosecuted for serious dog offences including attacks, and 14 owners were prosecuted for breeding dogs for fighting. After the recent BBC revelations about large-scale dog-fighting circuits in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, I expect the last figure to increase this year and in the future.

However, it is notable that the figures until the fourth quarter of 2006 were good compared with previous years; in 2003, 265 owners were prosecuted for minor dog offences alone. That improvement is to be applauded and should provide an impetus to reduce the numbers further. That is why I am in favour of toughening dangerous dogs legislation. However, when creating new legislation, Members must ensure that it does not impinge on, or undermine, the many wonderful dog owners across Northern Ireland who do not treat their animals badly. As people in Northern Ireland love animals, any further legislation on the control of dogs must have their respect or it will fail. That is why it is vital that caring dog owners, whose pets pose no threat, do not suffer from new legislation.

Although it is often easy to blame a dog for attacking innocent people, the way that a minority of people treat their dogs is disgraceful. The Assembly must encourage those in society who hurt dogs, or encourage dogs to fight, to stop. If someone beats an animal, it will become hostile to that person and people around that person.

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

Mr Elliott: Some of the recent attacks have not been because of the natural habit of the dog involved.

Mr Burns: I am pleased that the motion has been tabled, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on it. There have been serious problems with dangerous dogs in my constituency of South Antrim in recent times. One incident involved an attack on the Doherty family, who were out walking their pets in Randalstown Forest Park. The incident received widespread media attention at the time and was covered on last night's 'Insight' programme. I will not go into much detail, but had it not been for the heroics of the family pet — a golden Labrador named Troy, who died from his injuries shortly after the attack — the incident would have been more serious. The attacking dog was shot dead by the police, and the family escaped with cuts, bites, scrapes and bruises, but their much-loved pet was not so lucky.

The definition of a dangerous dog must be made clearer in legislation. One often talks about pit bull terriers, and pit-bull types are named as banned breeds in legislation. However, it is ironic that — as far as I am aware — many of those dangerous dogs are mongrels and not pure-bred American pit bull terriers. I do not intend to dwell on the matter, but a clearer definition of illegal dogs is necessary. The loopholes that permit cross-breeds, such as the Irish Staffordshire bull terrier, must be closed. Regardless of what changes are made to the law, the Assembly must consider how future legislation is enforced.

Considering the recent accusations of criminal and paramilitary involvement in dog fighting, I am not sure that we can leave the enforcement in the hands of district councils and dog wardens. There must be greater police involvement, and the courts must make an example of those people who ignore the law and continue to keep dangerous and illegal dogs. I call for stiffer penalties in the legislation, and the courts must be particularly tough on those people who breed and train dogs for fighting. We must also make it much easier to prosecute individuals who break the law. I appreciate that progress is being made in that area, but more needs to be done.

Stronger legislation should be implemented, hand in hand with more education. Dog attacks can occur for any number of reasons: the dog may have received inadequate training, had a poor upbringing or lived in an unsuitable environment, for instance. Therefore, all dog owners should be encouraged to be responsible, especially if they own breeds such as Alsatis, Dobermanns and boxers, which are legal but potentially dangerous. If those dogs are raised correctly, I am sure that they can be loyal and loving pets, but owners must be educated on how to care correctly for their dogs to ensure that they are stable and well disciplined.

I hope that the public will not see the debate as an attempt to demonise certain types of dogs: that is not my intention. It is my intention to condemn the criminals, highlight animal welfare issues and enhance public safety. I hope that the Minister will pay close attention

to those issues when she eventually reviews the legislation. I support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: When I read the motion, I was reminded of an incident in Portstewart during the summer, which involved visitors to the town and their pet dogs. The local newspaper reported how the two pet dogs attacked and bit an elderly man and a teenage girl, and attacked another dog. On further reading of the newspaper report, I was amazed to discover that local officers were unable to remove the dogs that were suspected of the attacks, because they had returned to their owners' property. In the Minister's review of the current legislation, I hope that she will consider enshrining in law the right for council officials to enter property — with PSNI support, if necessary — to seize dogs that have carried out such attacks.

I stress that in this particular case, the dogs' owners did the sensible thing and handed them over to council officials.

I urge the Minister to sort out the legal definition of the term "dangerous dog". The law currently does not have a sufficiently enforceable description, and in some cases in England, that has created many difficulties. I also acknowledge fully that although any dog can be dangerous, specific breeds are listed as dangerous. However, given that that list is in no way exhaustive, there is scope to extend and amend it continually. I would go so far as to ask the Minister to make it illegal in Northern Ireland to own certain dogs, such as pit bull terriers.

The 'Spotlight' programme showed the horrific purposes for which such dogs are used. It demonstrated that it would be better for everyone if those dogs were not permitted in Northern Ireland, full stop. I thank Mandy McAuley and the BBC team for bringing such an excellent programme to our screens, even though it covered an horrific topic.

The programme also showed how science can help to provide a DNA database that can be used to identify a particular family tree of fighting dogs. I urge the Minister to consider using such a database to assist in creating a legal definition of breeds and types of dogs.

Legislative intervention will never permanently solve any problem, but a strong legally defined base will avoid as much confusion as possible. People will then be spared much of the fear of being subjected to a dog attack.

Although the topic must be addressed, I have discussed only a small part of it. However, I appeal to the Minister to address that — and other connected matters — with speed and determination in order to produce workable and practical legislation.

I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I also support the motion.

Although I do not want to speak for too long, any review of the matter will take some time. Given that the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 obviously did not deal adequately with such dogs, I think that the Minister will take the necessary time to get the legislation right this time. Certain breeds of dog were banned under the 1991 Act, but of course, many of those who breed dogs can get round that, so we are still at the point at which no one is sure how to proceed.

There are far too many dogs, full stop, in some council areas and in urban areas such as Enniskillen. People must take responsibility for that. Some buy large dogs, and, most days of the week, they keep them alone in small gardens when they are at work. The dogs are then turned out on to the street, causing problems, such as fouling. The dogs are also taken to parks, where similar problems are caused.

Reducing the number of such dogs before they can become pets would resolve many of those problems. Dog attacks against people, and instances of stray dogs attacking sheep, which is a problem for farmers, would also decrease. That reduction could be achieved either by councils enforcing regulations against owners, or licences could be granted that must prove that a dog has been neutered and that it will be kept somewhere suitable.

I am not against people keeping pets, but they must be looked after. This is the time of year when parents buy their children dogs as pets without realising that the dogs may grow into large animals that will need to be cared for long after Christmas is over. People must realise that they must take that into account. Councils — and everyone else — face great expense when dogs are not looked after. Up to 50,000 dogs have to be put down in Ireland every year, and that is by far the worst figure in Europe where the control of dogs is concerned. Controlling numbers is a big problem.

Pets are sold on the black-market economy, and given that a great deal of money is involved, some kennel breeders in Ireland are against what the Assembly is trying to do.

3.15 pm

There are also people involved in hunting, including badger-baiting, badger-hunting — attacking badgers in their lairs — and fox-hunting. Dogs that are trained to do such things are also trained to fight and, therefore, they become dangerous dogs, even though they are not necessarily in the small category of dogs that we are talking about today. A lot of other things go on behind the scenes that none of us wants to pretend is the case. There is an undercurrent of a black-market economy and a black-market way of doing things out there. Those issues must be taken on board, and recent television programmes have shown that to be the case.

The type of dog is not the problem, as there are several ways round that issue. There are several ways of breeding hybrids of different dogs so that they can be trained to fight. Training dogs to fight is the big problem, not necessarily the type of dog. A lot of the dogs referred to can be very docile if they are properly trained and looked after.

The review needs to get it right this time, and that will take time. The Minister will look at all the difficulties and answer some of the questions. For example, are councils best placed to enforce the law, or should it be the PSNI, or both? How long will the proposed changes to the legislation take? What progress has the Twenty-six Counties made in its legislation for improving the situation? Is an all-Ireland approach being taken, and how will it be progressed?

The ordinary person on the street must think before buying dogs — or any pets — without having somewhere decent to keep them, especially at this time of year. Animals need space and looking after, and it is vital that people take that into account. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I support the motion and thank the Member for bringing this vitally important issue to the Assembly. None of us in the Chamber should underestimate how serious the matter is. It has become extremely concerning, given that statistics show that Northern Ireland has earned the disgraceful title of dog-fighting capital of Europe. Sick individuals — they can be described as nothing else — with a competitive bloodlust for illicit financial reward are training dogs with an aggressive nature to fight each other. Sad to say, there can be as much legislation as possible, but if people are intent on stooping to such low levels, then I fail to see how individuals like that can be combated, except by ensuring that they are not permitted to be in society, other than behind bars where they rightfully belong.

As recent television documentaries have shown, people are moving in a shady underworld and using ruthless, unscrupulous methods to heighten the antagonism of these animals until, when they face each other — goaded by trainers and owners — they end up tearing each other apart. If a dog survives the fight, the injuries and mutilations are horrific and, due to the illegal nature of the activity, those dogs are not taken to vets because it is too late for any treatment.

We saw on television last night what happens to dogs which are past repair or do not make the mark. Perhaps it is the human element that should be closely examined. Those who are caught up in this barbaric practice have no viable place in our society. Those people with their ruthless, unscrupulous, bloodthirsty mentalities should be off our streets.

However, not all dangerous dogs are the product of dog fighting. Some breeds are highly charged by nature, and any distraction or antagonism, however innocent,

can provoke a violent reaction encompassing sustained attack. As a pet lover, I have a terrier at home, and it can be as vicious as any other breed if antagonised by my children — or by me. Of course, some people say that if they were dogs they would bite me anyway, but that is how some things are in life.

The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr McHugh has already referred to the attack on a six-year old girl in my constituency during the summer. Having been in contact with the family, I am pleased to report that Sophia is on the mend, and I look forward to her family's return to Northern Ireland next summer. That young girl sustained severe injuries during a continued assault, and her mother was injured while attempting to protect her.

It has already been said that that incident involved two rottweilers, which, although the breed is not prohibited, it has a reputation for being antagonistic. Their owner was gravely concerned and took swift action by destroying the dogs immediately after the attack. Those and other dogs with an aggressive trait are particularly strong and, as on that occasion, are capable of throwing a child around like a rag doll. Any animal with that mentality must be kept under the strictest supervision if it is out in public. It must not be a risk to society.

The incident in my constituency raises an issue concerning the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. I have been in correspondence with the family and the Tourist Board. The family wrote that they do not want any other family to go through such an ordeal and that it is only fair that parents and children visiting Northern Ireland do so in the full knowledge that all precautions have been put in place to protect them.

The response to my correspondence with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board was less than satisfying, and I intend to follow up on the issues that I raised with them. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Someone has a mobile phone switched on, which interferes with the transmission system. Please turn it off.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Naomi Long and Trevor Lunn for raising the issues of dangerous dogs and dog fighting. Those are serious matters that concern us all, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have such an open and frank debate and to be able to outline how I intend to address some of the points that have been raised. I have listened to all of the contributions, and there is little to disagree with from any of the parties.

Like other Members, I have been concerned about this issue for some time. I have had particular difficulties in my constituency, and I have been working with officials and others towards a review of the legislation.

I agree with many of the concerns raised by Trevor, Naomi and other Members and, like them, I want to see an end to attacks by dogs and an improvement in public safety.

I also want to see an end to the immoral, cruel and deplorable so-called sport of dog fighting and to the sickening practices that surround it. Like any right-thinking person, I find the issues that were so graphically highlighted in two recent BBC documentaries and in last night's UTV 'Insight' programme to be totally abhorrent, and I agree that steps should be taken to rid society of that scourge.

Before dealing specifically with the concerns raised this afternoon, it would be helpful if I were to outline the legislative background to the two key issues that were raised in the debate. The control of dogs, including dangerous dogs, is regulated by the Dogs Order 1983, as amended by the Dangerous Dogs Order 1991. Dog fighting is separately legislated for in the Welfare of Animals (NI) Act 1972.

The Dogs Order 1983 provides for dog licensing by district councils and sets out provisions concerning stray dogs and attacks by dogs. Under that order, dog owners, or those in charge of dogs, must keep them under control at all times, and an owner or keeper is guilty of an offence if his or her dog worries livestock or attacks a person. Although it is not specifically an offence for one dog to attack another dog, damage to property, which could include a pet, is actionable by civil proceedings.

I will consider whether that must be amended as part of a wider review, which I will come to later. I particularly want to review attacks on guide dogs or on family pets, as were so graphically illustrated by Deirdre Doherty and the terrible ordeal that her family suffered.

Under the Local Government Act (NI) 1972, district councils can make by-laws; it is common practice, for example, to make by-laws that require dogs to be leashed in parks.

The Dogs (NI) Order 1983, as amended by the Dangerous Dogs (NI) Order 1991, designates certain types of dogs, such as the pit bull terrier, the possession of which is an offence. Such dogs are generally known as "dangerous" or "fighting" dogs.

District councils are responsible for enforcing that legislation and may seize any dog that appears to be a banned type. The maximum penalty for owning a banned-type dog here is, on conviction, up to six months' imprisonment, a fine of £5,000 or both.

I express gratitude to the many councils and to their dog wardens, in particular, who have been very active in their attempts to deal with dangerous dogs and other dog control issues. The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Gerry McHugh mentioned Dungannon

council, but Ballymena Borough Council was the first council in Britain and Ireland to introduce an amnesty for dogs and many others have followed that initiative.

To date, there have been few specific calls for new legislation on dangerous dogs. Last year, my Department wrote to the chief executives of all the district councils in the North seeking their views on the operation of the Order and asked for views on difficulties that might prevent effective enforcement of the legislation.

The responses showed that some district councils felt that, for a variety of reasons, they were not best placed or equipped to enforce the aspects of the legislation relating to dangerous dogs. Councils expressed serious reservation about the health and safety of their dog wardens in carrying out their duties and, in particular, when seizing banned dogs. As a result, some councils have called for the PSNI to have a greater role in enforcement.

On 31 October this year, I wrote to the Chief Constable requesting that we meet to discuss the issues of public safety and any role of the PSNI in the enforcement of dog control or dangerous dogs legislation. Our discussion will take into account the public safety aspects raised by the debate. I want to take the views of the PSNI before reaching any conclusions, and I hope to meet its representatives shortly.

Councils also commented that they experienced difficulties in proving in court whether a dog was of a banned type. On that point, the legislation states clearly that if the prosecution alleges that a dog is of a banned type, such as a pit bull, a court will assume that it is so, unless the owner can provide the court with sufficient evidence to the contrary.

Figures supplied by councils to my Department show that 10 individuals have been found guilty of offences involving dangerous dogs in the first six months of this year alone.

The Order enables my Department, through subordinate legislation, to extend the types of dogs that are banned if evidence is forthcoming that they appear to be the types of dogs that have been bred specifically for fighting. To date, there have been few calls to extend the list, but I will seek advice on that matter from experts. My officials also intend to raise that issue with the USPCA shortly.

Some councils commented that their officials require training on issues surrounding dangerous dogs. Several suggested that a panel of experts be made available as expert witnesses during court cases to advise on types of dangerous dogs. Neither suggestion requires legislative change.

Recent reports from welfare interests and others suggest that any problems that we might have in enforcing dangerous dogs legislation are a result of its

having been rushed through as a knee-jerk reaction to dog attacks in 1991. If that is so, I do not want to repeat that mistake. Therefore, I feel that it would be inappropriate to introduce new legislation in the short term in response to recent documentaries without full examination of the enforcement issue. However, I intend to review the current legislation in order to consider properly how to proceed and consult on the way forward.

Many of the issues raised by councils and members of the public have principally concerned enforcement, and, as I said, I am seeking to address them.

However, in undertaking a longer-term review of the legislative framework, I will seek the advice of experts and those with experience of enforcement locally, as well as in Britain and the Twenty-six Counties. Therefore, after my meeting with the PSNI, I intend to meet representatives of district councils in order to hear their views at first hand, because they are the people who are often in the firing line on a range of issues such as enforcement and identification.

3.30 pm

Mr Storey: The Minister referred to experts. Will she assure the House that she will be satisfied that those whom she contacts are, indeed, experts? Anyone who watched last night's 'Insight' programme and saw the activities in which a particular individual was involved would question the expertise of that person, who claimed to have a wealth of knowledge on the subject.

Ms Gildernew: That is why I am talking to representatives of district councils, the PSNI, the USPCA and others. I do not believe that one individual, or a number of individuals who claim to be experts, are the only people to whom we should listen. Therefore, I will consider a wide range of views. I will also consider the views of the Members who have contributed to this debate, and I will check the Hansard report, because some practical suggestions have been made.

Recent TV documentaries suggested that enforcement of dangerous dogs legislation is hindered by different rules, North and South. That has meant that dogs that are banned here can be imported into the South, where they are currently legal. From there, it is alleged that they often make their way back to the North.

I am grateful for the speedy and helpful intervention of the First Minister, who, after the programmes aired, immediately contacted the Taoiseach to discuss the difficulties with him. That intervention resulted in the South taking immediate action to tackle the problem through the introduction of new primary legislation that will bring the South into line with our existing legislation. That new legislation is expected to come before the Dáil in early 2008, and I hope that it will reduce the availability of those dogs on the island.

I also intend to raise the matter of alleged abuses of the EU pet travel scheme with officials in Britain and Dublin in order to ensure that illegal dogs do not come here under false documentation or under official documentation that can be downloaded from the Internet and is open to fraud.

I have already stated that it is an offence to participate in the cruel so-called sport of dog fighting. The relevant provisions are enforced here by PSNI officers, who are often supported by USPCA officials. In the past, there have been well-publicised successes in breaking up dog-fighting rings.

In late 2006, my Department consulted on a review of welfare legislation, including proposed new powers to deal with dog fighting and on higher penalties for certain offences, including those relating to animal fighting. I have asked my officials to revisit that exercise and to produce a paper that summarises the responses to that consultation.

As these issues affect both North and South, with some dog-fighting rings operating across the border, it is important that we take note of the position in the South in consideration of them. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South is considering updating its animal welfare legislation, and I discussed that with my ministerial counterpart in the South, Mary Coughlan, when we met earlier this month. I have also asked that my officials liaise closely with their counterparts in the South.

As a mother of two young boys, this is an important issue for me. The public safety aspect of this issue is cross-cutting and cross-departmental. The kind of attacks from which children have suffered must not be allowed to happen again, especially those that end tragically, such as the death of Ellie Lawrenson.

I hope that my statement has dealt with Members' concerns. I will consider what has been said today. I support the motion. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mrs Long: For obvious reasons, it is not often that a Member for East Belfast makes the winding-up speech on an agriculture and rural development issue. Therefore, I am pleased that I am able to do so on this occasion, particularly as it is such an important issue.

The reasons for the dangerous dogs legislation are twofold: it is to protect the public — the key objective — and it is to deal with issues of animal welfare, both for the particular breeds of dogs and for the protection of other animals and other dogs.

Some cases in recent years have highlighted that this is a serious issue. Over four years ago, I wrote to the direct rule Ministers after I had embarked on a round of discussions with animal welfare groups, council dog wardens, and so on, who recognised that there were difficulties with the legislation.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that I and many others — including Members of the House — had campaigned on the issue, it was never fully addressed during direct rule. I, therefore, welcome the fact that the Minister has given a positive response on this occasion. Perhaps this is an area in which devolution will actually deliver for people — something that was lacking under direct rule.

I cannot understand how anyone would want to breed an animal purely for the purposes of torturing, mutilating and destroying it in the most obscene way, or driving it to fight to the death against other dogs, with its only hope of redemption being humane destruction. It is a complete aberration. That anyone would want to do such a thing is despicable.

I, therefore, thank Trevor, my colleague, for proposing the motion. He comprehensively highlighted the complexity of the issue, particularly the need for cross-border working. I thank the First Minister for his reassurance in that regard, and for taking swift action to ensure that. I also thank Lord Morrow for his support. I am aware that Dr McCrea has taken a particular interest in the issue, and I am grateful that other Members have been so active on the subject. I recognise, as he did, the work that local councils have embarked on to ensure that the existing legislation is properly enforced.

In tabling the motion, we were concerned about legislative loopholes. The issue is that of focusing on banned types of dogs, as against the aggressive traits of individual animals. As a number of Members have said, any dog can be dangerous if it is permitted — or even worse, encouraged — by its owner to display aggressive traits.

The issue of banned types of dogs also needs to be fully understood. These are dogs that have been specifically bred to have traits that make them, not just particularly aggressive, but effective in the destruction of other animals. Therefore, there is still a need to look to those particular types of dog.

However, Gerry McHugh and a number of other Members clearly identified the problems, whereby cross-breeding of banned types can make it incredibly difficult to identify the type of animal and can disguise its typical characteristics, with a view to escaping prosecution. That has two effects that I wish to highlight, and were mentioned earlier by Willie Clarke and Tom Elliott.

Cross-breeding can affect the ability of those charged with enforcement to deal effectively with the animals that they encounter. It can also cause significant distress for families who unwittingly purchase, as a pet, a dog that is a cross-breed of a banned type. In that case, not only is a family potentially at risk from an extremely dangerous animal, but there is also distress when the council identifies the dog and has no other power but

to remove and destroy it. Therefore, as Willie Clarke said, there are implementation failures, but also legislative failures. Introducing the possibility of neutering, chipping, training, muzzling and controlling dogs would allow those cross-breeds to die out through natural means without causing unnecessary distress, while giving the public full protection, which is the aim of the legislation.

Tom Elliott rightly raised the issue of dog-on-dog attacks, where there is a differential approach. As the Minister said, dogs are controlled for attacking other animals, livestock or people. However, dog-on-dog attacks are increasingly a threat to people like me: dog owners who keep their dogs on leads and walk them responsibly, but find large, out-of-control animals bounding towards them in an aggressive fashion, with the owners completely unable to control the animals. Also of serious concern is the number of times one sees a particularly aggressive dog dragging a child for a walk. Therefore, there has to be a close look at dog-on-dog attacks, particularly where dogs are out of control.

Tom Elliott also mentioned the need to promote responsible dog ownership. Ultimately, while we focus on the dogs, owners are responsible for the behaviour of their animals. For a long time, human beings have had a close relationship with dogs: they are pets and friends. However, it seems that, at times, we forget that they are also animals with the capacity to do a lot of damage if they are not properly cared for, controlled and trained. That is something that we need to come to grips with as a community.

The right of entry into properties was mentioned by a number of Members, including George Robinson. That is important and must be considered.

I will highlight specific issues that the Minister mentioned, and I appreciate that she recognises that certain matters must be addressed. For example, she referred to the penalties that exist for those who are involved in dog fighting. Several Members raised the need to have stiffer penalties. I suspect that although six months in jail may be somewhat of a deterrent, it is not sufficient. I also realise that £5,000 is pocket change to some of those who are involved in this callous activity. Therefore, we must look at the range of penalties that can be used against those who are brought to court for mutilating and torturing animals.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has committed to a review, and, in particular, I welcome that that commitment is not a knee-jerk reaction. I am aware that there has been synergy between the motion and the several high-profile cases that have been broadcast recently on television. However, my motivation did not specifically relate to those problems; the inactivity that I had experienced during direct rule when no action seemed to be possible was a motivating factor. Therefore,

I am glad that the Minister will examine the matter in detail, taking into account the views of those who work on the coalface, whether they are involved in animal welfare charities, in local district councils, or have expertise on the subject.

I agree with Mervyn Storey's point about expert panels and witnesses. Last night's documentary made it clear that some people are prepared to sell their expertise in order to defend types of dogs that are obviously illegal. Therefore, it is important that a panel of experts exists that can be referred to in court, can give impartial views and expert-witness accounts, and cannot be corrupted by those who are involved in the dog fighting industry. That would be a most welcome and helpful step forward.

Finally, I want to focus on an incident that highlights the matter. Four years ago, just outside the gates of the Stormont estate, one of my constituents was walking her two dogs. One of her dogs was mauled by another and later died as a result of its injuries. On that occasion, that lady had no automatic right to have the owner of the other dog prosecuted; she would have had to have taken a civil action for the loss of the value of her dog. Of course, the financial value of one's dog is a tiny proportion of its worth as a family pet. Additionally, there was no automatic right to have the other dog destroyed. That incident took place yards from a children's play park. Therefore, whether such animals are banned breeds or dangerous dogs that are out of control, the issue of control of dangerous dogs must be addressed.

I thank Members for the cross-party support that we have had this afternoon. In particular, I thank the Minister for her commitment to act on the matter. I am sure that the House will be pleased when she reports back on any progress that is made.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of recent revelations about dog fighting in Northern Ireland, and of attacks by dogs on persons and other dogs in recent years, to review the dangerous dogs legislation with a view to providing enhanced protection in terms of both animal welfare and public safety.

Smoking Age Increase in Northern Ireland

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

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increase in the age restriction on purchasing tobacco that has been implemented in Great Britain; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the same age restriction in Northern Ireland, as a matter of urgency.

Whun a' wus a' wain o' 11, a' wus tuk up wi' tha thought o' gaun tae tha "big schuill" ma' daes wur fu' o' woark an ma' nichts o' chores an figgerin oot aw soarts o' mischief fer ma freens an whut a' wud be up tae tha nixt dae.

This soart o' innocence is nae langer ther whun we fin oot frae tha Dep o' Health smoking website that 11% o' 11-15 year ouds noo smok.

When I was 11 years old, I was occupied by the thought of going to the big school. My days were full of schoolwork and my nights of chores and thinking of the little-boy mischief that my friends and I could get up to the next day. It is clear that such innocence no longer exists, given that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's website on smoking cessation informs us that 11% of 11-to-15-year-olds smoke.

Across the UK, approximately 450 children begin smoking every day. The sad fact is that half the children who become regular smokers will die from diseases that are caused by the habit.

3.45 pm

It is no longer adequate to show off by climbing the highest tree; it is now the done thing to light up a cigarette in order to show that one is no longer a child. The outcome is that doctors have estimated that a child who begins smoking at the age of 15 is three times more likely to die from cancer than someone who starts in their late twenties. It has also been shown that in the Province, 79% of adults who smoke began their habit during their teenage years.

It is for those reasons and others, which other Members and I will comment on, that I welcome the fact that the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, has launched a consultation document on upping the legal age limit for the purchase of cigarettes. The Minister issued a statement that contained the shocking information that smoking is the single greatest preventable cause of premature death and avoidable illness in Northern Ireland; it accounts for the loss of about 2,300 lives every year. That is a shocking and completely unacceptable figure. Having watched people whom I knew die

slowly from lung cancer, I am certain that major action must be taken to stop children smoking at an early age and dying as a result.

It is a proven fact that smoking is far more dangerous and addictive than alcohol, yet we allow children of merely 16 years of age to buy cigarettes legally while trying to tell them that they are not mature enough to handle alcohol. It is true that they are not mature enough to handle alcohol or drink responsibly; however, neither are they mature enough to start a habit that will not only affect their health, but also their finances. One in five 15-year-olds is an habitual smoker: 16% of boys and 25% of girls. The scary fact is that in a regular year-11 class of 30 children, six of them will have already trebled their chances of dying from a smoking-related preventable disease than if they had been prevented from smoking until later in life. That cannot continue.

The question has been posed about what difference raising the age limit to 18 will make when smoking is a habit that children invariably pick up from a parent or a close loved one, and one that they will pick up regardless of the age restriction. The answer is that only a quarter of children under the age of 16 find it difficult to buy cigarettes: nearly 70% of all 11- to 15-year-olds buy their cigarettes in the corner shop or newsagent. Those two factors are linked — not to staff in small shops wanting to feed children's smoking habits, but because it is sometimes difficult to tell whether a child is 14 or 16 years of age, due to their style of dress and so on. Raising the age limit to 18 will make it much easier for smaller retailers to tell children's ages.

In addition, not many 16-year-olds have a form of identification apart from their National Insurance cards, which are not photographic. However, an 18-year-old is likely to acquire photographic ID in order to get into clubs, for bus travel, and so on. Therefore, it would make it easier for smaller retailers if the age limit on cigarettes were raised to a point that enables photographic ID to be produced. That will make the prosecution of people who sell tobacco products to underage children much more successful. At present, the prosecution rate is not high enough and fines are small and unacceptable. The average fine for the 117 shops that were prosecuted in England in 2006 for selling tobacco products to underage children was not the £2,500 that is enforceable, but just £200. That is ridiculous and cannot continue. By raising the age limit, there will be fewer excuses for those who sell tobacco products to underage children and they will, therefore, be held responsible for their actions more often.

A representative from a major supermarket in the Province told me that it has implemented a UK-wide over-18 policy. I will not mention the name of the supermarket; suffice it to say that it operates on the mainland as well as in Northern Ireland. It operates a

policy known as the “challenge 21” scheme, whereby staff can ask customers who do not look 21 to supply ID. A prompt comes up on the till as a particular item is scanned. It has led to a drastic reduction in the number of underage children being able to purchase cigarettes. One might question the enforceability of that policy.

Nevertheless, it shows that the company is making an effort to address the issue, and it has also led to less stress for its staff, who had been having difficulty in gauging the ages of young people. If they did misjudge the age of a customer, they were being faced with the fact that they were personally liable, which could have led to their being prosecuted and fined. The decision has been welcomed by the staff and the company. Many of the company’s products — such as alcohol, cigarettes, fireworks, etc — are subject to the same rule. Although the rule may have affected sales, it has given the staff peace of mind and led to a reduction in the purchase of cigarettes by young people.

I ask Members and the Minister whether we really need to consult on this matter. I believe that the people of the Province support raising the age limit for the purchase of tobacco. The company that I have described is representative of the many shopkeepers who want the protection of the law rather than to try to work outside it, or make a mistake, as sometimes happens.

The company should be commended for the stand that it has taken on the protection of our children: the Assembly should do no less. The current legislation was implemented in 1908 — long before the full dangers of smoking were known. Smoking had merely been considered to be a bad habit that children under 16 years of age should not start. Now, it is known to be a killer that, ideally, no one should start — especially not a child who is under the age of 18.

The fact that the smoking ban has been implemented in Northern Ireland means that someone who does not smoke will no longer be the odd one out. By implementing the ban, we are seeking to make social smoking a less palatable option and to lessen the well known dangers of passive smoking. That makes this the perfect time to raise the age at which young people can buy cigarettes so that smoking will no longer be part of the social culture.

Although I fully support the legislation that makes not wearing a seatbelt in a car an illegal offence, it seems absurd that we do our utmost to lessen preventable deaths on roads while not doing the best that we can for our children. The health and future of our children is vital. In such circumstances, parents must step in and make choices for their children, aided by the Government in the form of legislation. I fully support legislation on the matter, and I ask the Assembly to support the raising of the age at which young people may buy cigarettes. The risks are well known and the

facts are clear. The younger our children are when they smoke, the more danger they are in.

Let us play our part and encourage the Minister to implement legislation as a matter of urgency, and to ensure that the age restriction on the purchase on tobacco is increased to 18, rather than 17. We have a responsibility to ensure the best lives possible for our children and we must spearhead it in as speedy a way as possible by asking our Minister to start protecting their lives.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion, although I would like Members to note that the matter has not been discussed by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Nevertheless, the Committee hopes to discuss the matter when the Minister receives his findings and brings them before it. I congratulate my colleague for proposing this important motion. No one any longer disputes the fact that smoking has deadly consequences. Now that there is a ban on smoking in public places in Northern Ireland, inevitably, the next step we should take is to limit the number of deaths caused by tobacco by raising the age at which cigarettes may be purchased.

Public health measures on smoking can have a rapid impact. According to Dr Robert Hertzka, former president of the California Medical Association, lung cancer rates there have fallen six times faster than in US states that do not have smoke-free laws. Tobacco smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals, of which more than 60 are known or suspected to be carcinogens. Tobacco and exposure to tobacco smoke have been clearly identified as carcinogenic to humans. Tobacco is the single greatest cause of death and avoidable illness in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that it contributes to 30% of all cancer deaths and is a significant risk factor for coronary heart disease. Those represent the two largest causes of death in our Province.

There is now overwhelming consensus among independent tobacco researchers that tobacco consumption is detrimental to health. There is a clear link between exposure to tobacco smoke and lung cancer, heart disease and other respiratory illnesses. Those illnesses occur in children as well as in adults, and such exposure can have adverse effects on reproduction and can lead to low birthweight in babies.

Tobacco also causes other significant respiratory symptoms, including increased coughing, chest discomfort and reduced lung function. Moreover, it can trigger asthma attacks. In 1999, the World Health Organization identified tobacco as a real and substantial threat to child health. In children, tobacco smoke can cause bronchitis, pneumonia, coughing, wheezing, asthma attacks, middle-ear infection and cot death. The Investing for Health

strategy gives a strong cross-departmental commitment to improving health and reducing inequalities.

Tobacco is again emphasised in a new 20-year strategy for health and well-being, 'A Healthier Future', in which reducing the prevalence of smoking is identified as a key element in improving the population's health. We must create supportive environments to encourage people to quit or reduce their consumption. As my colleague has already mentioned, smoking claims around 2,300 lives in the Province each year. Stopping young people from smoking in the first place would make a great difference.

Across the water in GB, the age at which a person could buy cigarettes was increased to 18 on 1 October 2007. In the Irish Republic, that measure was introduced in 2004. The number of young people in their early teens who smoke is reducing gradually, although the number of boys who smoke is reducing more quickly than is the number of girls. Of the 11-year-olds to 16-year-olds surveyed in NISRA's 2003 young persons' behaviour and attitudes survey, more than one third smoked, and the majority of those young people had started before they turned 13 years of age.

A majority of EU nations have set a minimum age limit of 18 years of age at which tobacco can be purchased, as have the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In fact, in Alaska, Alabama, Utah and Nova Scotia, the minimum age is 19 years of age. The younger people are when they start smoking, the more likely they are to smoke for longer and to die prematurely from smoking. Someone who starts smoking at the age of 15 is three times more likely to die from cancer than someone who starts in his or her mid-twenties. Reducing the availability of tobaccos is a key component of smoking-reduction strategies. The high cost of purchasing a packet of cigarettes, as a result of high taxation, represents one of the most effective control measures. Cigarettes are more expensive in the UK than they are anywhere else in the EU.

Teenagers have been shown to have the same addiction to nicotine as adults. Recent changes to age restrictions on nicotine-replacement therapies across the water mean that children aged 12 years of age and over can now avail themselves of nicotine patches and gum. Plans to raise the minimum age for the purchase of tobacco products should be seen as being only one aspect of a package of measures.

I look forward to this matter being discussed in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I support the motion.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I thank Jim Shannon for bringing it to the House. I also thank the Minister for attending the debate.

Anything that we can collectively do to discourage children and young people from smoking must have the full support of the House. The motion calls for an increase in the age restriction on purchasing tobacco products from 16 years of age to 18 years of age, and that is a welcome step. I remind Members of the debate on the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which contains a provision to allow smoking on stage, under the guise of artistic integrity. Every time that that exemption was raised — either in Committee or with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — it was rejected outright. The motion deserves full party support.

We are trying to encourage the introduction of legislation that will prevent the sale of tobacco products to children and young people. As has been mentioned, the Minister launched a 12-week consultation on 29 October on raising the minimum age for the sale of tobacco. That consultation will finish on 18 January. I agree with the Committee Chairperson on the matter. I appreciate Jim's eagerness to move on this issue. Indeed, were we to take a straw poll, we would probably find that most people would be in favour of introducing the relevant legislation next week. However, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a responsibility to examine health issues, so it should be allowed to examine the issue, as would happen in the natural course of events.

Furthermore, I hope that the Member understands that we have asked for consultation on the basis that we require feedback, and, without contradicting what I said earlier, part of that consultation should involve going into schools and youth clubs to try to garner the support and awareness of children and young people. I hope that the Member accepts that caveat with full support.

4.00 pm

The age at which cigarettes can be purchased in the Twenty-six Counties was raised to 18 years in 2004, and in October this year Scotland, England and Wales followed suit. Statistics compiled by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) revealed that over 30% of boys and 34% of girls have smoked from the age of 13 or younger, which is alarming. Where possible, we must educate and raise awareness about reducing teenage smoking. We will have more success in putting the message across by using a youth-centred approach.

The British Medical Association (BMA) went further in its recommendations on increasing the age restriction on tobacco sales by calling for legislation to remove tobacco-vending machines and ban the sale of packs of ten cigarettes. The Executive's Investing for Health Strategy highlighted that some high-risk groups comprise vulnerable children and young people, some

of whom are looked after or are in care and are even further excluded. We must support children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable, and help them to quit or to get involved in smoking cessation programmes.

Moreover, the BMA recommended that targeted funding and resource streams should be made available for such programmes. As a smoker myself — I did not declare an interest because I did not think I had to — I know that it is very hard to quit. I have been through several smoking cessation programmes, some more successful than others, but support is required. I urge cross-party support for the motion; however, I would like those provisions to be built into existing support programmes where possible.

I commend Jim Shannon for proposing the motion to the House. I look forward, as do other Members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to discussing the matter in the Committee and using any influence that it may have to encourage greater consultation in the community.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank Mr Shannon for raising this issue in the Assembly today, and I strongly support his motion. The current age restriction of 16 years was established in 1937, at a time when the health dangers of smoking were unknown. A clear body of evidence from the BMA, which was highlighted in 2006 when the issue was debated in Scotland, shows that addiction increases the earlier a person begins to smoke. The earlier in life a person smokes, the harder it is for them to give it up.

In 2006, the BMA also called for an increase in the age at which people could buy drink or cigarettes. It is important to bracket those two addiction problems together, because they both account for a great deal of the spending in the Health Service budget. It is also important to note the threat of passive smoking. It is not simply the potential smokers who will benefit from an increase in the age at which tobacco can be purchased: day and daily, the people around them will benefit.

The BMA's 'Adolescent Health' report, published in 2003, argues that reducing the availability of cigarettes through age restrictions not only helps to reduce tobacco use, but when reinforced by the establishment of smoke-free public places and backed by media campaigns and school programmes, can reduce what the BMA called "the prevalence of smoking".

Such an integrated approach is more likely to succeed, since it recognises the complex causes of smoking, especially in relation to adolescent behaviour. Another example of that integrated approach can be found on the island of Guernsey, which offers a smoking quit-line, backed by free nicotine patches.

Fining shopkeepers who sell tobacco to people who are under 18, which was introduced in South Africa,

should be considered as part of an integrated approach. As Mr Shannon pointed out, that approach has been taken with alcohol and knives, so why not with tobacco?

It is clear from the statistics that adolescents are the most effective group to target in an anti-smoking drive. Scottish statistics show that 6% of 13-year-olds and 19% of 15-year-olds are regular smokers; approximately 14% of 15-year-old boys and 24% of 15-year-old girls smoke. Although that is a reduction from 30% for both boys and girls, the figure remains significantly higher among girls. The changing pattern from 30 years ago is that smoking is a much more persistent problem among teenage and young-adult girls than boys. The significant gender shift in tobacco addiction is of great concern to the medical profession, as is the prevalence of binge drinking among teenage girls and young-adult women.

In 2005 and 2006 respectively, the Scottish and Westminster Parliaments passed legislation on this matter; it is only reasonable that the Northern Ireland Assembly follow their example. Australia, Malta, Norway, Finland and the Republic of Ireland all have a purchase age of 18 for tobacco, and South Africa is considering measures to reduce smoking prevalence. Six out of eight Canadian provinces set the cigarette purchase age at 19, and several states in the USA are considering raising the legal age from 18 to 19 to stop high-school students buying cigarettes and sharing them with their classmates. Action must be taken against substances, such as tobacco and alcohol as well as drugs, that significantly impair the health of the people who use them and, in due course, contribute significant additional costs to the Health Service. In future, those costs could prove so great that the Health Service would break down. It also raises the spectre of the need for selective treatment for people who use such substances.

It would be prudent to impose a ban on smoking until the age of 18, or even 19, and to take positive action to improve the level of public health that we all know is necessary to protect the Health Service budget and to look after the well-being of our young people. I support the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank Jim Shannon for proposing it. As Members know, the consultation on the issue of buying tobacco issued from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 29 October 2007. As health spokesperson for the SDLP, I will respond to that document, and I will reiterate my thoughts on it.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has the authority, contained in the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, to amend the age of those who are entitled to buy tobacco products. The power to amend the legislation should be exercised, and I would be disappointed and surprised if that power to

amend was not supported on the back of the smoke-free workplace legislation.

In March last year, my response to the draft Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 noted that raising the purchasing age could reduce smoking among young people. There is evidence that, when adequately enforced, such a law can reduce the number of retailers who will sell tobacco to underage people. Eventually, of course, we want to eliminate smoking to save lives that are lost unnecessarily. Retailers continue to be a significant source of supply to underage people, and it is essential that any increase in the legal age for the sale of tobacco be accompanied by tighter implementation and enforcement mechanisms in order to have the maximum effect of reducing sales to young people. Other issues that must be considered are the availability of cigarettes from vending machines, as many of the purchasers may be underage, and the fact that packets of 10 make cigarettes more affordable.

The motion will make it more difficult potentially for young people to buy tobacco products. From the public-health perspective, I welcome an increase in the age restriction to 18, because evidence suggests that 11% of children aged between 11 and 15 are regular smokers.

Some 79% of adult smokers started to smoke in their teens and developed a lifelong habit at that young age. It is widely recognised that the earlier a person starts smoking, the more likely he or she is to become a heavy smoker and be at greater risk of suffering from one of the many diseases that it causes. An increase in the legal age at which tobacco products can be bought will improve the health of young people and should result in an overall long-term reduction in adult smoking rates.

The increase will also enforce the message about the health risks that are associated with tobacco products. Such targeted prevention will serve as a warning to young people about the dangers of smoking and, I hope, deter some from taking up the habit. The increase must be introduced in tandem with good health promotion, as has been mentioned. Good health promotion means leading by example and it must be introduced into schools.

The Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales have already taken steps to increase the purchasing age for tobacco to 18. Therefore, it simply makes sense for Northern Ireland to do the same and, thereby, create uniformity on the matter.

Mrs Long: The dangers of smoking have been well rehearsed in the debate, and I do not wish to reiterate all of them. The figures show that about 80% of adult smokers took up the habit as teenagers. People are, therefore, much less likely to start smoking after that age. Increasing the age restriction to 18 will make it more difficult for younger teenagers to obtain cigarettes, and it is likely not only to delay the uptake of smoking but, in many cases, dissuade people from ever starting.

As Mrs Robinson mentioned, tobacco impacts more strongly on those who take up smoking at a young age. The increased addictiveness of tobacco on younger age groups strengthens the argument in favour of raising the age limit and that may, potentially, make the law more enforceable. It may prove much harder to pretend to be 18 rather than 16, particularly for those aged 12 and 13.

It is helpful that wider access to photographic ID at 18 and 19 years of age would make it much easier for retailers who wish to enforce the law properly to do so effectively — those who do not could be better challenged on their failure to do so.

I agree with Rev Coulter on potentially increasing the purchasing age to 19. In America, several states have adopted 19 as the minimum legal age for purchasing tobacco because, by then, children have left school. Therefore, there is the added advantage that anyone wearing school uniform cannot purchase cigarettes. I do not dismiss that as potentially the right place to start.

As all Members have acknowledged, increasing the age at which people can buy tobacco is not a panacea for all woes. The smoking culture in Northern Ireland must be tackled through education — particularly the idea that smoking a cigarette is the mark of an adult. In addition to education, the willingness of parents to give their children cigarettes or allow them to smoke at home must be tackled. We must get across to parents that they are risking their children's health, because they are often not fully informed.

The restrictions on smoking in enclosed public spaces and workplaces has had an impact on the smoking culture — as I know from having a seat on Belfast City Council, which pioneered such restrictions before the official ban came into place.

Five times as many people gave up smoking during the four months before the introduction of the ban in England and Wales, as gave up in the comparable period the previous year. Therefore, the ban has reinforced the fact that it is no longer a socially acceptable way in which to behave, and that has had a huge impact. Undoubtedly, people will try to find a way round the legislation by getting others to buy cigarettes for them or by trying to look older.

4.15 pm

Carmel Hanna referred to vending machines. That is a significant issue. In some US and Canadian states, vending machines have been banned completely, but, in others, they are allowed only in places where people who are over 18 or 21 — depending on the state — have permission to be. Therefore, children simply do not have access to them.

Undoubtedly, there will be those who will buy cigarettes and pass them to their younger friends. However, if we create an additional barrier and make it

more difficult for young people — particularly 11- to 13-year-olds — to smoke, it will have long-term implications for the general health of the population.

From that point of view, I fully support the motion and hope that legislation and recommendations will be brought before the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for full consultation. The Committee must consider whether 19 is perhaps a more appropriate age restriction than 18. Perhaps it would be more enforceable.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The problem with being one of the last Members to speak is that everyone has said what I wanted to say.

I support the motion and congratulate its mover. The motion is timely. I also commend and congratulate the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for bringing forward the public consultation process, which Members touched on.

Most of us say that we should not pre-empt the outcome of any consultation process, and I agree with that. However, the discussion is timely. As political leaders, we have a duty to be proactive on issues that have a negative impact on the health of children and young people in our society.

Members have highlighted stark statistics, and it is important to repeat a few of them. Smoking claims the lives of 2,300 people every year, and those deaths are preventable. Evidence shows that 79% of adults in the North took up smoking in their teens, and 11% of children and young people aged between 11 and 15 are regular smokers. The younger someone starts to smoke, the more likely he or she is to be killed by the addiction. The earlier children become regular smokers and continue to smoke as adults, the greater the risk of developing lung cancer or heart disease.

The consultation process will last for only 12 weeks. However, perhaps after today's discussion, the Minister will take on board the points that the Chairperson of the Committee and my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín have made and give us an early Christmas present of bringing forward legislation — in consultation with the Health Committee — to increase the age restriction on purchasing tobacco products to 18.

The majority of the Members who spoke on the issue are members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. There is no opposition to the motion. The Committee is involved in scrutinising and ensuring that legislation takes its proper course, and the Minister will not get any negativity from that.

Parallel to that, we must ensure that services are easily available and properly resourced for smokers who want to quit. We talk about introducing legislation and ensuring that we try to encourage as many people

as possible to quit smoking, but they must be able to access the resources and programmes to enable them to do that.

I am never in favour of lifting English legislation and introducing it here, but I am sensible enough to realise that we should take the good ideas from it, learn lessons from it and redesign it to meet our needs.

The Minister will be happy for a change that all Committee members who have spoken support the consultation document that he has brought forward. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I support the motion proposed by my colleague Jim Shannon.

I am sure that no one in the Chamber is unaware of the dangers associated with smoking; it was accepted long ago that smoking kills. It is tragic to see the impact of smoking on people's health. Smoking is responsible for thousands of deaths from lung cancer, emphysema — which my grandfather died from — and related heart disease and blood circulation conditions. It is an expensive addiction and, although we recognise how difficult it is for smokers to quit, we must do all in our power to prevent people from damaging their health and ruining their lives. That is not an easy task.

Smokers come under enormous pressure from the tobacco companies, who require tens of thousands of new converts annually among the young members of our society to replace those who break the habit or unfortunately die from smoking-related diseases. The profit motive of the tobacco companies is insensitive to the number of deaths attributed to smoking. The costs of smoking to the country and the Health Service are also huge, but the priority is to do all that is possible to protect our young people from harming themselves.

Over the years, it has become clear that legislation can be a major factor in creating a healthier culture. Smoking legislation has been particularly effective in creating a new attitude in society whereby people increasingly accept, and support, anti-smoking measures. All Members must endorse the present call to bring our legislation in line with the rest of Great Britain by raising the age restriction on the purchase of tobacco. I support the call for the Minister of Health to urgently implement the same age restrictions in Northern Ireland. All Members will have heard the phrase "prevention is better than cure": raising the age limit would be a good preventative measure, along with better education, which was mentioned in the debate. I would go further and double the price of tobacco to make it harder for people to purchase. Any reticence in this matter, or failure to be wholehearted, will be a betrayal of our young people. I support my colleague's motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): As Members have

said, smoking is recognised as the single greatest cause of preventable death and illness in Northern Ireland, claiming 2,300 lives each year. It is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease, strokes, cancer and other diseases of the circulatory system, which kill two out of every five people in Northern Ireland. A lifetime non-smoker is 60% less likely than a current smoker to have coronary heart disease, and 30% less likely to suffer from a stroke. Smoking is also a major cause of health inequalities, and is the principal cause of the gap in life expectancy between rich and poor — instances of lung cancer are 71% higher in deprived areas. It is against that backdrop that I, like everyone else in the Chamber, am concerned about the level of smoking in Northern Ireland — particularly among young people, who are our most precious asset.

Members are aware that I launched a 12-week consultation exercise on 29 October to assess the public's view on raising the age of sale. I am aware that the age of sale was recently increased to 18 in Great Britain, which is the age it has been in the Republic of Ireland since 2004. The power to amend the minimum age in Northern Ireland is contained in the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, the primary aim of which is to protect the public and employees from exposure to second-hand smoke in enclosed and substantially enclosed public places and workplaces. I assure Members that, following the public consultation, proposals to raise the age of sale will be brought to the Assembly for consideration.

As part of my Department's five-year tobacco action plan, we have put tremendous effort into achieving the long-term aim of a tobacco-free society. The key objectives of that plan are to prevent people from starting to smoke, help smokers to quit, and protect non-smokers from tobacco smoke. The introduction of the smoke-free legislation in April has enabled us all to enjoy a healthier work and social environment; people can now go about their business free from the toxic and damaging effect of second-hand smoke. I am sure that everyone finds it hard to imagine the time when we were subjected to second-hand smoke, whether at work or even just out for a meal with family and friends.

It is no surprise, therefore, that public support for smoke-free legislation has always been high and, I am delighted to say, remains high, with non-smoking compliance sitting at 98%. People understand and appreciate the impact of a smoke-free environment and the impact that that environment has on their health.

Evidence from elsewhere shows that the smoke-free legislation also encourages smokers to quit, and early indications show that we are experiencing the same trend. Provisional figures show that 2,706 quit dates were set in May 2007 compared with 564 in May 2006. We are, therefore, seeing some success in reducing smoking prevalence, which sits at 25%. That represents

the lowest figure since the continuous household survey began in 1983. To that end, my Department will continue to support the development of smoking-cessation services across Northern Ireland.

Everyone knows that prevention is better than cure. Discouraging people from starting to smoke must continue to be a crucial plank in our overall tobacco-control strategy if there is to be a significant reduction in smoking prevalence. The tobacco action plan identifies children and young people as an important target group. The bold statistics make for depressing reading: 11% of children in Northern Ireland between the ages of 11 and 15 are regular smokers; and, significantly, 79% of adult smokers took up the habit in their teens. Research in England also found that 57% of children obtain their cigarettes from shops. The reasons that young people take up smoking, despite the overwhelming evidence of the harm that it causes, are complex and varied. They may include parental example, peer pressure and the rebelliousness of youth.

Much good work in discouraging children and young people from taking up the habit has been ongoing for many years. The Health Promotion Agency has a well-established website for young people, and the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have promoted smoke-free environments in facilities under their control. Along with boards, the Health Promotion Agency, the Department of Education and others, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will continue to explore how best to discourage young people from adopting the habit. A main consideration in that debate is the topic under discussion today — the minimum age at which an individual can legally purchase tobacco products. The options that will be offered in the Department's public consultation will be to maintain the current age limit of 16 years of age or to increase it to 17 or 18 years of age.

I have no doubt that the controls that are in place, such as smoke-free legislation, will have a positive impact on reducing smoking prevalence, especially among young people. The fact that children and young people will not be exposed to people smoking in public will mean that they may be less tempted to take up the habit. All Members are aware, and agree, that too many lives are lost prematurely each year because of the use of tobacco, and, as a society, we need to reassess our unhealthy attitude towards its use.

I look forward to hearing the views expressed during the public consultation on whether the age of sale has a role to play in achieving the long-term aim of a tobacco-free society. The outcome of the consultation will allow me — through the Department and in conjunction with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Assembly

— to take the necessary steps towards achieving our aim of a tobacco-free society.

Mr Ross: I am sure that all Members welcome the Minister's comments. I welcome the motion, and I congratulate my colleague Jim Shannon for tabling it. It has been a good debate, and it is encouraging that the House has united behind the motion. Members have heard that raising the legal smoking age to 18 will bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom, and the Minister mentioned the public support for that. Results from an ICM poll commissioned by the BBC show that 80% of people support increasing the age at which people may buy tobacco.

In his opening comments, Mr Shannon said that smoking is the single greatest cause of preventable illness and premature death in the United Kingdom, as did the Minister in his response. Mrs Robinson said that the health implications of smoking are beyond doubt. If tobacco were discovered today, it would not be legalised.

4.30 pm

Since the peak of smoking in the 1950s and 1960s the Government have made many efforts to reduce the number of smokers: recently launching the 'Smoking Kills' White Paper; bringing in legislation that bans smoking in public places; and placing restrictions on advertising. Smoking groups will be quick to point out that each individual ultimately decides whether or not to smoke, and undoubtedly children will still get their hands on cigarettes, irrespective of any age limit that we try to enforce, so the Assembly must realise that raising the smoking age alone will not necessarily stop young people from smoking. Personal choice and individual freedom are, of course, important, but it should be the clear responsibility of this Assembly to protect children from smoking.

Many young people start smoking because they see adults smoking, which has been pointed out throughout the course of the debate, so increasing the age at which a person can buy tobacco must be done in parallel with other efforts to tackle the current problem. Mrs Hanna made that point in her speech.

Facts and figures have been mentioned throughout the debate. In the UK some 120,000 people die every year from smoking, which works out at 13 people an hour. In Northern Ireland it is approximately 3,000 people each year. In 1984, some 33% of adults in the UK smoked, and at the beginning of this decade that figure had fallen slightly to 27%. However, as Mrs Robinson pointed out, young women are still the demographic most likely to smoke, which is an issue that needs to be addressed. Efforts over the last decade have been working, but the message is obviously still not getting through to some groups in society.

I welcomed the smoking ban earlier this year, and therefore I also support increasing the legal age at which one can buy tobacco products. This is not about taking away individual freedoms, because we are not talking about banning smoking. Rather we are trying to improve public health and prevent children from starting to smoke in the first place.

Rev Coulter referred to the many millions of pounds that the NHS could save in the future, and the Minister will be pleased about that given his recent budget difficulties. The motion aims to prevent children from starting to smoke; research has shown that the earlier someone starts to smoke, the more likely it is that they will smoke for a longer time and eventually die from a smoke-related illness.

It is a startling fact, and we have heard others during the debate, that some 16% of boys under the age of 15, and 24% of girls under 16, smoke. Rev Coulter, and many other Members, pointed out that fact. According to the Government's White Paper:

"for every 1000 20-year-old smokers it is estimated that while one will be murdered and six will die in motor accidents, 250 will die in middle age from smoking, and 250 will die in older age from smoking".

That is a startling fact.

Raising the age at which tobacco can be bought will send out a strong message that this Assembly believes that smoking is potentially lethal and not safe, and will hopefully reduce the availability of cigarettes to children. That must be accompanied by stronger enforcement action against those who sell cigarettes to underage children, and there must be robust and real repercussions for those shopkeepers who do so.

Mrs Robinson talked about how the Health Committee looks forward to proceeding on this issue, and she pointed out the health improvements in California following the implementation of tobacco laws there. She also outlined the impact of smoking on individual health and pointed to other areas in the world where the smoking age is 18.

The Member opposite for North Belfast talked about targeting schools and youth clubs and raising the level of understanding in education on this issue. In his response, the Minister said that he would work closely with the Department of Education, which is a welcome statement.

Rev Coulter talked about the current age of 16 having been implemented in 1937 and how that is now out of date. He also spoke of the cost of smoking, and smoking-related illnesses, to the Health Service.

Mrs Hanna talked about how raising the limit would have a potentially important, positive impact on public health. She also spoke of tighter enforcement, particularly on vending machines and ten-pack cigarettes, which make it easier, and more affordable, for children to smoke. That is an important issue that has emerged from this debate.

Mrs Long spoke of the addictiveness of nicotine for children, and of how an age limit of 18 would be easier to enforce with wider access to photographic ID. She also recognised that the culture of smoking needs to be addressed, and highlighted the benefits that have already been realised since the ban on smoking in public places was implemented.

Ms Ramsey supported the motion and welcomed the consultation. She said that politicians should take the lead on the issue. I also noticed that she praised the English legislation on the issue, albeit slightly reluctantly.

My colleague Mr Easton talked about the thousands of deaths that have been caused by smoking or smoking-related illnesses, and the expense of the addiction. He also referred to the large tobacco companies that sought to make more people smoke. Similar debates in America have highlighted the fact that large tobacco companies use child-friendly advertising to encourage more children to smoke. Mr Easton made the very good point that the company that makes Camel cigarettes used a cartoon character to entice people into smoking. The Minister discussed the specific problem of smoking in areas of social deprivation, and that must be looked at.

Smoking is a mass habit, and it is also a mass killer. We have enough adult smokers in the UK; we certainly do not need any more. I support the motion, and I look forward to the Assembly giving unanimous backing to Mr Shannon's motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increase in the age restrictions on purchasing tobacco that has been implemented in Great Britain; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the same age restriction in Northern Ireland, as a matter of urgency.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Referral of Patients from Daisy Hill Hospital to the Regional Acquired Brain Injury Unit

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes to speak. All other Members will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the issue.

According to the regional acquired brain injury unit admission policy, as clarified in the recent ministerial review, patients between the ages of 16 and 65 may be admitted. It also states that people over 65 years of age can be admitted to the unit depending on their general health and rehabilitation prospects — at least, that is the theory. However, I wonder whether that happens in practice. The statistics suggest otherwise.

The only way that a patient's prospects can be ascertained is through assessment of his or her condition, but does thorough assessment actually take place?

In the case of Mr Michael Hanratty, who was admitted to Daisy Hill Hospital on 7 September 2007 with an acquired brain injury, CT scans were sent that day to the Royal Victoria Hospital where they were read by a neurosurgeon and the results sent back to Daisy Hill Hospital. At that stage in Mr Hanratty's illness, the family was told by Dr A in Daisy Hill Hospital that the approach would be to "wait and see".

The following week the family was told by Dr A that a specialist would be coming from the brain injury unit to Daisy Hill Hospital to assess Mr Hanratty on 19 September. On the day before the assessment was due to take place, the family was told by Dr A that a specialist would not now be coming to assess Mr Hanratty as he was over 65 years of age.

On 19 September, Dr A told a member of the family that "this is as good as it gets" and that the outlook for Mr Hanratty was poor. Dr A said that Mr Hanratty had frontal lobe and temporal lobe damage, but when asked to explain what that meant he said that he could not say, as there were no specialists in that field in Daisy Hill Hospital and that that was why he had personally requested an assessment from the brain injury unit. Much of that was said at the patient's bedside during visiting hours, and without due deference to confidentiality. It subsequently emerged in a letter from Belfast Health and

Social Care Trust that no formal referral was made by the staff at Daisy Hill Hospital in respect of Mr Hanratty.

The following morning Dr A apologised to the family for his approach the previous day, but told Mr Hanratty's wife that Michael would not get any better.

Dr A made that judgement, having earlier admitted that there was no appropriate expertise in the hospital and without having received the assessment that he had requested of the regional acquired brain injury unit.

The family asked Dr A if it was possible for any specialist to see Michael, and said that they were prepared to pay. Dr A said that he would investigate. Later that afternoon, he told them that he had tried everywhere, but that no specialist was prepared to see Mr Hanratty because he was over 65 years of age.

The following morning, another doctor — whom we shall call Dr B — was in charge of Mr Hanratty's case. That doctor verbally abused a member of the family because she questioned the age-65 restriction for admission to the brain injury unit. She was so distressed that she was reduced to tears and was afraid to visit the hospital again for three days.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission became involved in the case at the behest of the family, and it contacted the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. As a result, on 19 October, a consultant in rehabilitation medicine, Mr McCann, was sent to Daisy Hill Hospital in order to assess Mr Hanratty. The family was only told shortly in advance of Mr McCann's visit, and no specific time was given. Consequently, no member of the family met Mr McCann.

In his letter to Dr McDowell in Daisy Hill, Mr McCann said that his first thought was that Mr Hanratty would have benefited from a CT scan of the brain in case he had developed post-traumatic hydrocephalus. If that had been the case, he might have required neurosurgical intervention, which might have led to an improvement in his status. So much for Dr A's prognosis that that was as good as it would get.

Mr McCann's assessment and the results of the scan were not communicated to the family until a member of the family contacted Mr Colm Donaghy, the chief executive of the Southern Health and Care Trust. They eventually received the scan results six days after it had taken place. Mr McCann's assessment was made available to them 10 days after it had taken place.

Since then, the family has sent the scans to a hospital in Dublin that has a highly reputable neurology and neurosurgical department, where they were read by a neurologist, a neurosurgeon and a geriatrician. All three experts said that it was a given that Mr Hanratty should have been assessed in the early days after his injury and that specialist rehabilitation was required.

The family now believes that the treatment that is available to Mr Hanratty in Daisy Hill Hospital will not lead to his recovery and, because of the upper-age restriction imposed by the regional acquired brain injury unit and by Thompson House Hospital in Lisburn, that suitable treatment is not available in Northern Ireland for a person over 65 years of age who has suffered a traumatic brain injury. In the meantime, Mr Hanratty's GP has referred him to a unit in England that does not operate an age restriction.

Several important issues that highlight the discriminatory effects of the age-restricted admissions policy of the regional acquired brain injury unit have arisen from Mr Hanratty's case. That unit's admission policy is, in my view, based on a stereotypical view of older people that considers them to be "old, frail individuals", which are the words of Dr Barnes, who is quoted in the ministerial review and who provided commentary for the initial business case for the unit.

Many older people have good health and are fit, and they increasingly take part in sports such as swimming, cycling and even marathon running. Until the day of his injury, Mr Hanratty ran a farm with 200 cattle — he was a fit and able person.

4.45 pm

The age restriction imposed by the unit is totally arbitrary. It is based on the evidence of an English specialist, who, in his commentary on the original business case, said that it was difficult to set an upper age limit. Yet he went ahead and did so.

People over 65 who suffer brain injuries are not adequately assessed in local settings. Mr Hanratty's case, as I have outlined it, and through the experience of his family, proves that beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Mr Hanratty would not have been assessed had it not been for the pressure that was applied by his family, myself, the Human Rights Commission and, eventually, by the Minister's office. Is that what every 65-year-old person in Northern Ireland will have to do to receive an assessment? I hope not.

The treatment available locally is not of a specialist nature and does not afford people over 65 the best possible opportunity for recovery. There are other issues, but time will not allow me to elaborate on them today. My colleague Mrs Hanna will deal with some of them later.

The ministerial review into the matter has resolved nothing. The Minister must examine the case again and take a personal interest in it. He must ensure that each case is assessed on its merits and that patients are admitted to the regional acquired brain injury unit based on their general health and rehabilitation prospects, regardless of their age. The only way in which that can be achieved is through proper assessment by specialists in the field at local level.

Mr Irwin: I am sure that it will have come as a shock to many of us to hear of the circumstances surrounding the referral from Daisy Hill Hospital to the Regional acquired brain injury unit of a Silverbridge farmer who sustained serious head injuries after being kicked by a bull.

I am sure that the majority of people in Northern Ireland would also agree that, after sustaining serious head injuries, one would expect to receive the highest level of assistance available. However, it transpired that the patient and his family were left in an unacceptable situation after being told that, due to the patient's age, he would not be transferred to the regional acquired brain injury unit at Musgrave Park Hospital or receive a visit from a specialist.

Most people in Northern Ireland would find that as shocking as the family did. Despite a review by the Department, Minister McGimpsey found that the unit's admissions policy was correct. However, Minister McGimpsey stated that the current policy does not prevent people over the age of 65 being admitted to the unit providing:

"it is the most appropriate place for them."

I ask the Minister why, after the gentleman sustained a serious head injury, his family was told that the regional acquired brain injury unit was not an appropriate place for him, and that he would not receive a visit from a specialist? That is a difficult policy to defend, given that everyone expects to have the best possible chance of recovery despite their age.

Why was it that a visit by a specialist from the unit was hastily arranged following representations from the family's solicitor? Should that visit not have occurred in the first instance? The Minister also stated that the policy would be examined by the Equality Commission, and I ask him to confirm to the House the conclusion of the commission's deliberations.

The family of the gentleman in question has been left with a bitter taste over the incident, which has led to claims that the treatment afforded to those over 65 is inferior to that offered to younger patients. That perception must be addressed, and I ask the Minister to outline how he intends to do that.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I would like to say a few words on this matter.

My colleague Sue Ramsey raised this issue with the Minister of Health after a meeting of the Health Committee, and the Minister indicated that he would look into it and review the age policy.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue and I thank the Member for bringing it to the Chamber. I want to highlight how the issue has arisen with regard to the statistics, but I will also be speaking from personal

experience. My uncle tragically died from a brain injury. Thankfully, because he lived in Monaghan, he had access to treatment in Dublin and that made it a bit easier on the family. Sadly, though, he passed away.

Traumatic brain injury can result from a closed head injury or a penetrating head injury, and is one of two subsets of acquired brain injury. The other subset is non-traumatic brain injury — for example, strokes or meningitis. The effects of a brain injury can vary widely. Head injury patients may experience physical effects such as headaches, seizures, difficulty in walking or coma; it goes from one spectrum to another. There can be emotional problems, including mood swings, poor impulse control, agitation, low frustration threshold, depression and many other effects.

Approximately 7,800 incidents of head injuries are reported each year in the North of Ireland, of which approximately 3,300 involve admittance to hospital. The majority of those are caused by road accidents involving cars, motorbikes, bicycles and pedestrians. That is the major cause of head and brain injuries for those under 75 years of age. Falls are the major cause for those over 75 years of age. Approximately 20% of brain injuries are due to some form of violence; 3% are sports-related injuries; and 50% involve some form of alcohol intake by the patient or those who caused the injury.

The regional acquired brain injury unit at Musgrave Park Hospital opened in March 2003, and was the first of its kind in the North. The facility is a specialist unit to which patients can be transferred as soon as possible after care in an acute hospital, which frees up valuable bed space and provides a comprehensive rehabilitation programme on an inpatient and outpatient basis. A full range of modern therapy facilities are provided. When it opened, it was to be the centre of excellence for research into the management of acquired brain injury. The facility accepts only patients from the North of Ireland referred by GPs or medical consultants. It has 25 inpatient beds and can provide services for 15 outpatients.

Herein lies the problem. The regional acquired brain injury unit is a top-class facility with dedicated, professional, and hard-working staff. However, approximately 3,000 people are being admitted to hospitals — whether it is Daisy Hill Hospital, the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Mater Hospital, Altnagelvin Area Hospital or even Antrim Area Hospital — and only 5% of them require the service of that facility; that amounts to 150 patients a year who will need specialised treatment. They could be there for two, three, four or six weeks, or more. That obviously puts the facility under severe pressure, and that pressure filters down to regional hospitals. It is as a result of that that individuals are told that they are too old or too young, and that they would be better off at home. That is unacceptable, and it is clearly not good enough. Everyone is entitled to the best healthcare

available; there should be no clauses as to who should or should not receive treatment.

If health experts in the regional hospitals cannot give their patients the proper care required, they are morally bound to raise the issue with the Department of Health, and to inform all of their elected representatives of their concerns.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister to initiate a comprehensive review of brain injury treatment in order to ensure that fair and equal treatment is available to all, regardless of age or gender. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I am conscious that this is a very important issue, yet it impinges greatly on the emotions of one particular family, who are highly respected in the south Armagh area.

It impinges specifically on Mr Michael Hanratty. Members are all — and should be — conscious of the sensitivities that are involved as they consider the motion. I am sure that at this enormously trying time we would not want to add in any way to the distress or emotional pressure that has been placed already on the Hanratty family.

I am aware that Mr Hanratty enjoyed good health and was very active, not only at home and on his farm, but in the local community. The sudden onset of his medical condition has obviously caused great distress and shock to his family, and Members would do well to remember that.

Early in the consideration of the matter, I raised it with the Minister and his private office in the hope that any available assistance could be given as quickly as possible. I do not doubt the professionalism of either the medical staff at Daisy Hill Hospital or the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Least of all, I do not doubt the personal commitment of the Minister himself to try to assist in every possible way.

The overwhelming number of patients at Daisy Hill Hospital receive first-class medical and health treatment. No one would say otherwise. We do not doubt the dedication or professionalism of the nurses, doctors or ancillary staff.

The case has highlighted the more general issue of how patients who are of a certain age and condition are treated. The staff who are involved in such treatment have to make delicate and enormously difficult judgements. However, those judgements are most difficult for families that are coming to terms with a new, complex and difficult medical situation.

I join Mr Boylan in his call for the Minister, having reviewed the operation of the regional acquired brain injury unit at Musgrave Park Hospital, to extend that review Province-wide to see whether any new considerations can be given to the overall issue. I have no doubt

that such cases will continue to be highlighted in the public domain.

It is good, therefore, that the debate has taken place today. I thank Mr Dominic Bradley for bringing it to the attention of the House and for the sensitive way in which he has approached it. The Members and the Minister are all on the same side: the side of the Hanratty family. We want to see what can be best achieved for Mr Hanratty and, in general, for those who find themselves facing great difficulties as a result of brain injuries.

I ask the Minister to consider whatever possible additional assistance he can give in respect of this case, and, more generally, to consider extending his inquiry to the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, commend Dominic Bradley for bringing the motion to the House. The motion raises wider issues about the care of older people and about ageism in general. It comes as no surprise that a recent survey showed that 73% of older people stated that they felt marginalised.

5.00 pm

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a policy regarding over-65-year-olds and brain injury, which boils down to the fact that someone over 65 with that kind of injury does not get treated. The perception that older people are frail, dependent and isolated may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ageism pervades our healthcare system and prevents older people from receiving optimum healthcare. In turn, that leads to their increased dependency on family and public resources, increased disability and mortality, depression and isolation. That is completely unacceptable.

Like many, I believe in the saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Mr Bradley highlighted that early intervention in Mr Hanratty's case could have been beneficial. There seems to be an assumption that pervades society in general, and the health system in particular, that serious medical conditions are an inevitable part of becoming older. The truth is that they are not. Known preventative treatments go a long way to keeping older patients healthy and enhancing their quality of life. Yet, the case of Mr Hanratty — and many others — shows that they often do not receive such treatments.

Ill health is not an inevitable part or consequence of growing older. When an elderly person encounters a health problem, studies show that physicians often use the person's age, rather than his or her functional status, as a factor in determining the appropriate treatment. Clearly, that ageist bias has infiltrated our Health Service and affected treatment decisions inappropriately.

Can older patients not speak up and demand better treatment? Unfortunately, they too have fallen prey to

the mistaken notion that their ill health is simply a part of ageing. I commend the Hanratty family for standing firm to highlight the plight of their father, which in turn has rekindled the ageism debate. I urge the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take a lead role in ensuring that the issue of ageism is tackled in the Health Service. More education is necessary across the board if health departments are to provide their older patients with proper care, and those patients are to take charge of their health.

Those over 65 do not have to resign themselves to living their remaining years with a declining quality of life. Proper knowledge can extend lives, and make them happier and healthier. Healthcare should be free at the point of delivery, irrespective of age or other considerations. Indeed, as I said, prevention could have been of benefit to Mr Hanratty had it been in place. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs Hanna: The review into the admissions policy of the regional acquired brain injury unit, initiated by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, was prompted by the case of Mr Michael Hanratty. The unfortunate outcome in Mr Hanratty's case is a sad reflection of an ageist policy.

The review throws up a number of questions connected with the admissions process, not least of which is the restriction of that service to those who are between the ages of 16 and 65. Indeed, the professor who informed the policy has a stereotypical view of older people, as has been said. He views them as frail and not suited to sharing a more dynamic environment with a younger, more aggressive clientele. Many older people — and people of 65 years of age may not be considered old any more — are fit, well and in good health. They may be fit enough to benefit from the treatment in question if the age restriction did not debar them.

It is possible that people between the ages of 16 and 65 may be so frail and weak that they may not benefit from treatment in the unit, and yet they are not excluded. That begs the question: why have restrictive age limits been imposed? Why is each case not determined on its own merits regardless of the age? That seems much more commonsensical.

If the admission of people who are at the lower end of the age scale is determined on their own merits, should the same criteria not be used for patients who are at the upper end of the scale? In other words, why should all patients not be assessed on their own merits? Why have age restrictions in the first place? Why not determine admissions on merit, especially when the admission policy, which was clarified in the recent ministerial review, states that a patient's prospects are ascertained through assessment of his or her condition. Surely that is what must happen for all patients, whether

they are under or over 65 years of age. There is also a strong economic argument for early intervention.

I thank the Minister for calling for an urgent review after a complaint from Mr Hanratty's family. To summarise that case: Mr Hanratty was fit and up and about on the farm before he was hit by a bull. His family wanted him to be seen by a specialist but was told that he was too old. The Equality Commission's report and the Human Rights Commission's views on what happened after that must be made public. Those details are not available.

The media has highlighted disturbing cases in which patients have been denied good-quality treatment because of ageist attitudes. There would not have been any review had Mr Hanratty been someone over 65 years of age who did not have a family to demand that he was given necessary and urgent treatment. I thank the family for its courage in seeing that through. However, the situation should never have happened, and more questions are thrown up, such as whether Mr Hanratty's family is entitled to financial aid should he now have to be transferred to England for treatment. Are there upper age limits on other vital services, such as bypass surgery, dialysis, screening, and so forth? Are older people less likely to be offered health and mental-health promotion and hospital referrals?

Older people are often stereotyped and not valued as individuals who have particular healthcare needs. Age discrimination can also be more subtle — for example, through the lack of priority that is given to elderly people's long-term needs. Surely healthcare should be offered to everyone on a clinical basis. There should not be any age discrimination. Provision and quality of care must not be based on age but on merit and need.

Mr P J Bradley: I want to apologise for my late arrival. I was at a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Adjournment debate is taking place much earlier than I had expected. I thank Dominic Bradley for raising the issue. I know Mr Hanratty and his family. I had the pleasure of doing business with him during a previous career. I found him to be a gentleman.

In the Newry and Mourne area, there is a large population of healthy, energetic people who are over 65 years of age; I am sure that that applies throughout Northern Ireland. While I am on my feet, I want to take the opportunity to congratulate one such person — my neighbour Mrs Moynes, who celebrates her one hundredth birthday today. She is a healthy, hale and hearty lady. It is hard to believe that she is 35 years outside the age bracket for treatment. I congratulate Mrs Moynes on reaching her hundredth birthday today.

The Michael Hanratty case caused much concern when it was first publicised. It triggered much worry among elderly people and their families. Just when we

thought that the Health Service was there to lend support when needed, we have discovered that the opposite is true. I am glad that the Minister is present, because I have every confidence in his ability to deal with the issue. To date, his handling of the situation has been fairly satisfactory.

I want to reiterate my thanks to Dominic Bradley for bringing the matter to the Assembly's attention.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I also want to thank Mr Dominic Bradley for bringing this important issue to the Floor of the Assembly. The issue of admissions to the regional acquired brain injury unit in Belfast was highlighted in the media, particularly concerning the referral of one patient. The patient — who is, of course, one of Dominic Bradley's constituents — had been admitted to Daisy Hill Hospital with an acquired brain injury.

It might be helpful if I begin by explaining what is meant by acquired brain injury. It is an injury, or assault, that has occurred to the brain since birth. For example, it can be the result of trauma following a car accident, a fall from a height, a stroke, or a haemorrhage. People may think of a brain injury arising as a result of a traumatic incident, such as a serious road traffic accident. However, approximately 4,000 patients each year suffer a stroke, of which approximately one third will be left with a brain injury that has to be managed.

Whatever the cause, brain injury can have a wide range of effects that will vary from person to person, depending on the exact nature of the injury and its severity. Obviously, it can be difficult and distressing for the family and friends of those who have suffered the injury. We must ensure that the right treatment is provided to every patient, meeting their needs and aiding their recovery. A brain injury can affect every aspect of how a person lives, thinks, breathes, walks and talks. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that every patient, and their acquired brain injury, is different and that their treatment and rehabilitation needs will vary.

Generally, treatment is multidisciplinary, and the team treating a patient may typically include speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and other relevant clinicians. Nevertheless, we must also recognise that an individual's brain injury may be only one of several existing health problems that must be addressed. Older people, for example, may have heart problems, respiratory diseases or arthritis. Other patients may have a physical difficulty, or a difficulty with their sight. All of the co-existing difficulties need to be managed.

In addition to the services that are provided at the regional unit, there is a range of well-established, high-quality services for patients in Northern Ireland, which include the high-dependency rehabilitation unit

at Daisy Hill Hospital; the regional neuro-disability centre at Thompson House Hospital in Lisburn; Spruce House, at Altnagelvin Area Hospital; and the twelve-bedded male neuro-behavioural rehabilitation unit at the Main Villa, Knockbracken Healthcare Park.

When the patient — to whom Mr Bradley referred — was admitted to Daisy Hill Hospital, I am aware that his family was incorrectly advised that the regional acquired brain injury unit only admitted patients aged 16 to 65. Mr Hanratty, the patient, is over 65 years of age. Understandably, the family were, and are, deeply concerned that their father's age appeared to be the reason why he was denied access to the specialist treatment that was available at the regional centre.

When the matter came to my attention, I instructed my officials to carry out an urgent review of the unit's admissions policy because I wanted to be assured that all equality and human rights legislation was being adhered to. I also wanted to know if — and why — an apparent ageist policy was being applied to health services, and if patients in the regional unit were receiving a higher quality treatment than others.

The regional acquired brain injury unit at Musgrave Park Hospital opened in May 2006. The unit was established to address an identified gap in provision for patients with brain injuries. That gap in services was highlighted in the unit's business case, which was subjected to public consultation and an equality impact assessment. The business case pointed to the fact that traumatic brain injury rehabilitation was mainly provided in settings for older people.

The review was completed on 19 October. The report concluded that the admissions policy does not exclude patients who are under 16 or over 65 years of age. Patients outside that age range can, and are, admitted to the unit, depending on their general health and their potential for rehabilitation, which may be influenced by any pre-existing health conditions.

There have been 36 admissions since the unit opened on 1 May 2006. Approximately 10% of the patients who were admitted were aged between 61 and 70, six of whom were over 65 years of age. In addition, there were 19 admissions of patients who were 18 years of age, or younger, to the unit in the same period. While the admissions policy is clear, I acknowledge that there were serious communication difficulties in the case to which Mr Bradley refers. I want to place on record my sincere apologies to the family for the distress that the incident has caused them, and the breakdown in communications —

5.15 pm

Mr D Bradley: I have seen a copy of the referral form that the Southern Health and Social Services Board used. That form clearly states that people aged under the age of 16 or over the age of 65 are excluded from

referral to the regional acquired brain injury unit. No exceptions are mentioned; there are no ifs or buts. According to the referral form, both of the aforementioned groups of people are excluded. Can the Minister explain how people over the age of 65 can be referred to the brain injury unit when the referral form makes no mention of any exception to the restriction that is contained in it?

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Bradley for making that point. That form was withdrawn on 24 October, and it was part of the communications problem that existed in the trusts and in Daisy Hill Hospital, and that resulted in misinformation in the unit. I have since written to the chief executives of all the trusts to inform them of the true policy, and I have made it a requirement that they inform all the staff in their areas of responsibility of the correct policy.

I have asked the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust about the number of admissions to the unit. Excluding Mr Hanratty, 10 patients from Daisy Hill Hospital were considered for admission. Of those 10, nine patients were subsequently admitted. Thus, there is a clear link. Patients over the age of 65 or under the age of 18 have been referred to the unit, but I accept that there was a clear misunderstanding, to put it mildly, on the part of the trusts and Daisy Hill Hospital. Again, I sincerely apologise to the Hanratty family for the misinformation and poor communication.

Patients of all ages have the right to access the best available treatment, and there should never be any question of discrimination on the grounds of age, or on any other grounds. The review outlined the range of treatment that is currently available to everyone with an acquired brain injury in Northern Ireland. It also explained why, for some patients, the unit may not provide the most appropriate or best treatment.

At present, there is no dedicated acquired brain injury rehabilitation unit in Northern Ireland specifically for children. I expect that to be addressed through the provision of suitable services in the new women's and children's hospital. Currently, children under the age of 13 who suffer from an acquired brain injury are usually initially admitted to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, and rehabilitation is normally delivered via a range of therapy and community services in acute and community child-health facilities. Older children may be admitted to the regional unit, but only if it is deemed clinically appropriate and suitable for a child to be placed in a unit with adults. The unit's admissions policy is in line with those in the rest of the UK. In particular, it is important to ensure that clinicians and other health professionals who look after the needs of elderly people have the necessary specialist expertise.

However, as I said earlier, I have now instructed all health and social care trusts to take immediate steps to prevent any further problems with communications over

admissions to the acquired brain-injury unit. I have ensured that the unit's admissions policy has been communicated by chief executives to all Health Service staff.

I wish to respond to the points that Mr Boylan and Mr Kennedy made. Although the review of the unit highlighted that the policy is not ageist, I recognise that it focused on the unit's admissions policy. For me, the review raised questions about the unit's wider service provision. I am therefore announcing a review of the Northern Ireland-wide provision of services for those with brain injuries, and of the protocols and care pathways by which patients can access those services.

I want to ensure that the needs of all those with brain injuries are being met. Let me make it clear that patients of all ages have the right to the best available service, commensurate with their needs. Patients, and their relatives and friends, quite rightly expect the best medical treatment and care to be provided regardless of age, and I am committed to ensuring that that expectation is met.

Adjourned at 5.20 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 26 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: At the sitting on Monday 19 November 2007, Mr O'Dowd sought a ruling in relation to comments allegedly made from a seated position by Mr McNarry.

The first question that Mr O'Dowd asked was whether the language that he believed that Mr McNarry had used was appropriate. I have met Mr McNarry on at least three occasions, and he has strongly denied using the words that were quoted by Mr O'Dowd. Without any evidence to the contrary, I have accepted his denial.

The second question asked by Mr O'Dowd was why the remark was not recorded in the Official Report. As I have said, Mr McNarry denies making the remark, but it may be useful to remind Members that remarks made from a seated position are only recorded in the Official Report if they are referred to by a Member who is on his or her feet at the time or by the Speaker.

I think that this exchange simply reinforces what I said to Members last week: all Members should ensure that good temper and moderation are demonstrated in the Chamber.

BUSINESS MOTION

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that a suspension of Standing Orders requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4), inclusive, be suspended for 26 November 2007. — *[Mr McNarry.]*

Mr Speaker: Given that the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm if required.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the Northern Ireland Events Company.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am grateful for this opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC).

Members will be aware that, on 22 November, the Executive agreed to a number of immediate steps in response to the deficit identified by the NIEC. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) was first notified of the deficit on 20 September, when the acting chief executive advised officials that the company had incurred a significant financial debt. Prior to that, the company gave no indication to the Department of any impending deficit.

Earlier in 2007, the Department commissioned an internal audit to review the company's governance and control systems, and that report was completed in August 2007. In view of the number of significant weaknesses identified, the Department engaged with NIEC on the recommendations and action points set out in the internal audit report. In that context, and in the work of the external auditors finalising the 2006-07 accounts, the staff of NIEC advised the Department of the deficit. The draft accounts prepared by the company's external auditors for the period ending 31 March 2007 reflect a deficit of approximately £1.2 million, accumulated over the financial years 2005-06 and 2006-07.

On the basis of the information provided to the Department to date, it appears that the greatest deficit arose from significant overspend against budget in several events, and the company committing itself to expenditure on the basis of assumed corporate sponsorship that failed to materialise.

The purpose of this statement is to inform Members of the background to the issue, and to set out the steps agreed by the Executive to address the matter. The NIEC is established as a company limited by guarantee, and it is bound by companies legislation. The company is treated as a non-departmental public body and has, largely, been dependent on financial support from its sponsor Department, DCAL. Grant-in-aid is paid by DCAL to the company on the terms of an approved business plan. The company is run by a group of non-executive directors, appointed by the Department, with the support of a small executive team.

The liabilities, and contingent liabilities, of the company are precisely that — that is, the liabilities of the company, and not of the Department. Prior to this,

the Department has not underwritten or guaranteed the debts of the company; however, in reaching a decision on how to address the issue of this deficit, there is a wide range of factors which I, and the Executive Committee, must consider.

At this stage, there is considerable uncertainty as to the precise details of the company's financial affairs; therefore, the information currently available must be treated with caution. As previously stated, the draft accounts for the year ending 31 March 2007 reflect a deficit of approximately £1.2 million. In addition, several potential contingent liabilities require further consideration.

I want to have available a comprehensive and authoritative audit of the company's financial affairs to enable me fully to assess the position, and I will advise the House further when that becomes clear.

Following a meeting of NIEC's directors on 5 October, the chairman of the company asked the Department to assist in meeting its liabilities. The Department asked the company to quantify its liabilities and set out the background to the accumulation of its deficit. The information currently available to the Department is based on the work of the company's external auditors and on documentation provided by NIEC.

A decision on whether or not to assist the company, and in what manner, was urgent. Given the circumstances, this required me to engage with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and, thereafter, my Executive Committee colleagues to seek agreement for my Department to assist in meeting the liabilities of NIEC. The Executive agreed on 22 November to meet the liabilities as identified by the external auditors appointed by the company. This process will be verified by an appropriate professional, appointed by my Department, who will advise on the most appropriate method of winding up the company in an orderly manner.

As Members will appreciate, this matter gave rise to a difficult policy decision for my Department and, ultimately, the Executive, since it is both significant and controversial. A range of options as to how the public interest could best be served were explored. The arguments in favour of assisting the company in meeting its liabilities included consideration of the damage to Northern Ireland's reputation for hosting events should the company, and the events function, be put in abeyance. A number of events are due to take place in the near future, and several significant events are in the pipeline. The rationale for supporting events is to attract tourists and improve the overall standing of Northern Ireland's image. The position in relation to the company's creditors and staff was also an important factor in the decision.

In seeking the agreement of the Executive for this course of action, it was my judgement that the public

interest is best served by assisting NIEC to meet its deficit in a manner that maintains confidence in the ability of Northern Ireland to attract and host major events. The potential strategic, long-term benefits of decisive action now outweigh the costs of meeting this immediate shortfall.

As I said earlier, I am in the process of commissioning an independent, comprehensive review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by NIEC. In particular, this will focus on the significant overspend against budget on a number of specific events. I will report back to the House on the findings of this review at the earliest opportunity.

I have also commissioned an external review of the monitoring arrangements between the Department and the other arm's-length bodies for which it is responsible. This will consider what lessons can be learned in the light of the experience with NIEC.

Clearly, there is a range of sensitive legal and financial issues to be addressed. The professional financial adviser and his specialist team are best placed to bring clarity to these matters. Until I am in possession of the precise details, there is a limit on the extent to which I can assist Members at this stage. I trust that Members will appreciate the sensitivities involved and, therefore, I ask Members to take account of the fact that not all the relevant facts are yet available. It would be prudent to suspend judgement until the facts are available.

The course of action agreed by the Executive will provide full scrutiny of the circumstances leading to the deficit. It will protect Northern Ireland's reputation for hosting major international events and secure, as far as possible, the existing portfolio of events, along with those in the pipeline. I know that Members share my keenness that events should proceed, if worthwhile, but I am adamant that this must be done within a properly controlled financial framework.

In the process of winding up the company in an orderly manner, early consideration will be given to how the events function should be delivered in the future. It is my intention to ensure that the transition from the current model to whatever new arrangements are put in place is managed in a manner that secures the continuity of attracting and hosting major events in Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Nelson McCausland, I remind the House, because of the nature of the Minister's statement, not to stray onto any legal issues. I also ask Members not to name, either directly or indirectly, people who are associated with the company.

Mr McCausland: Have there been any complaints against the company? If so, what was the nature of

those complaints, when were they made and how were they investigated?

Mr Poots: The Department received complaints from five individuals about the Northern Ireland Events Company. Those included complaints from former employees and from those who organised events. The complaints ranged from management attitude to their staff to financial management and propriety and to lack of transparency and equity in dealing with funders.

Complaints were also received about specific actions of the former chief executive, and a further complaint concerned an alleged irregular payment. Those complaints have been subject to ongoing investigations.

The Department has interviewed former members of staff, who wish to remain anonymous. A broad internal audit of the Northern Ireland Events Company was initiated to examine those areas of financial management and processes that former employees had highlighted. The audit also included an examination of all contemporaneous records of payment.

Funding applicants who made allegations were advised to follow the NIEC complaints procedure, and they were provided with the relevant documentation on those procedures.

Additional allegations that a fifth individual made were investigated, at the Department's request, by a retired senior civil servant, whose report concluded that there was no evidence to substantiate the allegations that had been made. After the complainant was informed of the report's findings, a further allegation about an irregular payment was made, and the Department immediately initiated an internal audit investigation, which remains ongoing, into that specific alleged payment. Some of the queries and inquiries to which I have referred date as far back as two and a half years ago.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr O'Dowd): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware that the Public Accounts Committee has asked for an interim report into the matter to be compiled. Given the comments that both the Minister and you, Mr Speaker, have made on the legalities involved, I shall keep my comments broad.

First, will the Minister let the House know why the internal audit of August 2007 did not highlight the company's financial difficulties immediately? Does the Minister agree that there is no excuse for arm's-length bodies finding themselves in the position in which the Events Company now finds itself?

The Minister's statement said that the internal audit report was completed in August 2007 and that in view of a number of significant weaknesses identified, the Department had engaged with the NIEC. The significant weaknesses refer to good governance practices. A wealth

of information on good governance is available to arm's-length bodies. The Audit Office provides that information, as does the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Indeed, I think that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) provided training only last week or the week before on the governance of such public bodies. Does the Minister agree that significant information is available out there, and, therefore, there is no reason why a public body's governance procedures should contain weaknesses?

Mr Poots: It is a salutary lesson for those who sit as directors on such organisations that their responsibilities do not simply extend to dealing with information of which they are aware. It is also their responsibility to make themselves aware of information that they should possess. Individuals who sit on such bodies must ensure that they receive the quality of information that gives them the confidence to make decisions. I agree with the Member on that.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McNarry): I thank the Minister for detailing his proposed action and congratulate him on securing the required extra funding.

Will the Minister confirm that groups that have yet to complete their forms to draw on grants that have already been approved will receive payment? Also, what lessons can his Department and other Departments learn from their not recognising sooner what was a serious financial deficit?

Mr Poots: First, those groups that applied for funding, were awarded it and have yet to draw on it, will still be eligible to receive it, provided that they present the appropriate and proper documentation.

We will be very careful to ensure that everything paid out is adequately documented and that appropriate spending took place. This situation will be a lesson to Departments, and there will be lessons to be learnt.

We will have our enquiry; and I expect that there will be a hearing by the Public Accounts Committee on the matter also. As we go through the process, there will be lessons for Government to learn about how non-departmental bodies are organised, and there will be lessons to be learnt by the individuals who are involved in those bodies.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I acknowledge his contribution and help in recent days in bringing a level of comfort to many on this matter. Has a commitment been given to existing programmes, activities and festivals in the incoming year? There is a level of anxiety from the organisers of good events — such as the Foyle Cup and Milk Cup, community events in my constituency and the World Police and Fire Games. There are good staff who have the capacity to deliver such events, not just in relation to funding applications but in securing private-sector

sponsorship. Not all of the staff have been at fault in this matter. Therefore, can we ensure that the capacity to deliver events will remain intact?

Mr Poots: First, I want to ensure that genuine creditors will receive outstanding payments. That will include all applications that have been approved up to March 2008. As for the future of the Northern Ireland Events Company: it will be wound up as soon as possible after that date. It was due to transfer to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 1 April 2008, and the due diligence process is underway. As things stand, the transfer is still planned to take place on that date.

Secondly, I intend to make a statement to the Assembly next week on how we will deal with community festivals, as they do not seem to fit within the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. My statement should give Members some confidence on the matter.

We want to ensure that there is confidence both within and beyond Northern Ireland in our ability to deliver events. We have been bidding for significant events, which I trust will be successful. There is still a very important events function to be delivered, and we want to ensure that it is delivered in a professional way that inspires widespread confidence.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister stated that the draft accounts for the period ending 31 March 2007 were prepared. Will he tell us when the accounts for 2005-06 were published and whether they highlighted difficulties at that time? He also said that the company had committed itself to expenditure:

“on the basis of assumed corporate sponsorship that failed to materialise.”

Could the company claim funding from the bodies that did not cough up, or was there any written agreement that funding could be recouped from those bodies?

Mr Poots: On the first point, the 2005-06 accounts were unqualified. Therefore, the auditors had not identified any issues in the 2005-06 accounts that were presented to the board. Corporate finance and corporate sponsorship was assumed but was not actually achieved. Companies had not agreed to give funding or sponsorship. However, it was assumed that such funding and sponsorship could be received on the basis of previous experience.

Unfortunately, the events company lost key members of staff who had a specialism in attracting and going after that type of corporate sponsorship. In the absence of the members of staff who were pursuing that particular sponsorship, it did not materialise.

Lord Browne: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a large number of non-departmental public bodies. In the light of the serious financial loss incurred by the Northern Ireland Events Company, how confident

is the Minister that other, similar situations could not arise? Will he confirm that a business case had been made for each event sponsored by the Northern Ireland Events Company?

Mr Poots: All Departments can learn from what has happened. As a consequence, DCAL has commissioned an immediate review into the monitoring arrangements with all of the arms-length bodies for which it is responsible. I cannot necessarily say that I would be confident that that is the case in other companies. It may be unlikely, but the review is being carried out to ensure that we have that confidence in place, and it is something that other Departments might wish to consider in order to identify the lessons learned in the light of that experience.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

With regard to the new arrangements that have been put in place, I ask the Minister if he believes that the events company is best suited to DCAL in the future. Has he a view on where it should be situated? Will he agree that all such bodies are best placed in DCAL, so that the Minister can keep a close eye on them? He talked about learning from the mistakes that have been made, and I hope that we can all learn from that experience. What is the position with regard to arrangements for which the events company has responsibility, including the community festivals fund?

Mr Poots: I indicated that the company was due to move to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 1 April 2008. As I understand it, that is still the case, subject to due-diligence procedures. Festival funding, clearly, does not fall within the Tourist Board's remit. We intend to make a statement next week that will deal with that issue. I am sure that the good work that has been done in that area will continue.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the diligence that he has shown in the matter. He said there was considerable uncertainty about the precise details of the company's financial affairs. What steps were taken once the company's financial deficit came to light?

Mr Poots: A number of actions were taken. First of all, the Department instructed the Northern Ireland Events Company not to enter into any further commitments until and unless it had been given explicit approval by the Department to do so. In addition, the usual quarterly monitoring meeting between the Department and NIEC has been escalated to a monthly one for the foreseeable future. The Department has requested a full assessment of the financial deficit and financial commitments of the company up until March 2008. It has also asked for a detailed report on the extent and origin of the deficit. That is being prepared by external auditors, who are also undertaking a 100% verification

of all payments against authorisation. I expect to have a report on that in the near future.

Mr B McCrea: I note from the Minister's statement that the Department was first notified on 20 September 2007. Perhaps he will tell the House when he was informed personally about the financial difficulties. Will he also indicate whether any significant contingent liabilities were entered into after that date? Given the importance of protecting Northern Ireland's reputation, will he state what quantum of costs might have to be dealt with in order to settle the contingent liabilities?

Mr Poots: I was informed at the same time as the Department on 20 September. My accounting officer brought to my attention that which had been brought to his attention. I would have expected nothing less from him than to be informed immediately of something of that nature.

12.30 pm

I first received information to the effect that all might not be well at the Northern Ireland Events Company in the early part of the summer, when I was approached by my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr. He indicated that he had picked up information to the effect that matters might not be as they should. In response to that, I met a former member of Northern Ireland Events Company staff. I also met the organiser of a particular event, who brought some matters to my attention, which I subsequently brought to the attention of my officials. That led to the chain of events that I outlined in my statement.

The Member asked how we intended to handle the matter. We have stated that we intend to ensure that legitimate creditors are paid in full, and we shall put in place a process whereby we can continue to ensure that quality events are brought to Northern Ireland. The organisers of those events must be able to have confidence that those events will be successful, and that whatever sponsorship is offered to them will be paid. I believe that we are in a position to do that.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Bearing in mind that the events company was in difficulties for some time, why did the Minister's Department not become aware of those difficulties until 20 September, and why did his Department not have in place monitoring arrangements to protect the public interest in the company?

Mr Poots: As I have indicated, monitoring arrangements are in place, which have operated on a quarterly basis. The reason why the figures were not identified at an earlier point is a matter that must emerge from the inquiries that will take place. I trust that we will get that information and that we will learn how such a deficit could have been accumulated without it being noticed through the audit arrangements that were in place.

Mr Craig: Bearing in mind the information that the Minister has already provided about the transfer of the Northern Ireland Events Company's responsibilities to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, is the Minister not concerned that some board members appear to hold dual mandates? Could he also outline to the House the findings of the internal audit review?

Mr Poots: As I have clearly indicated, the transfer of responsibilities to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will be subject to prior due diligence. However, the sooner we can wind up the Northern Ireland Events Company and start the transition of its functions and responsibilities to another organisation, the sooner we will be able to gain greater certainty and clarity and ensure greater confidence in the local community, and beyond, in respect of bringing events to Northern Ireland.

As part of that process, the responsibilities of those who have been members of both bodies will have to be addressed.

The internal audit review that was completed in August 2007 concluded that risk management, control and governance arrangements in the Northern Ireland Events Company were satisfactory, in part, but contained a number of significant weaknesses that could undermine the achievement of objectives and leave the organisation vulnerable to material error and abuse.

In view of the significant weaknesses that were identified, the Department engaged with the Northern Ireland Events Company to address the recommendations and action points that were set out in the internal audit report.

Mr Durkan: I recognise that the Minister is dealing with problems that were in no way of his making. The Minister said that the full facts are not available. When will the full facts become available? Will the full facts be available to all Members and the wider public, so that the due diligence exercise in respect of the possible transfer of most of the events company's functions to DETI and the Tourist Board are fully informed by those facts? To carry out a transfer on any other basis would be asking for more problems.

Mr Poots: In addition to the work that the external auditors have been asked to do, an expert has been appointed who will be directly answerable to the Department on all of the issues at hand. I cannot be specific as to a date for the establishment of all the facts, but that will happen — comprehensively and adequately — as soon as is physically possible. We must identify how the present difficulties and problems came into being and clear them up before any consideration can be given to transferring the functions of the Northern Ireland Events Company to the Tourist Board. The work that has to be done is in good hands, and the right level of expertise has been deployed in order to identify the issues that Members need to know about. I

will inform the House as soon as I receive adequate information, just as I have done in this instance.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he mentioned the non-executive directors who run the Northern Ireland Events Company. Will the Minister remind the House of the identity of those directors and state whether any assessment has been made of their management of the company?

Mr Poots: The current board members are as follows: Mr Mervyn Elder, chairman; Mr Ian Lee; Dr Paul McWilliams; Mr Jim Rodgers; Mr Jim Clarke; Professor Eric Saunders; Mr Alan Clarke; Mr Gerry Lennon; Mr Bill White; Mrs Roberta Dunlop; and Mr Sam McGregor. Three of those appointments were made on 23 April 1997. Four appointments were made in 1999, and the remainder in 2002.

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned contingent liabilities in his statement. Will he advise the House whether loans are included under that heading? Did the Northern Ireland Events Company take out any loans to enable it to operate? If that is so, when were the Minister and the Department made aware of the situation, and when was any approval sought or given?

Mr Poots: I am not aware of the Northern Ireland Events Company having taken out any loans. That is not to say that that is not the case, however. I will seek to ascertain the facts and inform the Member in writing.

Lord Morrow: The Minister said that he had received a number of complaints. Will the Minister inform the House whether he received those complaints prior to, or after 20 September 2007? Furthermore, will he tell us what the deficit was in the accounts for 2005-06? The Minister also mentioned sponsorship that failed to materialise. What action was taken when the facts of that matter were brought to his attention? Does the Minister have any details of further deficits for the period between April and October 2007?

Mr Poots: I received first reports of these matters in June 2007. As I said, I met an event organiser and a former employee of the Northern Ireland Events Company, both of whom expressed concerns about the company. I passed those concerns on to senior staff in the Department, which brought about the internal review, and, which, ultimately, has brought the matter to the attention of the House. I will seek to ascertain the exact figures pertaining to the 2005-06 deficit and provide those to the Member. I am aware that a considerable amount of the deficit developed in that period, and I will provide that information to the Member as soon as I receive it. The Department is not aware of deficits in the financial year 2006-07 to date. However, that determination will be subject to the accounting procedures that have been put in place.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to introduce the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07], which is a Bill to amend section 2A of the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Pensions Bill

Accelerated Passage

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

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

This Bill will make provision for Northern Ireland corresponding to provisions of the Pensions Act 2007, which received Royal Assent on 26 July 2007. The provisions in the Bill flow largely from the Independent Pensions Commission's Turner report, and they are aimed at improving the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension and simplifying private pensions.

I am sure that everyone in the House, myself included, wants to be a champion and an advocate not only for pensioners but for those who are on the threshold of receiving entitlement next year or in 10 or 15 years. Anyone who is in that category now or who will fit into it in the future will obtain the money to which they are entitled. The reforms of the state pension will benefit women and carers in particular, by providing them with better opportunities to build up pension entitlement. I will describe the proposals in greater detail later this afternoon during the Second Stage of the Bill. However, it may be helpful if I briefly go through the main provisions of the Bill.

The Bill will reduce the number of qualifying years needed for a full basic state pension and will revise and modernise contribution credits for those with caring responsibilities. It will enable a spouse or civil partner to draw a pension based on their partner's National Insurance record, even if the partner has chosen not to retire, and will abolish adult dependency increases. It will provide for the uprating of basic state pension and the minimum guarantee element of pension

credit in line with earnings. It will reform and simplify state second pension and increase state pension age gradually from 65 to 68 between 2024 and 2046. The Chairman of the Committee for Social Development raised that issue with me, and I have provided him with a written response.

The Bill also simplifies private pension arrangements and encourages saving for retirement by simplifying the structure of defined benefit contract-out schemes, abolishing contracting out in defined contribution schemes, introducing simpler internal dispute resolution procedures for occupational pension schemes and providing for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal account system to enable people to save for their retirement.

I will now turn to the reasons why this important Bill should be given accelerated passage. However, I am conscious that such a procedure may inhibit Members from conducting fuller line-by-line scrutiny. There has been a longstanding principle of parity with GB in the areas of social security and pensions. In recognition of that exceptional position, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on me and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to seek to maintain single systems of social security and pensions right across Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Members are aware of the constraints of parity, both in terms of what is operationally possible given the common information-technology systems, and, crucially, the very substantial funding that we receive from Britain to pay benefits here: currently around £2.4 billion per annum. That funding is predicated on the maintenance of parity — thus, there are 2.4 billion reasons for the maintenance of that arrangement. Very sound and pertinent economic imperatives underpin the principle of parity and I hope that all parties are aware of and understand its benefits.

12.45 pm

The majority of the provisions in the Pensions Act 2007 were brought into force when the Bill received Royal Assent, or two months afterwards, even though most of them do not have practical effect until 2010. Planning for retirement is a long-term process, and commencing the provisions of the Act in that way allows people throughout Northern Ireland and Great Britain to plan for retirement with some degree of certainty. We are already finding that the absence of corresponding legislation in Northern Ireland is causing operational difficulties, in relation to retirement pension forecasting for example. If this Bill were to be subject to the full Bill procedure, people here would, unfortunately, be disadvantaged for several months to come in that they would be unable to plan with certainty for their retirement.

Furthermore, an important provision of the Bill ensures that the standard minimum guarantee of pension credit can be operated in line with earnings. The standard minimum guarantee provides a minimum level of income for pensioners: currently £119.05 for a single person and £181.70 for a couple. Before the introduction of the Pensions Act 2007, there was no requirement to uprate the standard minimum guarantee, and uprating was carried out purely at the discretion of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Pensions Act 2007 now places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to uprate the standard minimum guarantee annually in line with earnings, and that takes effect from April 2008, when the minimum guarantee is expected to rise by £5 a week for a single person and by £7.65 a week for a couple. My Department has no power to uprate benefits unilaterally in Northern Ireland. However, the Bill empowers the Department to make an Order to uprate the standard minimum guarantee in line with the rate applicable in Britain.

This Bill is essential to ensure that no one in Northern Ireland misses out on increased payments guaranteed to be available in Great Britain. Without accelerated passage, there can be no guarantee that the Bill will receive Royal Assent in time to allow the necessary Order to be made. The Department would therefore have no power to uprate the standard minimum guarantee in Northern Ireland from April 2008, and people here would be entitled to only the 2007-08 rate.

Parity covers not only the content of the legislation, but also, as far as possible, the timing of its implementation. To ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are given the same opportunities to plan for retirement as people in Britain are, and that they are entitled to the higher rate of the standard minimum guarantee from April, the necessary powers must be made available as soon as possible.

I do not take lightly the use of the accelerated passage procedure. I do not believe that any legislation should be free from detailed scrutiny, and I have already had that discussion with the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and Committee members. I will consider each piece of so-called parity legislation according to its merits, and I have already given that undertaking to the Chairperson.

However, in this instance, I believe — and I hope that the Assembly will agree — that people in Northern Ireland who pay the same rates of National Insurance contributions and income tax as people in Great Britain have the right to expect the proposed changes to apply here at the same time as they apply in Britain. In particular, they should be entitled to the higher rate of pension credit in the same way as people in England and Wales are.

As I said earlier, I want all people in Northern Ireland, particularly those who are on the threshold of entitlement to their pension and those who are currently in receipt of it, to be sure that they receive all of their entitlement. That is why I launched the benefit uptake campaign earlier in 2007, which had already been successful during the previous two financial years.

Therefore, for all the reasons that I have outlined, I ask that the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure in accordance with Standing Order 40(4). Granting the use of accelerated passage procedure means that there will not be a formal Committee Stage. I met the Committee on 8 November to explain why it was necessary to seek accelerated passage for the Pensions Bill. Of course, Members will have an opportunity to make their views on the Bill known during its Second Stage and for issues to be fully discussed during that debate, the Consideration Stage and the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Some people have experienced delays in payment of their pension credit. I have asked my officials to carry out a full investigation of the number of applications for pension credit that have been made during the past three years; how many have been approved, refused or are outstanding; and to explain why applications are outstanding and whether further information is required from the applicant in those cases. As I have said, I want to ensure that everyone who is entitled can obtain their benefits without undue stress or discomfort.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): As she has mentioned, the Minister attended a meeting of the Committee for Social Development on 8 November 2007. She explained the reasons for her request that the Pensions Bill should proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. She also outlined the consequences if accelerated passage were not granted. The Committee listened carefully to her remarks.

Every part of the Bill falls under section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is a 100% parity measure that will ensure the continuation of a single system of pensions for the United Kingdom. It is part of the ongoing process of pensions reform and is intended to improve the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension, to simplify private pensions and also to establish a personal accounts delivery authority.

The Committee is aware of the importance of maintaining parity in order to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland benefit from changes at the same time that they are introduced in Great Britain. However, Members expressed serious reservations about the principle of bringing forward legislation without full Committee scrutiny. The Minister has agreed that she will consult intensively with the Department on how to deal with future parity legislation with the Committee's

involvement. Therefore, in the light of that undertaking by the Minister, the Committee has agreed to support her request that the Pensions Bill be granted accelerated passage.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As has been stated, accelerated passage is relevant to the Pensions Bill and has been agreed by the Committee.

The problem of pensioner poverty has resulted from years of underinvestment in the pension system. The state pension is one of the meanest in Europe. It looks set to continue as such, even under the reforms to the pension system. Unfortunately, the Government have chosen to use means-testing as the apparatus with which to tackle pensioner poverty. The system's inherent fatal flaw is the problem of uptake. Each year, here and in Britain, over £4 billion is unclaimed by pensioners, and that does not include disability benefits.

In conclusion and in view of the huge amount of money that is unclaimed, the basic state benefit should be set at a level that takes people out of poverty rather than one that requires them to claim help. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I have listened carefully to the views expressed in the Chamber today, particularly to the comments made by the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Campbell, and by Mr Brady; and I am grateful for the Committee's support for my request for accelerated passage. I agree with Mr Campbell's view that the handling of social security and pension legislation poses unique problems. The statutory requirement to seek to maintain single systems across Northern Ireland and Great Britain creates obvious tensions between our desire to scrutinise in-depth proposed legislation and the need to maintain the parity of timing inherent in such single systems.

The area of social security and pension legislation is highly regulated, and the Pensions Bill is the second Bill from that field that has been introduced by the Assembly: Members considered the Welfare Reform Bill back in May and June of this year. Furthermore, it is anticipated that there will be two more related Bills in this session. I acknowledge the undertaking that I made to the Committee: I will consult heavily and intensively with my departmental officials, the Committee and the Chairperson about how to progress the Pensions Bill. In addition, there was an announcement in the Queen's speech that another pensions Bill and a national insurance contributions Bill will be progressed. I propose to consult further with the Committee as to how we can best handle parity legislation in this field, particularly given the anticipated heavy programme of legislation.

I also thank Mr Brady for his comments on pensioner poverty. I cannot disagree with him, because it should be the ultimate aim of the Executive and the Assembly

to ensure that people, particularly pensioners — many of whom live in isolated rural communities and who already feel marginalised, undermined and alone — do not live in poverty. The Assembly must be there to help them, and that is why I took the opportunity to launch the benefit uptake campaign through which the advice service network will inform people of what benefits are available. The Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Social Security Agency wrote to pensioners, and other eligible people, earlier in the year to ensure that they were aware of the campaign. There is an onus of responsibility — in fact, an obligation — on Members, as public representatives, to ensure that the elderly members of society are made aware of all the benefits that are available to help remove them from poverty.

Over the next couple of days, I will have further meetings on this issue in London. I will meet a social security Minister to discuss child poverty, and I will also make further representations to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on matters relating to pensions, because I am conscious of the issues involved.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

Pensions Bill

Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] be agreed.

I feel as if I am regurgitating some of what I said a few minutes ago. Notwithstanding that, the Pensions Bill makes provisions that correspond with those of the Pensions Act 2007. During the debate on the Bill's proposed accelerated passage, I addressed the issue of parity with Britain and the arguments in favour of maintaining that long-standing policy — not least with regard to the financial realities. I trust that all Members accept that the policy of parity is beneficial and acknowledge that all pensioners and those who are on the threshold of receiving a pension next week, next year, or in 10 or 15 years' time — and many Members may fall into that category — have a right to obtain the benefits to which they are entitled.

1.00 pm

I also briefly described the content of the Bill and, with your agreement, Mr Speaker, I will provide some background to the reforms and address the Bill's proposals in greater detail.

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

In November 2005, the Independent Pensions Commission published its second report, the 'Turner Report', making recommendations on how the pensions system could be reformed to better meet future needs. Average pensioner outcomes today compare well with those of previous generations, and changes since 1997 have been targeted in particular at helping those on lower incomes. As I said earlier, I am sure that everybody in this House, including me, wants to be a champion and an advocate for pensioners and future generations of pensioners to ensure that they are able to avail of all the benefits to which they are entitled, including all the benefits that pensioners should be able to obtain.

The commission concluded that the demographic and social trends are creating future challenges for all of us. Life expectancy is increasing. This, along with lower birth rates, is resulting in older age groups becoming an increasingly large proportion of the population. Indeed, we are facing a situation where, for the first time, we will have more pensioners than children. Family structures are changing with single-person households now more common. The trend of women's growing participation in the labour market is continuing and as a result of the accumulation of 60 years of pension legislation, the current pension system is complex and difficult to understand. Problems with savings incentives could develop if, in the long term, a

pension system evolved in which a significant majority of pensioners had to rely on pension credit. Around seven million people across Northern Ireland and Britain are estimated to be under-saving for their retirement.

In May 2006, building on the analysis and recommendations made by the Independent Pensions Commission's proposals for pension reform and the rationale for change were published in the White Paper 'Security in retirement: towards a new pensions system'. The White Paper explained the challenges facing the pensions system and presented proposals for a long-term solution. The proposals aimed to promote personal responsibility for planning for retirement and to be fair, affordable and sustainable. The White Paper was the subject of widespread consultation both in Britain and here, and the proposals form the basis of the Pensions Bill that we are debating today.

The Pensions Bill contains a package of reformed state pensions, simplification measures and private pensions, and provides for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal accounts system to enable people to save for retirement. It is anticipated that the detail of the personal accounts scheme will be the subject of a later Bill.

Part 1 of the Bill proposes a number of changes to state pension provision. These are aimed at improving its coverage, generosity and sustainability by reducing the number of qualifying years for a full basic state pension; revising and modernising credits for caring that will apply to both the basic state pension and the state second pension; enabling a married person or civil partner to draw a pension based on the National Insurance record of a spouse or civil partner over pensionable age who has chosen not to retire; abolishing adult dependency increases; flat-rating and simplifying the state second pension; linking the up-rating of the pension credit guarantee and the basic state pension to earnings; and gradually raising the state pension age, including consequential changes for other social security benefits.

The state pension reforms recognise the different ways in which people contribute to society and will particularly benefit sections of society, such as women and carers, who, arguably, are disadvantaged by the current system. Under the proposals, they will have significantly better opportunities to accrue pension entitlement.

That will be achieved primarily by reducing to 30 the number of qualifying years required for a full basic state pension for men and women and by introducing contribution credits for parents and carers. Those measures will help to address the pension effects of differences in the labour market between men and women and the impact of caring responsibilities.

Only 40% of women in Northern Ireland are entitled to a full category A pension. Under the proposals, it is

anticipated that 75% of women who reach state pension age in 2010 will be entitled to a full pension, and that that figure will rise to over 90% by 2025. A fragmented career history, for example, due to caring responsibilities, will no longer necessarily have a negative impact on pension entitlement.

The Bill also provides for the basic state pension to be operated in line with earnings rather than prices. However, due to the significant cost implications, the precise date for that has not yet been fixed. The corresponding Act at Westminster provides for it to be implemented by no later than the end of the next Parliament. The measure will ensure that the basic state pension keeps its value relative to earnings and provides a solid underpinning to retirement income.

I have explained the provision in the Bill that ensures that the standard minimum guarantee element of pension credit is uprated annually in line with earnings, and that will take effect from the uprating in April 2008. During the debate on accelerated passage for the Bill, I told the House that I have asked my officials to investigate the number of applications for pension credit over the past three years and how many have not yet been processed to approval stage and why. I am particularly conscious that many pensioners are isolated and are living in poverty. The Assembly should do everything in its remit to ensure that that situation does not continue.

The new Bill provides for the reform and simplification of the state second pension. The earnings-related component will be phased out, and the complex accrual mechanisms will be replaced by a flat-rate sum of £1.50 a week, in 2007-08 terms, for each qualifying year spent working or caring. Over time, the earnings-related component will decrease, and by about 2030, it will have disappeared.

The Bill will enable a spouse or civil partner to draw a pension based on their partner's National Insurance record, even if the partner has chosen not to retire. Given the cost implications of the proposals, there are inevitable trade-offs, such as the increase in state pension age in each decade between 2020 and 2050 in response to the ageing demographic profile. Under the proposals, the state pension age will increase to 68 by 2046.

The changes to pension age merely reflect the anticipated changes in the average life expectancy. Indeed, the ratio of people of working age to those of pensionable age in the population will continue to decline, although not as sharply as it would if the state pension age were to remain unchanged. The increases in state pension age will be matched by a corresponding extension in the availability of working-age benefits to those who are below the new pension age.

The abolition of adult dependency increases in category A and category C retirement pensions will simplify state pension rules. The existing provisions

governing adult dependency increases are complex and are based on the increasingly outdated post-war concept of a single-breadwinner household. Transitional protection will be provided to 2020 for the small number of people in Northern Ireland who will be affected.

Part 2 of the Bill contains measures aimed at simplifying the provision of private pensions, of which there is a long history in Northern Ireland. Over time, layers of regulation have produced an extremely complicated system that makes it difficult for schemes to operate and for members of the scheme to understand. The proposals aim to provide a degree of clarity that does not currently exist and to encourage saving for retirement.

The structure of defined benefit contracted-out schemes will be simplified by permitting the conversion of guaranteed minimum pensions that relate to certain pension rights earned between 1978 and 1997 into ordinary scheme benefits of at least equal actuarial value. Contracting out in defined contributions schemes will be abolished. The amount of pension payable by a defined contribution scheme depends on a number of variables, including the age at which a person joins; the amount he or she pays in contributions; and, crucially, the performance of the scheme's investment portfolio. Given these variables, it is difficult even for experts to judge whether a person would be better off contracted out in such a scheme or remaining in the state second pension. Permitting the conversion of guaranteed minimum pensions removes the need to make that difficult decision.

Occupational pension schemes will be able to operate similar internal dispute resolution procedures, and the Department will no longer be required to approve actuarial guidance notes relating to pension schemes. Part 3 of the Bill provides for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority in preparation for the introduction of a personal accounts system to enable people to save for retirement. Part 4 of the Bill provides for a report on the operation of the subsequent Act before the end of 2014, and that report will be laid before the Assembly.

The Bill represents a step in legislating for the long-term reform of our pension system. It will improve the coverage and generosity of the state pension system and ensure its sustainability, simply by private pension provision, and lay the foundation of the introduction of a new system of personal accounts, as recommended by the Independent Pensions Commission. The reforms will remove existing inequalities in state pensions and help to mitigate the consequences of labour market differences, which adversely affect women's pension entitlement. They will also reduce the income gap in retirement between men and women.

The Bill aims to ensure that the state pension system remains affordable in both the short and long term. As

envisaged by the Independent Pensions Commission, the proposals form an integrated package. None of the elements alone could successfully tackle the future pensions challenges.

With this Bill, we are aiming to build a simpler and enduring pensions system for generations to come. I hope that many, including those who are women and carers, will be able to benefit from the new Pensions Bill. I hope that all people and all Members in the House will be able to agree with the provisions contained therein. I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the very technical nature of the provisions contained in the legislation, but it is my duty and responsibility to explain the content of the Bill and its consequences.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): It is on occasions such as this that eyes glaze over and brains begin to numb, and that is before we get to equal actuarial values. In all seriousness, as the Minister has outlined, there are three key components to the Bill. Improving the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension; enacting simplification measures in private pensions; and establishing a personal accounts delivery authority.

The Minister and her officials have briefed the Committee in great depth on the principles and details of the Bill, and the Committee is grateful for that. The Bill is part of the preparations to meet the challenges of increasing longevity and changing demographics. In 2050, there will only be two people of working age for every one person in retirement — today, the ratio is 4 to 1. Therefore, it is clear that pension reform is vital to meet those challenges, and the Bill is only part of the ongoing process of pensions reform.

I have no intention of speaking about every provision in the Bill. Members will be glad to hear that.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Campbell: There is no need to be so enthusiastic. However, there are a number of provisions that I want to touch on.

The Bill is of particular significance and benefit to women and carers. Many women and carers are denied a full pension because their family and caring responsibilities mean that they are not in work long enough to qualify.

However, the Bill will enable people who care for children, or people with a severe disability, to build up a state pension entitlement through weekly carer credits. The Committee believes that that will provide women and carers with a fair deal, making it easier for them to balance their responsibilities. It will also recognise their important contribution to society as a whole and help to redress the gender gap that exists in pensions generally, which is just as important.

1.15 pm

The changes would mean that around three quarters of women who retire in 2010 would be entitled to a full basic state pension — the current level is about half of that figure. By 2025, more than 90% of people who retire would be entitled to a full basic state pension. The Bill will also raise the state pension age. The first increase, from 65 to 66, will take place between 2024 and 2026. The second increase, from 66 to 67, will occur between 2034 and 2036. The third increase, from 67 to 68, will take place between 2044 and 2046. That may not be welcome news for some, but those changes are necessary to reflect increasing longevity and, hopefully, will go some way to stave off a pensions crisis in the future and secure the long-term financial stability of the pensions system.

Research has shown that poor people do not live as long as wealthy people. Therefore, any increase in the state pension age — to allow for a more generous state pension — may not benefit poorer people in our society. The Department for Social Development takes the lead on many strategies and policies that target the disadvantaged and aim to reduce the level of poverty, and the Committee will pay particular attention to those when it is scrutinising the Department's work.

The Bill also provides for re-linking the basic state pension with earnings. It is hoped that that will go some way towards ensuring that living standards for older people keep pace with those of the rest of society and that older people do not get poorer the longer they live. The proposed abolition of contracting out defined-contribution schemes is intended to remove complexity from pension-saving decisions; due to the complex nature of pensions, it is often difficult for someone to judge whether they would be better off contracted-out or contracted-in to the state second pension. The Bill also intends to simplify private pensions: streamlining the regulation of private pensions should make it easier for people to plan and save for retirement.

I highlight the Committee's desire to see the people of Northern Ireland benefit from changes at the same time as they are being introduced in the rest of the UK. However, as I mentioned during the debate on accelerated passage, Committee members expressed serious reservations about the principle of advancing legislation without full Committee scrutiny. The Minister has agreed that she will consult intensely in her Department on how future parity legislation is dealt with. The Committee looks forward to hearing from the Minister about the outcome of her consultation.

Mr A Maginness: I suppose that we are the victims of our own success; the reforms initiated by the Labour Government after the Second World War created a welfare state, which provided universal health care, support for the vulnerable in society, and helped to

increase living standards and life expectancy for ordinary people on the street. None of the pioneers of the welfare state anticipated that, as a result of their good work and the creation of better conditions for the ordinary in our society, people would be living a lot longer. Neither would they have anticipated the change in the ratio between those in work and older people in our society — I do not like using the term old age pensioner, particularly when the First Minister is in the Chamber as he might take exception to that. *[Laughter.]*

I do not want to be ageist, but I am sure that Members take the point that there is an imbalance between those people who are working and those who are older and will retire soon. Therefore, it is necessary that there be a thorough pension reform. It remains to be seen whether the Bill is such a reform, but, at first glance, it seems to be substantial and moves towards a simpler, more effective and, as the Minister has said, more generous pension for people in retirement.

Importantly, the Bill also promotes personal responsibility towards pensions. When one is younger, one does not think about pensions. One of the obstacles, particularly for people who are self-employed, is the complexity of private pension schemes. As a self-employed person, I have experience of that. The Bill attempts to simplify those schemes, which are baffling to those who attempt to operate them and those who are their potential beneficiaries. People simply do not understand the schemes because they are so complex. Any reform that simplifies those schemes and makes them more comprehensible to the ordinary person is to be welcomed. In that regard, the Bill is to be welcomed.

The reform of the state pension, which the Bill aims to do, is also to be welcomed. The Bill aims to improve the coverage and sustainability of the state pension. If there are not reforms to the state pension, the system will be under incredible strain, and that might impact adversely on many people. The reduction in the number of qualifying years for a full pension to 30 is to be welcomed. That is important for people whose careers have been disrupted for all sorts of reasons, but in particular for people who are caring, or have cared for, ill or elderly relatives and who, as a result, have been unable to obtain the necessary credits for a full pension at a reasonable age.

The linking of the uprating of the pension credit guarantee and the basic state pension to earnings is important. The linkage was established previously with prices. That is also a step forward. I ask the House to welcome it as a progressive step towards being fairer and more equitable to the ordinary pensioner. The uprating of the state pension in line with earnings is a significant and important step because it will maintain the value of the pension relative to earnings and will be a much more secure basis for people who are entering retirement.

The Pensions Bill is timely, and it will be of general benefit to many people in society who were disadvantaged by the previous pension system. It strengthens the state pension, increases its value for many people, and is a progressive and welcome step forward for all those, including myself, who are approaching pension age.

Ms Lo: I very much welcome the Bill and the simplification of the pension arrangements.

I hold several pensions from different employers, and contracting in and out is absolutely mind-boggling. I also welcome the fact that women and carers will benefit from the shortening of the qualifying period to 30 years — it is unfair for women caring for children and elderly parents or relatives to be penalised. It is a welcome step, and it is a recognition of women who stay at home to look after young people, which saves public services money. Women looking after children and sick, and perhaps disabled, relatives are actually providing a public service.

I was puzzled when the Minister said that 40% of women are entitled to a full pension in 2007, and that that figure will be increased to 75% in 2010, but then went on to say that it will take another 15 years — to 2025 — to increase it to 90%. I do not understand why it will take so long to achieve that increase. Overall, I welcome the Bill.

Mr Hilditch: I have a few comments to make; before the glazed stares spread along the Benches.

I thank the Minister for bringing this important reform to the House for debate today, and I would like the Pensions Bill to proceed under the accelerated passage as previously agreed.

Members should be fully aware, as part of the ongoing process of pension reform, that Part 2 of the Bill makes provision in relation to non-state pensions. It will allow the right to a definite minimum pension accrued under a defined benefit pension scheme to be changed into ordinary-scheme benefits and provide for the abolition of contracting out for defined contribution pension schemes. The Bill also makes corrections on dispute resolution arrangements and the Department's role in approving pension help and advice.

A number of elements of the Bill have been highlighted, and I welcome those. They will raise the amount of pensions; ensure that those who are entitled to a pension receive it, and they will install faith in the state pension in Northern Ireland. The Bill will improve the allowance for females and carers by decreasing the requirement years for a basic state pension. It will refresh and update credits for caring that will apply to the basic state pension and the state second pension. It will enable a married person to have a pension based on the National Insurance record of a spouse who is over pensionable age and who has decided that they wish to work on.

The Bill will abolish adult dependency increases, flat rate and simplify the state second pension, and will combine the upgrading of the pension credit guarantee and the basic state pension to earnings.

The regulatory impact assessment was printed earlier this month. The proposal works towards meeting the five main reasons for pension reform.

It will encourage constituents to get involved in plans for their retirement; it will be fair to those in vulnerable sectors, through the establishment of a new contributory principle; it will make the pension system easier to understand and will ensure that a constituent's decision to save can be made as easily as possible; it will be affordable, through examination of the financial needs of future pensioners, alongside the financial capabilities of the taxpayer, and ensuring that those needs are met economically; and it will be sustained, as many of our constituents gain trust and faith in the pension system in Northern Ireland.

1.30 pm

The Pensions Bill will benefit our constituents. More people will receive a full basic pension; there will be a more generous state pension, with earnings uprating of the state pension; the poorest pensioners will benefit from a higher income, with earnings uprating from the pension-credit standard minimum guarantee; and there will be a simpler system of state second pension and private-pension measures, which will make it easier for people to understand the pensions that they are now accruing.

There will be an impact on employers, who will have to pay full-rate National Insurance contributions. However, a rebate will be paid through the scheme and, therefore, the extra National Insurance costs could be reflected by smaller employer contributions in the long run.

However, if we choose not to reform the pensions system, the inequalities between men and women will continue. If the minimum guarantee is uprated with increasing prices, some pensioners will fall into low income and poverty. To sustain an affordable state pension while the number of people aged 65 increases, the value of state support for pensioners will fall to incomes, and our constituents will never have a clear understanding of their retirement income.

There is no guarantee that life expectancy will not change and, therefore, it is important that we allow people time to plan for retirement. Under the reforms, the amount that is provided through the basic state pension remains constant by means of the second state pension becoming increasingly flat, with each year of work or caring earning an extra £1.40 a week, in 2006-07 terms, during retirement. The result is that individuals will move increasingly towards an underpinned weekly

state pension of around £135 for working or caring from 25 years of age to state pension age.

I welcome the reform of pensions that will result from the Pensions Bill. I see no reason why we should not all support the motion.

Ms Ritchie: I have listened carefully to all of the points that Members have made, and I trust that I will be able to address their concerns. Several matters were raised during the four contributions.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Campbell, raised the issue of lower life expectancy for those on low incomes. Life expectancy is increasing across the board. However, Mr Campbell raised the important issue of the need to ensure better health for everyone in society, particularly lower-income groups. Anyone who is unable to work to the new pension age will have the safeguard of the existing range of working-age benefits, and I assure Members that that is the case. Each of us has to ensure that that happens, and that those people who find themselves outside that category due to ill health before pension age should receive their full entitlement. That is our duty and responsibility.

My colleague Mr Maginness referred to the complexity of the pensions system. I am sure that we all welcome any measures that make the system easier to understand. Many Members may wonder how the system is easier to understand — particularly after listening to the various explanations of the technical details. I know that there is irony in needing such a complex Bill to simplify the pensions system. However, I hope that all Members agree that the Bill will be successful in simplifying the system.

Anna Lo referred to two matters; first, the extremely complex issue of the anticipated rise in the number of women who would be entitled to a full state pension in 2010 and 2025. I wrote to the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development on that matter.

The proportion of women who are entitled to a full basic state pension has been rising steadily. That is largely due to women's improved work records and to the positive effect of home responsibilities protection, which was introduced in 1978. However, lower state pension entitlement is particularly acute for women who are over the age of 45 today. They did not fully benefit from home responsibilities protection and have significantly poorer contribution records than men of the same age — despite the fact that most of them have made valuable contributions to society. The Bill will allow credits to be awarded for previous years in which home responsibilities protection was awarded. That applies only for complete years, up to a maximum of 22 years.

The general issue of women was also raised. I agree with Ms Lo about the important role that women play

in society, and I am pleased that this Bill will help to protect women and carers, because in many instances — although not all — women are the carers.

Ms Lo also asked about the percentage increase in the number of women who are entitled to a full state pension, and I have dealt with that.

Mr Hilditch raised various issues, and I thank him for his considered response and for his support.

In this short debate, Members have had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of this complex legislation, which I hope will improve the coverage and generosity of the state pension system. It will also ensure the system's sustainability and remove existing inequalities, thereby reducing the retirement-income gap between men and women. Private pension provision will be simplified and the foundation of a new personal accounts system will be put in place.

I hope that I have addressed all the points that Members raised. I will carefully read Hansard to ascertain whether I have properly dealt with those points, and, if I have failed to do so adequately, I will write to the relevant Member.

This Bill will significantly improve the lives of women and carers, and I hope that I, as the Minister for Social Development, and other Members will continue in our role as champions and advocates for pensioners, whether under current legislation or this new Bill. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill (NIA 7/07) be agreed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Programme for Government and Draft Investment Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to six hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 20 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The Minister will have 45 minutes to respond, and all other Members will have 10 minutes.

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

As we embark on this potential marathon, I anticipate Members' co-operation.

I am pleased that the Assembly has been provided with an opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI).

At the outset, I wish to make it clear that I am speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and that my comments are based on the Committee's discussions on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. While I hold personal views on many issues that will be debated today, there will be other opportunities for me to make those views known to the House.

I trust that all Members recognise the significance of this debate, because we have an opportunity to influence the priorities that will direct the £25 billion that will be spent by the Executive over the next three years. In addition, the priorities and programmes under discussion today will direct approximately £18 billion of capital investment over the next 10 years. Therefore, it is incumbent on all Members, irrespective of party differences, to ensure that the Programme for Government and investment strategy are fit for purpose and will deliver tangible improvements to the quality of life of the people whom we represent.

At the request of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, my Committee is liaising with the other Statutory Committees to produce a co-ordinated response to the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. We will take our new role very seriously — it will involve publishing the views

and recommendations of all the Statutory Committees in a single report.

The report will identify the main strategic themes that emerge from the Committees' responses, and, in that context, members will listen carefully to the views expressed by MLAs today on the strengths and weaknesses of the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy.

Before commenting on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy in greater detail, I will mention the process of their development. My comments are not intended as excessive criticism of the Executive — I recognise that many opportunities for engagement in consultation, which would normally be available to Committees, were lost as a result of the early delays in devolution. In addition, the late announcement of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review did not facilitate the early publication of the draft Programme for Government or draft investment strategy.

However, it is important that Members recognise the limitations of the process to date and the impact of the delayed publication of the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. There have been reduced opportunities for Committees to scrutinise departmental proposals and for Members to scrutinise the overall plans of the Executive. Therefore, it is more important than ever that the Executive should pay careful attention to the views expressed during today's debate and to the conclusions and recommendations of Statutory Committees that will be detailed in my Committee's forthcoming report. It is also crucial that the Executive take proper account of the comments that will be made during the public consultation process, and I am sure that all Committees will be seeking evidence to prove that that has been the case.

The Assembly should make certain that the final Programme for Government and investment strategy are as robust as possible. However, no plan is perfect, and we must be mindful of the need for early action to ensure that new processes for engagement in consultation are put in place for next year, so that any limitations in the Programme for Government that might emerge will be addressed quickly and effectively.

For that reason, my Committee has specifically asked for views from other Statutory Committees on how to improve the accessibility, quality and relevance of the information provided in relation to the Programme for Government and the investment strategy.

My Committee has identified some areas of potential concern and has recommended remedial action. For example, my Committee will have concluded its scrutiny of the draft Programme for Government before high-level findings on equality impacts will be available to its members.

Again, more detailed information regarding the geographical spread of new capital investments will not be available until the final version of the investment strategy is produced.

1.45 pm

My Committee is also establishing the views of other Committees regarding how the overall process to develop the Programme for Government and the investment strategy can be improved in future years. It is imperative to ensure that any new process takes careful account of the need for the systems that are used to develop priorities and to allocate resources to be closely connected. Therefore, I will be writing to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to seek an early meeting at which we can discuss how we, in consultation with the Executive, can take forward proposals on a timetable for the Programme for Government, the Budget and ISNI.

As I said earlier, I hope that this debate will be constructive. It offers an opportunity to highlight to the Executive the aspects of the draft Programme for Government that Members commend — and which should therefore be retained in the final strategy — and to identify areas for improvement that need to be addressed before the Programme for Government is finalised.

I am aware that the views of Members vary about the extent to which the actual strategic priorities identified in the draft Programme for Government are the most appropriate priorities. However, in general, my Committee welcomes the Executive's effort to develop a Programme for Government that focuses on delivering cross-cutting priorities and endeavours to avoid the traditional silo mentality of many Departments.

Efforts to ensure that public service agreement (PSA) targets are aligned with the strategic priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government are also to be welcomed. My Committee has sought and received assurances from the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that its Budget allocations were determined based on an assessment of the resources required to deliver its public service agreements. That, of course, is as it should be.

Over the next few weeks, my Committee will be carefully scrutinising the extent to which the Programme for Government commitments made by OFMDFM are matched by the resources that the Department is receiving. As a prudent Committee, we will also be checking that large amounts of resources are not used to support low-priority programmes.

A specific concern that has come to the attention of my Committee is the relationship between the goals and commitments in the draft Programme for Government and the targets and actions in the public service agreements and the investment strategy. Not all of the

goals and commitments for the next three years that are mentioned in the draft Programme for Government seem to have found their way into the public service agreements or the investment strategy. We have asked OFMDFM for an explanation of the status of such goals and commitments, and we encourage other Committees to explore that issue with their Departments.

Another area of interest for my Committee — as I mentioned earlier, we have had a relatively limited time to hold a discussion on the Programme for Government and ISNI — relates to the delivery of the Programme for Government. To be fair, it is unreasonable to expect the draft Programme for Government to include all the details of how the Executive intend to meet their priorities. Were that to be the case, I suspect that this debate would need to be extended even beyond its allocated time. I am not sure that my fellow MLAs would welcome that.

The public service agreements do include some of the detail that the Assembly requires in order to satisfy itself that the priorities in the draft Programme for Government are deliverable and will be delivered. However, my Committee is of the view that we need to hear more about the arrangements for monitoring and reporting progress against PSA objectives and targets. That is particularly the case regarding the cross-cutting objectives of a better future and sustainable development. Therefore, my Committee will be taking an interest in the early development of a robust performance management framework for the Programme for Government and ISNI, and we have already asked OFMDFM to explain its proposals to us in more detail at the earliest opportunity.

My Committee will also consider the action that needs to be taken in advance of the draft Programme for Government being finalised in order to ensure that the targets in that document and in the PSAs are sufficiently specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bounded (SMART). We have sought the opinions of other Committees on the robustness of those targets and we expect to include specific recommendations about that in our report.

I welcome the inclusion of longer-term goals in the draft Programme for Government. However, if we are to ensure that those are more than aspirations, it will be important to ensure that all long-term targets in the Programme for Government are supported by SMART targets that can be delivered within the three years covered by the programme.

All parties represented in the Assembly were critical of many of the policies developed under direct rule. We now have the opportunity to change those policies. I recognise that we cannot change everything overnight, and I am sure that I speak for all the members of my Committee when I say that we will be supportive of

the Executive in establishing a clear set of priorities on which all Departments and agencies may be expected to focus. As an Assembly, we must ensure that, when the overall objectives and targets are changed, existing policies are also changed and improved. A quotation attributed to Albert Einstein defines as insanity:

“doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

We must also ensure when setting new objectives and targets that we carefully consider the actions and resources that will be required to have them delivered. In that regard, I encourage the Executive to be clear with the public about the timescales required to deliver some of the most challenging problems that we face.

My Committee has a particular interest in the targets in the Programme for Government and the related PSA targets relating to child poverty. Members will know that my Committee has commenced its first inquiry into that subject. We, therefore, wholeheartedly support the Executive’s commitment to work towards eliminating child poverty by 2020 and halving it by 2010.

However, we wish to see more evidence of how that challenging target is to be delivered. The Committee on the Programme for Government assessed the existing anti-poverty strategy earlier this year; and, while welcoming its overall direction, the Committee was far from convinced that the associated actions were capable of delivering the objectives. My Committee will also be seeking evidence from OFMDFM that specific outputs and outcomes will be delivered as a result of the higher priority afforded to those issues. In tomorrow’s debate on the draft Budget, we will be highlighting concerns about the impact of the time lag before resources become available for some specific priorities.

I am conscious that my time is running out, but I must say that the main interest of my Committee is to ensure that the strategies developed will help to produce an improved environment; more and better-paid jobs; affordable housing; high-quality health and education facilities; reliable and sustainable transport infrastructure; and more efficient government. I therefore look forward to hearing today from Members and the First Minister about proposals for ensuring the timely and cost-effective delivery of key infrastructure projects, on time and within budget.

One specific step that could be taken is inclusion in the investment strategy of a timetable for Departments to complete production of their investment delivery plans. My Committee will take an interest in the extent to which investment delivery plans make clear how investment will contribute to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

I encourage Members to contribute to what should be a strategic and robust debate on the contribution

that the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy can make towards delivering a better Northern Ireland.

Mrs Long: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“; but expresses its concern at the limited vision, scope and proposals contained in the documents.”

I am aware that this debate is on a take-note motion, and I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, of which I am a member, for proposing it. Owing to his Committee role, Mr Kennedy’s comments are necessarily more fettered than mine may be. I realise that he may have searched for the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon in order to pull together a speech that fully represented the Committee’s views.

Today’s debate comes during the consultation period on the Programme for Government, so Members have an opportunity to give initial feedback. The draft Programme for Government was announced in this Chamber with much fanfare and trumpet blowing. In fact, that speech was longer by about eight pages than the document that it was announcing. The Executive told Members that it was no mean achievement to produce such a programme, and agree on its contents, five months into the new Administration. Although we recognise that devolution happened on 8 May, only five months before the publication of the Programme for Government, the current Executive parties were funded by the NIO, at taxpayers’ expense, immediately following the St Andrews Agreement last November; special advisors were presented to them, and full details of the direct rule Ministers’ plans were available so that the development of a Programme for Government could proceed.

That is the context in which we should regard this document, not simply as a short-term, cobbled-together piece of work, but rather as the product of a year’s work, which should see us through the next three years, with only a light-touch return to it over the next two years.

As the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee has already said, the opportunities for scrutiny and input were extensively foreshortened. We understand the reasons for that, given the timelines that were available, but some of that discussion could have been held in Committees, had we received a draft at an earlier stage to allow us to have some input.

I shall focus my comments specifically on the Programme for Government for the next three years. Other Alliance Members will examine issues connected with the ISNI.

On the day of the publication of the Programme for Government, I half-jokingly asked whether some of the document had been left at the printers. My primary concern is not about quantity, but quality. The document

sets out general policy areas, but there is no serious attempt to prioritise them in the accompanying public service agreements. Concrete actions are few and far between; for example, the Executive will implement measures, conduct reviews and take steps, but those measures, reviews and steps are not detailed.

The targets that should tell us in three years whether the measures have been implemented, reviews conducted and steps taken, and whether the desired outcomes have already been achieved, appear to be much the same as those that were being developed under direct rule. There are only a few areas in the PSA framework, notably health and education, where there is a read-across between what the Executive want to achieve, what they want to do, and the outcomes that the Executive are going to measure.

Last week, David Ford and others highlighted the lack of imagination and direction on legislation, and a number of areas on which action was needed. Private Members' Bills have secured significant and, in some cases, unanimous support, such as the creation of an independent environmental protection agency for Northern Ireland, and the introduction of free personal care for the elderly.

The same commentary could be applied to the Programme for Government. As David correctly highlighted, the little legislation that has been generated or is anticipated in the forthcoming year is mainly parity legislation, tidying-up exercises, or legislation that was already substantially progressed under direct rule — rather than new, home-grown solutions to local problems. That could also be applied to the Programme for Government, the most apparent failures of which are in connection with one of our most pressing, most pervasive local problems — that of sectarianism. Others from the Alliance Party will focus on other areas during the course of the debate, but I will concentrate my attention on that specific area.

Let me be clear: my primary concern is not about the endorsement of a certain policy, with a certain name or actions; my concern is about the lack of any policy under any name, or any attached action, to address the fault line that runs through the heart of our community and, indeed, through this Chamber. The Alliance Party recognises that the Executive's seal of approval on any such document was important when the issue of a shared future was debated in the House on 4 June 2007. However, since then, precious little effort or progress appears to have been made in developing an alternative and equally comprehensive strategy.

2.00 pm

A written reply that I received from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, specifically on that matter, suggests that there may be something "early in the new year". I can already feel another question

coming on — asking them to specify which new year. The level of priority and urgency that is attached to the shared future agenda does not fill me with hope for January 2008.

If people cannot live with the language of 'A Shared Future' — owing to its having the seal of approval of a direct rule Administration — by all means, change the name. It would be a huge mistake to simply throw the baby out with the bathwater. That document was developed, with extensive consultation, to address issues that are specific to the needs of a society that is moving out of conflict and towards a more prosperous future. That policy is built on international experience, as well as local expertise.

Only this morning, the One Small Step campaign launched a new drive to produce 100 small steps that individuals can take, or have taken, to create a shared future and advance that aim in our society. The campaign's focus is on individual actions that can be taken in our community. However, if the work that is being done by those individuals and groups in the community is to be effective, it must be acknowledged, underpinned, supported and promoted by an overall framework that secures the progress that has been made and clears the way for further progress.

The impact of division in our society is wide-ranging; there is hardly an aspect of governance that is unaffected by it. This is not the fluffy stuff that was previously dismissed, with some disdain, by John O'Dowd in earlier debates — rather, it is a realisation that the tough problems cannot be resolved in the absence of some sense of shared purpose, and some overarching framework for enhancing sharing, rather than shoring up segregation.

Does anyone truly believe that we will solve the housing crisis without strategic tools in place for tackling division and the restrictions that that places on people's mobility? Can we tackle economic inactivity without also tackling the physical and psychological barriers that prevent people from moving freely from where they live to where employment exists?

Can we resolve the issue of declining school rolls without considering increasing the number of shared facilities? Can we deal with issues of culture and language if we fail to address the reality of a cultural and language war that is being waged? Is the basis for progress on that not the delivery of a shared future, which embraces diversity?

The cost of not tackling this issue was highlighted, quite rightly, by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in his speech on the draft Budget. Although that reference was welcome, it was disappointing that it was not followed through by the Executive in the draft Programme for Government.

The Finance Minister claimed that there were limited opportunities for major savings during the three-year financial cycle. However, in the absence of any strategy to tackle division over the next three years, it is hard to see how we will be closer to unlocking that money for better use in the future. There is not a single reference to a shared future, or good relations, in the Programme for Government or in a single public service agreement, out of the 23 that are designed to promote them.

I wrote to OFMDFM, asking that those references be highlighted for me, in case I had missed something. In the letter that I received in reply, that had not been done. In line with the Executive's stated aims of building a stronger economy and a fairer, more just and equal society, those objectives will be best followed if we can also tackle the issues of a shared future. Stability aids inward investment, supports tourism, creates a more mobile and flexible workforce, tackles social exclusion, and helps to underpin the political structures, which is to everyone's benefit. Instead, mention is made only of the rights and equality agenda, in the complete absence of any strategy for improving community relations.

It goes without saying that equality and human rights must underpin the building of a shared future. The Alliance Party has championed both of those critical tools and it will continue to do so. However, they cannot alone heal the divisions in the areas that have most readily spilled over into communal tension and violence, or where competing rights have failed to be resolved in the context of any wider sense of shared community.

Even before we had spoken, those of us who are critical were told that we were naysayers. However, the First Minister, in his speech last week, welcomed the fact that the Programme for Government would be examined and said that proposals could be improved, and that we could add new proposals. I simply ask that, following my party leader's written request, we embark on that engagement. We want this to work, and we are happy to help.

Mrs I Robinson: The Member for East Belfast made some derogatory comments on the work of the Programme for Government, describing it as being "cobbled together". Do voters not choose those whom they wish to speak on their behalf in this devolved Administration? As I look around the Chamber, I note that the electorate has spoken. The Member's party also proposes social engineering and the creation of a third-level tier of education that discriminates against the controlled sector by taking moneys that could be used to improve the lot of the children who are in that sector.

Mrs Long: It is called parental choice.

Mrs I Robinson: No; it is called force. I shall ignore those remarks that have been made from a sedentary position. *[Interruption.]*

I shall make my remarks today in my capacity as the DUP's health spokesperson, but I shall also touch on a few issues that affect the Strangford constituency. A draft Programme for Government that has been produced by locally elected politicians represents a significant step forward for Northern Ireland. It is also encouraging that this blueprint was unanimously endorsed by every Minister around the Executive table.

Members of the Alliance Party have argued that the conciseness of the document is worthy of criticism. I take the opposite view; it is a clear and concise document that is intentionally written in more accessible language.

The document is political rather than technical; it sets out the Executive's strategic plan rather than, as previously, simply throwing together everything that each Minister wanted to include. The draft Programme for Government is tightly focused, with clear objectives and targets. All goals have specific measurable targets.

Unfortunately, some of the content of our predecessors' Programme for Government was woolly and unfocused, with few action points. Previously, commitments were broad in nature and frequently offered only to review or develop strategies, policies or recommendations. There are now radical new proposals, and all Ministers must prove that they are up to the challenges in their Departments.

I welcome the fact that there is a strong focus on the economy. The previous Executive's Programme for Government had no hierarchy of priorities. Although my overriding concern will still be health issues, it is through building and sustaining an improved economy that health and all other sectors can best be served in the longer term.

I welcome the stronger emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, but I believe that much more can be done in this area. I support increased screening programmes, including, in particular, the introduction of a bowel-screening programme and follow-up treatments; it is intended that those measures should reduce death from bowel cancer by 10%. Similarly, an immunisation programme for the human papilloma virus should see cervical cancer decrease by 70%.

The Appleby Report found that our public-health behaviour in Northern Ireland is much worse than in GB. To that end, I welcome the intention to see, by 2010, binge drinking reduced by at least 5%, drunkenness fall by 10%, 5% fewer young adults taking illegal drugs, and a 30% reduction in the number of young girls under 17 years of age who give birth.

Efforts to reduce obesity, and the number of adults who smoke, are also sensible. I support enhanced co-ordination across different Departments to improve well-being. The public health of the people of Northern Ireland is not a matter only for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Therefore, I welcome additional funding to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to encourage leisure and exercise. That is an example of the Executive's providing better joined-up government. I shall illustrate that point further: the draft Programme for Government has 23 public service agreements that cut across Departments; the previous Executive's document had only 11 — one for each Department.

Everyone will welcome efforts to reduce healthcare-acquired infections. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been conducting some work on that issue.

The Committee has also been taking evidence on the issues of mental health and suicide. It is important to slash the waiting times for access to talking therapies, although that will require sustained effort and investment over a prolonged period. It is also a positive step that more people with mental-health problems can be treated in their own homes and in the community.

There is a determination to continue the good work achieved under direct rule in reducing waiting times for assessment, investigations and treatment. In particular, I applaud the proposed reduction in waits for cancer treatment.

There are commitments to improve productivity, through indicators such as bed throughput, staff absenteeism, and the ration of day cases to inpatient admissions. A strong, local, commissioning role will, however, be required in order to see improvement.

It is difficult to see how these measures can be sufficiently improved without introducing some degree of contestability into the process. Where are the real incentives and actions to sharpen performance? If a service provider is guaranteed the delivery of services to a given population, what encouragement is there to optimise performance? Similarly, for example, if a builder is guaranteed a number of houses to build — regardless of how quickly that is completed or what problems subsequently emerge — his maximum output is unlikely.

Some of the current output comparisons with other parts of the United Kingdom are poor. However, our front-line health-care staff, generally, work flat out. Clearly, the problem is in how the system operates, and that must be fixed. Efficiency savings are one thing, on a par with all other Departments, but the real challenge is in refocusing the entire Health Service to ensure much greater productivity. In that regard, the loss of David Sissling, Chief Executive Designate of the new,

strategic Health and Social Services Authority, is a real hammer-blow to the province's urgent requirement for Health Service modernisation and innovation.

Disturbingly, now, clicking on the icon for modernisation of the health and social services in Northern Ireland on the DHSSPS website leads only to a single, temporary, holding page with no information. That is not an encouraging sign, particularly given the wealth of progressive proposals that were previously accessed there.

Those fighting for funds for education, transport, and so many other worthy causes, question — quite rightly — whether huge proportions of funding for health, in the region of half of the block grant, will keep on rising at such a fast rate. Will 48% become 58%, then 68%? Where does it all end?

That is why significant reform, placing the emphasis on quality outcomes and cost-effectiveness, is so important. In an environment where there are so many worthy, competing, needs, those of us tasked with improving future health provision for Northern Ireland must prove that we are determined to squeeze every last penny's worth from the sizeable sums invested in health.

If I may, for a few minutes, I shall flag up some issues in my own constituency, which has a historic association with Northern Ireland's traditional industries of agriculture, fishing, textiles and shipbuilding, as well as with the aerospace industry. Over the years, the people of my constituency have suffered as a result of the demise of Harland & Wolff, the downturn in fortunes at Bombardier Shorts, and the closure of TKECC, the constituency's largest private employer. That has had a deeply negative effect on the wider community. There is equal concern about the provision of industrial land throughout the area.

I could speak on many other issues; unfortunately, my time is running out. However, I thank the Minister for Social Development for coming to Ballybeen last week and for looking at the Renewing Communities action plan, which was completed last year. It was based on the report of a task force, which examined claims in the Protestant unionist community that, since 1998, they had lost out to nationalists in improvement programmes. Studies show that, of the 15 Northern Ireland electoral wards with the worst educational attainment, 13 are predominantly Protestant. In Strangford, areas such as Ballybeen, West Winds and Bowtown are often overlooked, because they are surrounded by areas that are perceived to be affluent. I welcome the Minister's commitment in visiting Ballybeen last week, to see for herself the difficulties faced by local communities. She is examining strategies to help with funding.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I welcomed the opportunity to speak.

2.15 pm

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion.

I note the Programme for Government and am pleased with its contents. I congratulate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on their commitment, taking as their priority the use of prosperity to tackle disadvantage so as to build an inclusive and stable society based on equality. The challenge for all of us today is to develop new and innovative measures to address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.

The old days have long gone, thanks to, among others, Nobel Prize winner and former vice president and chief economist of the World Bank Joseph Stiglitz, who has dispelled — once and for all, we hope — the nonsense that a rising tide lifts all boats. In fact, it only lifts the boats of those who have boats. As he says, it is “a riptide” that destroys the smallest boats.

What is extraordinary and far-sighted about the Executive’s Programme for Government is that it more than acknowledges in its priority objectives, alongside economic growth and competitiveness, the building of a society based on partnership, equality, inclusion, regional balance and mutual respect, and the urgent need to address environmental sustainability in the world of global warming and man-made climate change that is encroaching on us. We are facing a world that is going to undergo huge changes. This Programme for Government, along with ISNI 2 and future investment strategies, must be able to cope with these changes, which threaten economic life as we know it.

If we are serious about the pillars of economic growth in ISNI 2, we must treat each in a holistic way. The essence of our investment strategy is that the pillars are interdependent and inextricably linked. Building skills, a good quality Health Service, meeting our social and environmental objectives, and striving towards regional balance and equality — they cannot be severed from each other, nor must they be in practice. That means that we should see a strong ISNI 2 after consultation.

For instance, the people of Derry want to be assured, following the consultation, that the commitment made in ISNI 1 that future investment strategies would tackle regional imbalance is addressed the next time that we in this Chamber discuss the outworkings of the consultation. Let us all be clear: striving towards regional balance is not tackling regional imbalance.

In addition, Derry people are appalled at performance reports from Invest NI, which show that assistance for investment has mainly been skewed to where invest-

ment is already located. In fact, Invest NI appears to have an active policy of disinvestment west of the Bann. I am sure that all Members from that region will support the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee’s investigation of the activities of Invest NI and its continued failure to deliver on its statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity. Thankfully, the First Minister is aware of the need for ISNI 2 to tackle regional disparities. We hope that his political commitment, given in this Chamber, is heard by those carrying out the consultation on ISNI 2.

If we are to lift all boats, we must also lift the boats of the disadvantaged, the vulnerable in society, the marginalised and the excluded, whatever community people may come from. That is the prosperity that the Programme for Government commits us to building. ISNI 2 must not dilute that. The First Minister came to Derry a few weeks ago. He said that he was struck by the wonderful potential there, but that potential has been wasted through dark days of impoverishment and neglect. That is what regional imbalance is all about.

Last Friday, some gathered around the Christmas tree at the Guildhall with their Christmas boxes to represent the presents that they want for Christmas. The boxes reflected the litany of neglect that Derry has suffered in the absence of strategic investment. Stand Up For Derry is looking for investment strategies to address the holistic neglect of our city and, indeed, the entire north-west region, which has been denied the opportunity to use the wonderful potential that the First Minister talked about.

Tá mé ag iarraidh níos mó jabanna agus tuilleadh infheistíochta i nDoire. I call for more jobs and investment in Derry. I acknowledge the political will and skill that Minister Conor Murphy has shown in pursuing the railway development for Derry and the rest of the north-west.

Infrastructural development will enable us to redress neglect. We can then begin to achieve economic growth and development, which, in the end, is all about developing the potential of the people of Derry and the entire north-west. In that sense, a present to one is a present to all. Investment for Derry and the rest of the north-west means investment for all the people who reside across the North and further afield. It would be economically incompetent not to assess that outcome when deciding where investment should go.

The boats will rise because we plan strategically to raise them. A priority is to address disadvantage. We must ensure that the opportunities that the new political dispensation affords us do not leave behind those who suffered the most. Moreover, we must ensure that the investment conference in May 2008, which OFMDFM is to lead, builds prosperity and tackles disadvantage. The Programme for Government’s aims must find

expression in that conference's aims. Without housing, good healthcare, jobs and transport, the rip tide will continue to deny that potential in Derry and in the rest of the north-west, and the boats, as before, will remain holed, sinking.

Through targeted investment to address those disadvantaged areas, we will begin to enable people in all our communities and to tackle seriously child poverty, fuel poverty and much more. Those who argued that a rising tide lifts all boats forced, at a terrible human cost, people's resourcefulness, innovation and human potential to be wasted. It is the declared intent of the Programme for Government to free that potential by promoting tolerance and inclusion of all, and by building on, as Jim Shannon correctly stated a few weeks ago, "equality for all".

ISNI 2 acknowledges that we need to assess and monitor continuously everyone in order to ensure that we are implementing a strategy that tackles regional disparities. We must apply clear criteria on which our success can be judged. Practical, measurable outcomes are necessary. We must carry out a root-and-branch review of the Shaping our Future strategy, in order to ascertain whether it is enhancing our future. The strategy must create a better future, not merely a shared one. Statistics can appear that show an increase in economic growth, yet those same statistics can be entirely consistent with an increase in inequality and a further waste of people's lives.

We must judge this Executive's success, and our people will judge it too, on the extent to which we succeed in addressing inequality and tackling regional imbalance.

Thinking must change. Human rights and — to quote Jim Shannon again — "equality for all" must be embraced so that the Executive's Programme for Government's values are recognised and acclaimed as being at the forefront of economic practice for development in what is an unjust and unequal world. I support the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in what they are trying to achieve through this Programme for Government and future Programmes for Government, and so does my party. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will begin at 2.30 pm. Members are being allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes in the debate on the draft Programme for Government, so I suggest that they take their ease until the beginning of Question Time. This debate will recommence at 4.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Commissioner for Children and Young People

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether it will include a declaration of independence in a future Order in relation to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in order to improve the autonomy of this post; and to ensure that the commissioner, as a "constitutional watchdog", is made answerable to an Assembly Committee rather than to a Government Department. (AQO 906/08)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): A LeasCheann Comhairle the review of the Commissioner for Children and Young People Order 2003, was carried out at the end of 2006. Patricia Lewsley took up post in January 2007, and we thought it only fitting to ask the commissioner for her views on the review report. We have very recently received her additional recommendations. Those are complex and wide-ranging, and we are currently considering them.

Mr A Maginness: I understand that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is studying the report given to them by the commissioner, Ms Lewsley. However, I emphasise that it should be the objective of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to enhance the position of the Commissioner for Children and Young People so that she is totally independent of Government and answerable not to a Government Department but to an Assembly Committee. If the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are serious about that position, they will seek to enhance her independence.

The deputy First Minister: As I said, the commissioner has given her opinion of the review that has taken place. In fact, there have been two recent reviews relating to the Commissioner for Children and Young People. We will take into consideration everything that she has said before deciding how to move forward. The review of the 2003 Order was initially carried out by Barney McNeany, the interim commissioner, late last year with added recommendations from Patricia Lewsley received lately.

A second review was carried out by Deloitte to determine the effectiveness of the operation of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The overall conclusion of the Deloitte review of the commissioner's office was that it was, in the main, very positive. It recognised that the illness and untimely death of Nigel Williams had a significant impact on the staff and led inevitably to a period of uncertainty and change that affected staff morale. However, the review also reported that staff felt morale had improved. Our Department is satisfied that the commissioner is taking steps to bring about further improvements, including reducing the number of priorities and registering to begin work to achieve Investors in People status.

We take very seriously the views of the commissioner in all of those matters. When deciding how to take that forward, we will set considerable store by the experience that she has gained during her time as commissioner.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his fairly comprehensive reply. However, there is a suggestion that a vacuum has been created and in that vacuum the interests of children are paramount. What steps does OFMDFM expect to take in the interim before the details of the report and the review are fully digested to ensure that that vacuum does not expand?

The deputy First Minister: We are of the view that the difficulties associated with the death that occurred in the organisation created problems for Patricia Lewsley as the new commissioner. I think that she has done a good job, has dealt with the difficulties that flowed from the situation and is very much involved in suggesting measures to improve it. Certainly, from our perspective, we believe that whatever difficulties were created are now in the process of being resolved. I am very hopeful that there will be a significant improvement over time.

Ms Anderson: How do the current powers of the Commissioner for Children and Young People compare with those in other jurisdictions?

The deputy First Minister: The powers of the Commissioner for Children and Young People are, generally, wider here than those in other jurisdictions. That clearly indicates that, when the post was established, there was an absolute commitment to ensure that the Children's Commissioner had enough powers to do a thorough job. During the course of the reviews that have taken place, issues have been raised, and it is now for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to consider the outcome of those reviews and, particularly, to reflect on the comments of the Children's Commissioner herself.

Joined-up Government

2. Lord Morrow asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it has taken to ensure collaborative, joined-up government between Departments, both in general and on specific projects. (AQO 888/08)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive play a central role in promoting joined-up government by providing a forum for collective decision-making; for the agreement of a common position on cross-cutting issues; and for keeping Ministers informed of emerging issues in each Department. I am grateful for the Member's question and for the opportunity to clarify the broad range of steps that the Executive have taken to ensure joined-up government.

In the Programme for Government, we will establish an agreed framework and a set of overarching priorities within which each Department can operate. We shall monitor ongoing progress against the objectives that are set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring that a high level of co-ordination and co-operation is maintained throughout its delivery.

The publication of the Executive's legislative programme for this year represents another important step to ensure joined-up and collaborative government.

In respect of specific projects, a number of Executive subgroups have been established to consider issues such as water and sewerage, rural planning and local government reform. Those groups are also proving highly effective in ensuring that Departments work in a co-ordinated and integrated manner to address those important matters.

The junior Ministers continue to play an important role through their responsibility for the co-ordination of Executive business, including ministerial statements in the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: I have listened carefully to the deputy First Minister's reply, and I have no doubt that if all the measures that he outlined are implemented, we can look forward to better days — bearing in mind that, over 35 years of direct rule, we had anything but joined-up government.

Are OFMDFM and other Departments ready to take advantage of opportunities for the efficient building of infrastructure? For example, during the construction of new roads, provision for cabling could be made, even though it might seem premature. It has often been the case that, six months after a road is constructed, it is ripped up again to provide for cabling. Can the deputy First Minister confirm that those days are behind us?

The deputy First Minister: The issues of roads and the type of support that is required to ensure an integrated approach are matters for Departments other

than the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. However, OFMDFM has a particular responsibility to promote joined-up government within the Executive, and I believe that all Ministers recognise the importance of such an approach.

If we do not adopt a joined-up approach to important infrastructure projects, our economy and our people will suffer. We have no intention whatsoever of being part of an Executive that do not do their job on behalf of the people who sent us to this Assembly. It is a clear duty and responsibility of all Ministers, including ourselves, to work in a spirit of co-operation and in a positive and joined-up manner so that we can provide the results that our people deserve.

Mr Kennedy: Does the deputy First Minister accept that collaborative joined-up government, as operated by the two currently larger parties, has so far been little more than an exercise in crude majoritarianism, which ignores the necessities and realities of enforced coalition government?

The deputy First Minister: Anyone who read or listened to any of the interviews in which I have participated in the last few weeks could not fail to be aware that I am strongly of the view that some Members are in denial about the outcome of the elections earlier this year.

The electorate has charged the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, alongside our colleagues in the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP, with the responsibility to progress the business of Government. There is no point in people being in denial, because prior to the election, the electorate were told that this venture would never work and that there would never be an agreement. We do not hear that anymore. The Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionists now say that it is only a matter of time before everything collapses. We hope to confound all of you.

We have been in operation for nearly six months, and there is no doubt that during that time we have reached agreement on a range of complex and demanding issues, such as water and sewerage, rating reform, the reform of local government and the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy. The Executive have also responded collectively and highly effectively to emergencies such as the July flooding and the more recent outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease and bluetongue in England. However, it would be unrealistic, in any democratic Administration, to expect that we would have unanimous support for every decision that is taken. The success of the Executive should be measured against our growing list of achievements rather than the tiny number of disagreements that some parties here choose to highlight in the course of recent times.

Dr Farry: There is a big difference between the Executive staying together and actually delivering results. The cross-departmental commitments to the shared future strategy have effectively been abandoned by the Executive in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget. Having regard to joined-up Government, is it the view of the Executive that the shared future strategy is now solely the responsibility of OFMDFM, leaving the other Departments with nothing to do in improving good relations in Northern Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: We are looking for a better future. The course on which we have set over the past six months offers up a real opportunity for all those who voted to send 108 MLAs to the Assembly to have a far better future than anything that we have seen in the past. It obviously grates on the Alliance Party and some other individuals in the Assembly that, after six months, things are going well. We have presented a draft Programme for Government, a draft Budget and a draft investment strategy. People have had every opportunity to criticise, praise, knock down or applaud those developments over the course of the debates that have commenced in the Assembly and which will continue through to the Christmas recess. When we come back in January, I hope that final agreements will be reached on all of those matters so that we can move on and provide the better future that our people deserve.

Naturally, there are difficulties. We are working to a tight Budget, and all Departments are under considerable pressure. Our job as political leaders, and as a Government, is to make best use of the available resources, in the hope that we can continue to make life better and make a real difference for the people that we represent. Sometimes I get a wee bit fed up coming in week after week to constant narking from the Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionists. It almost seems as if some people in here would rather see the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin collapse in a heap. That is not going to happen.

Child Protection

3. **Mr Butler** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to produce proposals in relation to child protection. (AQO 969/08)

The deputy First Minister: A LeasCheann Comhairle we propose to develop a "Staying Safe" policy statement as part of the 10-year strategy for children and young people, which will bind together and integrate current developments and existing measures for safeguarding children, as well as examining required additional actions and policies. We have also re-established the Bichard co-ordination group, which will oversee the development of the recommendations of the Bichard Inquiry Report, particularly the establishment of the new safeguarding vulnerable groups scheme, and barring arrangements here.

2.45 pm

Mr Butler: Does the deputy First Minister agree that child protection issues can also be advanced through the North/South Ministerial Council?

The deputy First Minister: Members debated a motion on the issue of sex offenders on 9 October. We have advised the secretariats of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council of the Assembly's wish to consider the matter at their meetings. Although the issue of child protection is in neither Council's existing work programme, we wish to raise the matter at the next North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting and at the next British-Irish Council summit meetings, subject to agreement from the other participating Administrations.

Mr Shannon: I thank the deputy First Minister for his comments on child protection. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has set a commitment to reduce by 20% the numbers of children on the child protection register over the next few years. How does the deputy First Minister hope to measure that success? Will targets be set to ensure that that commitment is met?

The deputy First Minister: Child protection and the safeguarding of children are crucial to the Executive. Therefore, we were delighted to accept an invitation from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to provide us with expert advice for a time to help us to develop the Staying Safe commitment scheme.

We will have to explore ways in which to measure our success in reducing the number of children on the child protection register, and we are contemplating ways in which to do so in the context of decisions that are yet to be taken. At a later date, we hope to outline in more detail how we intend to move that policy on.

Mrs D Kelly: What projects have the junior Ministers, as the designated champions of children, introduced in the past six months to improve children's lives?

The deputy First Minister: It is early days. The junior Ministers work to a wide-ranging brief, not least on the issue of child protection and on how we deal with the issue of sexual offences against young people. It is a major issue that affects our entire society, and the Executive have charged the junior Ministers with dealing with it in a comprehensive fashion. As time progresses, we will be able to outline in great detail all the initiatives and developments in which they have been involved and in which they intend to become involved.

Budget 2008-2011

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether the final Budget document for 2008-2011 requires the support

of all members of the Executive, or a simple majority vote, in order to be adopted. (AQO 912/08)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive unanimously cleared the draft Budget for consultation at their meeting on 23 October 2007. I see no reason why we cannot secure the support of all members of the Executive for the final Budget.

The ministerial code places a specific responsibility on the First Minister and me, as Co-Chairpersons of the Executive Committee, to seek to reach decisions by consensus, wherever possible. It also provides for a vote to be taken on any issue should it be required.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his reply. It was clear and was worth hearing, especially from the Co-Chairman of the coalition. Does he accept that a more consensual method of operation must be found for the operation of the Executive? An inbuilt resolution procedure is necessary, given that the present coalition Government is so different from that in Westminster.

The deputy First Minister: The provisions that cover the decision-making process in the current Executive are effectively set out in the statutory ministerial code, which was agreed by all parties. From our first meeting on 10 May to our most recent meeting on 22 October, the Executive have considered between 100 and 120 items of business. A decision has been taken by means of a vote on fewer than five occasions. That reflects the effort that has been made to achieve consensus on each issue and the rarity of the occasions on which that does not prove possible.

Mr Ford: Two weeks ago, I asked the First Minister whether he could provide any evidence that the Executive operate under the principle of collective responsibility. He did not answer — no surprise there. I wonder if the deputy First Minister can explain how an Executive can possibly implement a Budget unless there is full collective responsibility and full agreement within the Executive. In his earlier answers, he made it very clear that he takes no notice of what is said by members of my party or other Back-Benchers at this end of the Chamber. Is he now saying that he has no respect for the opinions of Ministers who are outside the two largest parties?

The deputy First Minister: I fully respect the participation of all Ministers in the Executive. As co-chairperson of the Executive, I have done everything in my power — as, I believe, has the First Minister — to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak at, and contribute to, each Executive meeting. There is no doubt whatsoever that, in moving forward, further important decisions will have to be taken on the draft Budget, the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. Until I came to the Chamber today, I was not aware that any Alliance Party Members

were members of the Executive; however, I am aware that the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP —

Mr Ford: Nobody said that they were.

The deputy First Minister: It is quite clear from contributions in the Assembly, and the Alliance Party's rather futile efforts to portray itself as the Opposition, that you are trying to punch above your weight — and I think that you know that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that Members make their remarks through the Chair, please.

The deputy First Minister: I think that the Member knows that, because every time he stands up in this Assembly, he makes a very serious contribution railing against the Executive, particularly the Executive as led by the First Minister and myself. His remarks are always delivered with a very serious face. However, I note that when the Member sits down, he always smiles to himself, as if he is involved in a pantomime. *[Laughter.]* None of us in the Executive is involved in pantomimes. We are involved in providing Government for the people who we represent. I am not interested in playing wee games with the Alliance Party in the Assembly. I am interested in working with serious political parties to build a better future and to make a difference for the people who we represent — and I believe that the four parties that make up the Executive are serious political parties.

Mr O'Loan: I am sorry that the deputy First Minister feels so constantly marked. People should not be so hard on him. *[Laughter.]*

Will he acknowledge that the draft Budget fails to provide adequate resources to build a shared future?

The deputy First Minister: It is quite interesting that the leader of the Alliance Party, David Ford, thought that the response to the question was very funny. I think that he was the only person in the Building who thought that it was very funny.

The fact remains that there is a draft Budget, a draft Programme for Government and a draft investment strategy. The key word is “draft”, and the contents of all three will be debated in the Assembly over the course of the coming weeks, after which big decisions will have to be taken. Those big decisions will have to be taken in the context of a very tight budgetary situation. There is no point whatsoever in Members coming to the Chamber with grandiose notions about what can be achieved with a limited Budget. We cannot take money from a stone. We must deal with the resources that are under our control. I believe that, at the end of the debate, we will move forward, adequately and decisively, to govern in the interests of our people, to build a better future and to make a difference.

Older People's Commissioner

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it will give a timescale within which the review into an older people's commissioner will be completed. (AQO 970/08)

The deputy First Minister: The review into the case for an older people's commissioner is currently under way. Following a competitive tendering exercise, OFMDFM recently appointed an independent organisation to consult key stakeholders and examine possible roles and responsibilities for such a post.

It is expected that the review will be substantially complete by the end of 2007, although it is envisaged that, thereafter, there may well be a need to engage further with section interests.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. Will he outline the issues that are currently being considered by the review?

The deputy First Minister: The key issues that will be considered as part of the assessment include the impact and accessibility of the existing levels of advocacy and protection for older people that are provided by statutory organisations here; how existing provisions for older people here compare with those elsewhere; identification of any gaps in existing advocacy and protection; stakeholders' views, including those of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister; and how older people will directly benefit from the establishment of an independent commissioner for older people.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am not sure whether the First Minister and I should declare an interest in the subject. Does the deputy First Minister envisage that an action plan will be produced by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to proactively deal with ageism, which is prevalent throughout society, both in the economy and in social and political life?

The deputy First Minister: The review into the case for an older people's commissioner, which is currently under way, will make a mighty contribution to tackling the issues that the Member clearly identifies. My mother — God bless her — is 84 years of age. Therefore, I declare an interest in the subject. I am sure that many other Assembly Members have relatives in that age group. We are their elected representatives. We have as much duty and responsibility to them as we have to our children. The Assembly must do everything in its power to ensure that the approach that it adopts is comprehensive and meets the needs of older people who, surely, deserve as much as the Assembly can deliver.

Mrs M Bradley: Can the deputy First Minister inform the House as to when the proposed commissioner's post will be advertised in the press? I welcome the fact that the review will conclude at the end of 2007. Perhaps, that will give hope to older people.

The deputy First Minister: The Member must await the outcome of the review, which, as I said during my response to the initial question, will be completed by the end of the year. Therefore, by the end of 2007, Members will have a good idea of how matters are shaping up. As soon as final decisions are taken, the First Minister and I will report back to the Assembly.

Gender Goods and Services Directive

6. **Mr Simpson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it will report on responses to the recent consultation on the gender goods and services directive. (AQO 934/08)

The deputy First Minister: Consultation on the gender goods and services directive sets out the Department's plan to transpose the European directive that implements the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services. Just over 240 responses were received. The First Minister and I will take account of those responses as we make our final decisions. A consultation report is also being prepared for publication. An initial assessment of the consultation responses was provided to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in order to facilitate its response to the consultation exercise.

Mr Simpson: With regard to the EU's gender goods and services directive, will the deputy First Minister's Department use available flexibility to extend exemptions from harassment provisions in order to include commercial enterprises, care and residential centres that are run in accordance with a religious ethos, church activities that are outside a church building, and medical professionals who have a conscientious objection to referring someone for gender re-assignment surgery?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the deputy First Minister to be brief in his response as time is nearly up.

The deputy First Minister: Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way that both complies with the requirements of the directives and deals with the specific needs of the member state. Policy consideration and the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law include consideration of the degree of flexibility that is available to the member state and to the devolved Administration. Given that equality is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of this Administration to

consider how the requirements of equality directives affect the Assembly and to bring forward legislation that is specific to here in order to implement those directives. It is often the case that in transposing equality directives into domestic law, there is limited discretion with regard to the precise rights or obligations that must be imposed or, indeed, created.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Science Foundation Ireland

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the progress made in identifying funds to enable both the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast to participate in Science Foundation Ireland, further to the national development plan of the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 909/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The two universities presented a joint paper to the Economic Development Forum, which contains a proposal to link with Science Foundation Ireland programmes. My Department has established a project board to consider the proposals contained in that paper, including those relating to North/South collaboration. Funding will be determined in light of the comprehensive spending review outcome in January 2008.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat. There is a strong view that the participation of Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster in Science Foundation Ireland can bring real benefits to the North. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that it will be a lost opportunity if the universities are not offered the financial assistance required to contribute to the foundation and that everyone will be denied new opportunities to join and share in research and development that will benefit everyone on this island?

Sir Reg Empey: I share the Member's view. The precise mechanism for participation must be considered by the project board, and it will ensure that only projects that are of benefit to Northern Ireland are supported by moneys from this Administration. However — subject to the availability of funds — one must understand that it may be appropriate to seek an agreement with Science Foundation Ireland on what areas can be aligned with Northern Ireland priorities.

As the Member is aware, the Department for Employment and Learning is bidding through the

comprehensive spending review process. We know that collaboration exists, and the universities have expressed their enthusiasm about Science Foundation Ireland to me. They have brought that forward to the Economic Development Forum, and I think that the Member is pushing at an open door. The Department for Employment and Learning is concerned with trying to secure the funding, and the projects that require that money, we believe, have been established. There is an enthusiasm from the universities, and we will make progress.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The draft Programme for Government commits to providing an extra 300 places for PhD students in Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. Is the money available to follow through on that commitment? Has consideration been given to some of those students undertaking PhDs in science-related subjects?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has veered off to a slightly different issue, but I assure him that it is one about which I feel strongly. I want to maximise the number of people taking PhDs, and I assure the Member that the Department for Employment and Learning will support the targeting of PhDs in specific subject areas. There will not be a blunderbuss approach, because we must target the support at areas in which our representation must be maximised for the benefit of our economic interests.

An existing scheme that has been supported by European funding has helped us to provide PhD places, but some of that funding will fall away and will have to be made up through comprehensive spending review bids. That is ongoing business, and I hope that I can rely on Mr Butler's support at the Committee for Employment and Learning when it comes to the actual Budget allocations in the coming weeks.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister inform the House what progress has been made towards the creation of an innovative funding package along the lines of that first mooted by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, in November 2006.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member raises an important subject. As I understand it, the Department of Finance and Personnel is aggregating a number of streams of funding, which will be funding for innovation generally. There are two sums of money: money that will come through our own system and money that has been pledged by the Government of the Republic.

In our negotiations with the Department of Finance and Personnel, we are pursuing the interest that we have. We have made bids for the innovation money, and we are working closely with our counterparts in the Republic to maximise the amount of money that we can bring to bear on this issue because if we are to compete in a very difficult business environment, it is

one of the critical areas. Therefore, I can assure the honourable Member that every effort is being made. However, at this stage, the detail of the fund, such as how it should operate, are unclear, and we have had some difficulty in trying to confirm that detail. I can assure the Member that we are working closely with others to maximise the amount of money that can be brought to bear on this subject.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question number 2 has been withdrawn.

Seagate

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he is having with Seagate in Limavady in order to ensure that staff facing redundancy receive the necessary assistance from his department to enable them to seek alternative sustainable employment in the north west.

(AQO 891/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Senior officials from the Department and Invest NI met with representatives of Seagate Technology Ltd, who expressed clear commitment to work with the Department for Employment and Learning. The focus is on ensuring that workers who are facing redundancy can gain alternative employment and can access advice on training, education, careers and benefits. Provision of on-site services, along with partner organisations, will be agreed with management and employee representatives.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his reply and, indeed, for his offer of assistance for Seagate. However, does the Minister agree that if the 1,000 Seagate employees, who are facing unemployment, are to successfully reintegrate into paid employment in the summer of next year, that is more likely to happen in the small- and medium-sized enterprise sector or through self-employment? Will the training and skills that the Minister plans to offer them be geared towards that direction?

Sir Reg Empey: I accept the analysis that the honourable Member has made as to the probabilities of where the workers will find alternative employment. That is largely due to the fact that there are so few large companies left in that sort of sector. I assure the Member that, first of all, we must understand that a 90-day consultation period is ongoing, and, clearly, we are limited in what we can say and do during that period.

However, I understand that a workers' forum is being established. My Department will engage with that forum. We have already engaged with the company. In conjunction with Limavady Borough Council, we plan to consider measures, such as jobs fairs at the Seagate premises. My officials are happy to establish an office at the plant, and they will interview everybody

on an individual basis. We are working on assessing the skills that are available, and we will talk to each individual and link them to the vacancies that we have.

Training will be a critical point, and I can assure the Member that we will do everything in our power. We are working very closely with Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I have spoken with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we are determined, between us, our Departments and Invest NI, to do a good job on behalf of those workers who have suffered a significant blow at a very bad time.

However, the Member will also be aware that, sadly, the Seagate employees are not alone in that area. I assure him, however, that everything that can be done will be done.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister inform the Assembly of the role of his Department in alleviating the hardship being felt by former workers of Reid Transport Ltd in Cloughmills?

Sir Reg Empey: Unfortunately, unlike the situation at Seagate, the situation at Reid Transport Ltd has happened all of a sudden, without warning and without any time to prepare. At least in the Seagate situation, we have the benefit and the luxury of some time to at least prepare and do things in an orderly manner.

I deeply regret the timing and, indeed, the manner in which the crash closure of Reid Transport Ltd has come around. It has created an enormous difficulty, and my Department is meeting with the administrators to look at the wage records and the books to establish the number of people who are entitled to departmental help. I am meeting the administrators later this afternoon.

A short time ago, I had an opportunity to brief the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on the situation, and I have spoken, or relayed messages, to most of the North Antrim MLAs. I assure the Member that we will do everything that we can.

However, nothing will take away from the trauma that those workers have suffered due to the suddenness and unexpected nature of the closure. It is in stark contrast to the manner in which the Seagate redundancies are being handled.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, I am sure that you appreciate the Minister's answer, but I remind you that the supplementary question should relate directly to the original question.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has touched on the situation at Reid Transport Ltd. What has his Department done to ensure that the affected workers receive redundancy packages? Over the past four nights on the picket line, I have heard various claims being made about the

company, including that many employees had been working for more than 70 hours a week. I was also told that children as young as 14 years old had been working night shifts at the plant. Does the Minister consider that those workers and their families should be given immunity from prosecution and encouraged to come forward and make statements?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, will you please extend your generosity?

Sir Reg Empey: I am happy to do so, because I understand the urgency of the situation. I have heard all those allegations. Officials in my Department have been made fully aware of them, and are looking very closely at them. I understand that approximately 220 people were employed by the company, but, a short time ago, only 76 people had made themselves known to staff at jobcentres in the area. I appeal to Members to encourage them to attend a jobcentre so that their details can be processed in an attempt to alleviate their situation. Over the weekend, only a few people applied for emergency loans to tide them over.

The nature of some of the allegations is such that I felt compelled to draw them to the attention of the PSNI. Others relating to the day-to-day administration of the company, such as the payment of wages, number of hours worked, and so forth are matters for the administrator because, as an officer of the court, he is obliged to report to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on how he considers the business was run and on the conduct of the directors.

The allegations are very serious, and my Department is taking them seriously. Over the weekend, and again today, all necessary steps have been taken to make progress. I appeal to the workforce to come forward as soon as possible. Employers have come to the Department's offices to say that they have vacancies that could be filled by the former Reid Transport Ltd workforce. That would be the best solution for everyone. There will be ample opportunity to reflect on how those workers have been treated and how the company has been run, but that is for another day.

Building Trade: Apprenticeships

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to secure apprenticeships in the building trade.

(AQO 949/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's Training for Success programme offers apprenticeships for a full range of construction skills. Through the Construction Employers Federation and the Construction Industry Training Board, the Department is working closely with the construction industry to refine the training provision, provide incentives for employers to take on

apprentices, and ensure that apprentices are suitably equipped to work in the building trade.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware of the downturn in the construction industry; the situation at Seagate has already happened. Hundreds of workers are losing their jobs. The building trade is prone to ups and downs, but this seems to be a prolonged downturn. I hear reports of young people being unable to complete their apprenticeships. When my colleague Martina Anderson saw that I had tabled a question on the subject, she told me of such a case in Derry, and I know of one young lad who was in the third year of his apprenticeship when he lost his job.

His mother has brought him round several building sites and he cannot get other employment. His further and higher education college has told him that if he does not get an apprenticeship, it will put him out. Will the Minister make an intervention, whereby further and higher education colleges are encouraged to keep on apprentices, allowing them to finish their apprenticeships in college?

3.15 pm

Sir Reg Empey: If Mr O'Dowd, and the Member for Foyle, have individual cases in mind, they should bring them to me, and I will ensure that they are dealt with. Mr O'Dowd is right. The building industry is cyclical. It is going through a difficult period — certainly, the house building side is at the moment. Before Training for Success was introduced in September, a Public Accounts Committee inquiry reported that many young people in the construction sector were being used on building sites for four days a week, and then spending one day at a further education college. At the end of the year, they were being dumped by their employers.

The Public Accounts Committee said that that amounted to exploitation of the workforce. That provoked the Training for Success programme, which requires young people to have contracts and be employed. In the current circumstances, we are monitoring closely the operation of the scheme since it started on 3 September. I may have more to say to the Committee in due course, but we are monitoring the scheme closely and we are prepared to be as flexible as possible.

I will draw the Member's point to the attention of the further education sector. We are as anxious as he is that these people get proper training. However, we must get a balance between that and their being exploited. We may or may not have got the training right — it is a bit early to tell. However, I am very conscious of the point that the Member makes.

Mr Spratt: There is a perception across the Province that different colleges provide different standards of training for apprenticeships and various aspects of the building trade. Will the Minister look at the possibility

of reviewing the standards set in each of the colleges to ensure that that perception amongst employees does not continue? This would provide a set standard right across the Province, removing the perception that any one college provides better quality apprenticeships than others, particularly in areas such as joinery?

Sir Reg Empey: I regret if that is the perception. I will take the honourable Member's views on board and I will write to him when I have had an opportunity to establish the facts in each area. Our aim is to have as consistent a standard as possible across the Province, because that is what people are entitled to receive. Of course, there will be variations according to the skills of the trainers. There will always be a certain amount of latitude and difference. Generally speaking, training should be of a consistent quality across the Province. I will have the matter looked into and I will write to the Member.

Mr Cree: The Minister has touched on this subject, but I would ask him if he keeping on the review the success, or otherwise, of the various aspects of the new Training for Success Programme?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes. The programme is a new departure, and I have explained the genesis of it, which was that the Public Accounts Committee felt that the previous arrangements were unsatisfactory because employers were exploiting the trainees.

We are anxious to avoid that. However, we are also conscious that there must be a sufficient degree of flexibility to allow for the fact that not every trainee is ready for a contract of employment. The programme includes a "job ready" strand to prepare the trainees to ensure that they are ready for such a contract. We are also monitoring the programme very closely; some amendments have been made. Therefore, I can give the Member the assurance for which he has asked.

Numeracy and Literacy: Baseline Figures

5. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to establish reliable baseline figures for numeracy and literacy challenges for adults in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 979/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Reliable baseline figures are available for Northern Ireland through the International Adult Literacy Survey 1996, which included both literacy and numeracy.

However, those are dated and the Department is considering various options for the most appropriate method of measuring an updated position of essential-skill needs in Northern Ireland's adult population.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: What consideration has been given to conducting surveys of literacy

performance in Northern Ireland, comparable to the types of measurement that are available in England?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has touched on a matter that is at the heart of the Department's current considerations. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was last conducted in 1996 — with its results published in 1997 — and is due to be held again in 2011 or 2012. Importantly, that is an international standard, so we shall have the opportunity to measure our performance against other countries. However, the time between the last survey and the next one is too long, which means that we are a bit blind about our current position.

Other research was conducted in England, although not on a comparable basis. For us to carry out a full IALS survey, or invent another method, would be exceptionally time consuming and expensive. Consequently, the Department is closely examining alternatives to provide some early indication as to whether we are winning or losing the battle on essential skills. Although the figures for throughput are positive and above target, the danger is that we are adding to the cohort in the community who do not have essential skills and are out of school. All Members must be concerned about that — it is a big issue for the future. The Department is urgently examining that issue for the obvious reasons that the Member identified.

Mr Ross: The Minister has mentioned how important essential skills are. Will he detail how he is working with the Department of Education on that issue? Recent reports in England have stated that the state of the comprehensive-school system there means that many young adults are leaving schools and looking for jobs without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Does the Minister agree that it would be a disaster for Northern Ireland to implement a comprehensive system that is similar to the one that is failing so spectacularly in England?

Sir Reg Empey: Although I share some of the Member's views on education, sadly the evidence that we have indicates that the differences in the levels of people who do not have essential skills — literacy and numeracy — among Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, are minimal. According to the last survey, that level was 24% in Northern Ireland, 22% in Great Britain and 23% in the Republic of Ireland. There is a cohort of the population that we are completely missing. The Department is working closely with the Department of Education; we have produced a careers-strategy consultation document, and I have spoken to the Minister of Education on a number of occasions — we are both acutely aware of the problems.

For the benefit of Members who do not know, I am talking about people who do not have the ability to

fully read; for example, grasp and understand the instructions on a medicine bottle or read a bus timetable. In those terms, the problem sounds horrific, but sadly large swathes of our population have huge difficulties. That is one of our enormous tasks: how will we build a vibrant economy if we do not have those basic elements in place? There will be a huge challenge for all Members if we do not do that. I assure the Member that I am working closely with the Department of Education to ensure that we bear down on that severe problem.

Further Education: L1 Category Enrolment

6. Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the fact that enrolments in the further education sector, delivered by the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College in 2005-06 was 85% for the L1 category and below and was 54% for the same category in the statutory sector, what plans he has to ensure that the success of the non-statutory sector in creating opportunities in the L1 category and below is protected and enhanced. (AQO 958/08)

Sir Reg Empey: During 2005-06, statutory further education colleges enrolled 71,435 adults in provision at level 1 and below, which equated to 66% of their total adult enrolments.

During the same period, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the Ulster People's College (UPC) enrolled 2,938 adults in provision at level one and below, which equates to 85% of its total adult enrolment. My Department is developing proposals to enable voluntary and community groups to collaborate more effectively with further education colleges to support adult learners.

There has been concern about the withdrawal of contracts from the WEA and the UPC. A number of other voluntary and community organisations have expressed an interest in delivering similar provision to that which is being purchased from the WEA and the UPC. Legal advice and Government guidelines indicate that competitive tender is the only equitable way to resolve the matter. The Department would be likely to be vulnerable to successful and costly legal challenges if it were to continue with the current single-contract arrangements.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the WEA, the UPC, and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults have a proven track record for attracting people from the hardest-to-reach groups back into education? Will he agree that interim funding should be provided for the groups to enable them to continue their work beyond March and August 2008, pending an assessment of failed CSR bids, the merits, or otherwise, of tendering

for community education provision, and a full assessment of how best to deliver community education?

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's contracts with the WEA and the UPC have been extended to August 2008. That follows the notification that was given to both organisations in December 2006 that any future requirement for non-statutory provision would have to be on the basis of open, competitive tender. Other organisations have expressed an interest, and, therefore the Department felt that the only equitable way was to put the contracts out to tender.

We are examining how third-party organisations might better collaborate with further education colleges, and it is hoped that proposals will be brought forward on the matter in the next few weeks. I take this opportunity to say that the work that both organisations do is very important, and it cannot be assumed that they will not continue to do that work as they will have the opportunity to tender for the work if they wish. Judgement will be made by the procurement branch of the Department of Finance and Personnel, which has guided my Department in the tenders that we have conducted hitherto.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister agree that, although level-one qualifications are important, they are a minimum requirement and that employers are demanding level two as a minimum for entry into employment? Will he agree that a pathway from level one to levels two, three and four is necessary in order to achieve a skills base and future economic prosperity, and that those qualifications are best delivered through statutory provision?

Sir Reg Empey: As the Member points out, level one is a basic qualification. However, as I said in my original answer, during the last year for which figures are available, further education colleges enrolled 71,435 people to study at level one or below. In addition, a further 3,000 people approximately were dealt with by the WEA and the UPC. That is a huge number of people. I agree entirely with the Member's analysis that a platform and a pathway are needed to get those people through to levels two, three and four. My Department is looking at how it engages with the community sector in delivering those, but the Member is right — unless we get clear pathways to levels two, three and four, our economy will struggle in the years ahead.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question has been answered by the Minister's response to Mr Bradley.

3.30 pm

PhD Study – Scientific and Technological Subjects

7. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people at universities in Northern Ireland were studying for a PhD in scientific and technological subjects.

(AQO 923/08)

Sir Reg Empey: In the 2005-06 academic year, there were 1,710 enrolments in PhD courses in scientific and technological subjects at Northern Ireland universities.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister indicate what progress he has made in discussions with universities in India, and other further-education colleges, in developing links with Queen's University?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I am sure that the Minister will reply in writing to Mr McCrea.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn.

Rate Relief

3. **Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he would take to increase the uptake of rate relief.

(AQO 899/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Member is right to highlight the relatively low uptake of both rate relief and rebate, which is available through housing benefit. That has long been the case with the system in Northern Ireland, whether because of a general lack of awareness, a misunderstanding of eligibility for relief, the perceived complexity of the application process, or the perceived stigma attached to receipt of a benefit.

The Member will be aware that I intend to make a statement to the House tomorrow outlining the outcome of the Executive's review of the domestic rating system that was introduced in April under direct rule. When he listens to that statement, I hope that he will recognise that the Executive have agreed a package of support measures that will improve the rating system. An important element of the Executive's report is an acknowledgment that that support will be effective only if people avail of it. The Executive will, therefore, tackle that issue as a priority so that the new measures

will make a real difference, particularly for those hard-to-reach groups in greatest need.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Minister have a view on why more people do not claim what they are entitled to, given the significance of relief to someone's annual rates bill?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure how helpful the statistics are in this matter, but, traditionally, about 40% take-up has been consistent in the owner-occupier sector; between 60% and 70% in the private-rented sector; and up to 90% in the public-rented sector. That seems to indicate that the Housing Executive and housing associations are doing a very good job of informing people.

Therefore, on the one hand, there is a need to better communicate what entitlements are available, and, on the other hand, people are being discouraged by the complexity of applying for either benefits or relief. That leads us to considering more automatic payments.

Some people are put off by the perceived stigma, which might explain the larger figure in the owner-occupier sector, and we need to get the message across that this is a matter of entitlement, rather than a hand-out.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister ensure that sensitivities about data-protection matters will not prevent various services allowing their databases to be used to communicate information on rate relief to the people? Furthermore — without asking him to give away any of tomorrow's statement — will the Minister pay particular regard to the needs of pensioners, who are being encouraged by Government to take up the minimum-income guarantee — the pension credit? Will he also ensure that rate relief means that no one's income will be brought effectively below the minimum-income guarantee as the result of a rates demand?

Mr P Robinson: With regard to the last element of the Member's question, I am sure that he will want to come to the House tomorrow. He is a patient man, and I am sure that he can wait until then. However, if he has looked at the report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, he will have seen that it paid particular regard to the role of senior citizens. Of course, I pay special attention and regard to the work of the Committee, and I shall say no more at this stage.

There is a massive need for better data sharing between Departments and agencies. There will be some concern about data sharing, given recent events at HMRC. However, I have instituted an investigation in my Department. I understand that the Minister for Social Development, who has responsibility for pension and benefit claims, is doing something similar. We want to ensure that, if there is data sharing, the same standards are being operated and that those standards

are high enough to ensure the safety of all data in the public sector.

Mr McFarland: Is the Minister aware of computer difficulties that are leading to delays in dealing with rate relief applications? Does he accept that unduly long delays do not encourage others to apply, and will he ensure that those who do apply receive their assistance in a timely manner?

Mr P Robinson: I was aware of the delay. I hope that, if it is not already sorted out, that it is very close to being so. The Rate Collection Agency has undergone major work during the past few years, with the introduction of a new system. Various Government agencies were involved in providing the necessary information for the new system, and that has caused some delay. If the Member wants to draw specific incidents to my attention, I will be happy to take them up with the appropriate people.

Industrial Derating

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether he intends to bring forward legislation in relation to industrial derating.

(AQO 903/08)

Mr P Robinson: Amending legislation will be required to change the percentages set out in the current legislation, which was passed at Westminster under direct rule. It laid out the annual percentages that were due up until the planned date for complete removal of derating in April 2011. The legislation imposed a 15% liability on manufacturing firms for 2005-06, 25% for 2006-07, and, last year, David Hanson agreed to a slowdown to 30% for the current year, in recognition of the early review that my parliamentary colleague David Simpson and others helped to secure.

Under the legislation, we are due to move to 50% liability next year, followed by two years at 75% before reaching the full 100%. Those percentages can be changed through subordinate legislation and will be subject to affirmative resolution by the Assembly.

In due course, we will have to consider amending the primary legislation, which, although it allows the phasing in to be altered annually by regulation, still enshrines the final destination figure — full rating by April 2011.

Mr Ross: Can the Minister explain why he proposed to cap industrial rates at 30% rather than the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland's recommendation of 50%?

Mr P Robinson: My Department received the preliminary report when we were deciding on the draft Budget. It was clear that the evidence provided in the preliminary report was useful and informed my

decision. It recommended 50% but stated that it would ultimately be a matter of political judgement. My view was that there was a real risk to some of our manufacturing firms if the rating liability were to be increased to 50%.

Subsequent events confirm that that was the right judgement to make, and I am glad that the Committee for Finance and Personnel agrees.

Mr F McCann: Does the Minister think that tax incentives will encourage new businesses to set up in TSN areas?

Mr P Robinson: We have limited tax controls. Within the scope that we have, I am happy to consider producing further incentives in conjunction with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Employment and Learning. At one time we had enterprise zones, which benefited those areas to some degree, and I am happy to consider any suggestions that might benefit the areas that are finding it most difficult to attract employment.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister acknowledge that the application of industrial rates could be the final tipping point at which manufacturing companies decide whether to close or to continue to invest? Given the recent spate of redundancies that have been announced, does the Minister agree that preventing increases in industrial rates has been a prudent decision?

Mr P Robinson: I agree with the honourable gentleman. I have had the opportunity to meet a number of people from that sector, and I have been pleased to hear that, on the one hand, many of them believe that it has been sufficient to keep them in business, while others are saying that it was the type of decision that they needed in order to put in place investment proposals that, for a long time, had been sitting on the shelf. I hope that it will strengthen those who are finding things difficult and provide a degree of certainty and encouragement to those who are striving for a safe and stable future.

Budget Statement: 25 October 2007

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Budget statement made to the Assembly on 25 October 2007 was in draft form, and is subject to an ongoing process of consultation between Ministers, Committees and others before it can be ratified or amended. (AQO 940/08)

Mr P Robinson: No. The statement was not in draft form, nor does it need to be ratified, and it cannot be amended.

Mr Armstrong: Both the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development have confirmed the status of the draft Budget and have explicitly stated

that its provisions are insufficient to meet the important demands facing their Departments. Will the Minister therefore give an assurance that the draft Budget will be revised?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, that is a different question, which I am happy to answer. I was asked about my statement, and now I am being asked about the draft Budget. The purpose of a draft Budget is to allow the Committees and the public to consider the proposals in the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the draft Budget, and to comment on them. Of course, we will be happy to hear proposals from the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development — not just on the extra money that they think they should have, but also on where they think it should come from.

Mrs Long: In his Budget statement, the Minister highlighted the potential savings that were identified in the Deloitte report, 'The Cost of Division: A Shared Future Strategy' and acknowledged that, although the scope to release money for more effective investment was limited in this three-year cycle, we must now make a start on tackling the underlying issues. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that during the current Budget consultation process it would be helpful if specific measures were added to both the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government to directly address sectarianism and division? Currently, such measures are lacking, and adding them would help his Department to move the matter forward in the next three-year cycle.

Mr P Robinson: Every Member has a duty to address sectarianism and division, and I hope that they will do so. I have considered that report and, in light of the tight fiscal framework within which I must work, I am keen to search out any other possible sources of revenue.

The first difficulty with that report is that a large chunk of the funds that it relies on for its rather attractive headline figure comes from the education budget. No matter how desirable anyone thinks it would be to have one educational system for the Province, no one believes that that is likely to be resolved and the money released in a three-year period.

3.45 pm

Secondly, the report identified another great source of funding from security and policing benefits. However, the Assembly does not enjoy funds from that element of Government expenditure. The third strand of savings was exemplified by there being a swimming pool on the Shankill Road and another one a few streets away on the Falls Road. Again, those sorts of savings go to local government as opposed to the regional Assembly.

There are clear areas where we will benefit over time. I am happy to talk to the Member about any of those issues — if she or her party colleagues wish to come and see me — and to examine how we can use

the funding that results from the savings that I hope will be made as we get over the traditional divisions in our society.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister accept that the Budget does not allocate enough money to provide the level of social housing that everyone agrees is necessary?

Mr P Robinson: I spoke in some detail on this matter when I made the Budget statement. I thought that I had shown myself to be very much on the side of the Minister for Social Development when I said that the body that we had set up to look at the possibility of realising further assets from the various Departments — the capital realisation task force — would operate from now until the Budget is finalised. I saw the Minister for Social Development's bid for housing funding as an important recipient of any assets that we might realise during that period. I wanted to take that one further step to assure the Minister that I wanted to find additional resources for her.

In good faith, I provided the Minister with a further £20 million as a result of in-year monitoring, and the Member will hear about further steps to assist the Minister when I make a statement tomorrow.

There are several ways to address the matter. My colleague the Minister of the Environment has been meeting the Minister for Social Development to examine how the current planning regulations can be used to assist the provision of more social housing and what changes to the legislation might further assist it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Workplace 2010

7. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the implications for Workplace 2010 of the delay in moving to best and final offer. (AQO 898/08)

Mr P Robinson: The judge issued a ruling on the court injunction last Friday afternoon. The Department is considering the implications of the judgement in consultation with the two remaining bidders. I can tell the Member that the Department is now in a position to invite bids. However, that is only one part of the process, as there is a further court case outstanding, which is not due to start until January.

If the procurement continues to be delayed, there will be serious implications for capital projects that rely on the funding that it will generate. The severity of the impact will depend on the extent of the delay.

As I have said before, Workplace 2010 will generate a substantial capital payment that will enable the funding of other capital projects. The receipt of that payment is planned for 2008-09, so any delay into later

financial years will be a significantly limiting factor in delivering the early parts of the investment strategy, and we may have to reassess our priorities for funding.

On the operational side, the Civil Service estate continues to deteriorate. Without capital investment from the private sector, we cannot implement plans to refurbish and upgrade properties in the estate.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer. The fact that some judgments have been made is good news as regards being able to proceed with the projects. The Minister indicated that there will possibly be capital-receipt ramifications because of the delays caused. Will he indicate what those ramifications might be?

Mr P Robinson: The figure in the draft investment strategy and draft Budget for Workplace 2010 — although it could not be a precise figure — was £200 million. Therefore, if that amount is not going to be available during the 2008-09 financial year, the gap will have to be plugged, timetables will have to change or other programmes will have to be reduced. Those are the kind of issues that will have to be considered should Workplace 2010 not proceed during that financial year.

I do not want to depress the honourable gentleman. It is still possible to meet that schedule, and I hope that the court decisions will continue to go in the right direction.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to the Minister's reply, and acknowledging that there may be further legal delays, will he commit to making progress on the relocation of public-sector jobs? Given the devastation there has been as a result of job losses, particularly in the north-west, the decentralisation of public-sector jobs would create a lot of confidence.

Mr P Robinson: I have taken forward Workplace 2010 and the displacement of public-sector jobs in parallel. I have not put the brake on the latter because of the legal issues involved in Workplace 2010.

The Executive, at their most recent meeting, approved a proposal that I submitted regarding the terms of reference of the inquiries that are going to take place on the matter, and that work will proceed. I am content for proposals to come to me in advance of the legal issues being resolved.

As I understand it, there is to be a commercial court hearing in early January 2008. I am not in a position to ascertain how long it may take before a judgement will result from that. The worst judgement would be one that would take us back to the best and final offer stage. Clearly, we want to make real progress.

The two bidders still being considered by the Department are being acquainted with the position. I had a brief meeting with both of them, and my officials are talking to them in more detail about how we might

proceed in light of the fact that the injunction has, to that extent, been lifted.

Mr Beggs: The Minister referred to a substantial capital sum. I believe that it was £200 million, which then changed to £175 million. Will he advise how that cash-back sum was determined? Furthermore, what interest repayment rate can be expected on it, in comparison with borrowing it through conventional means or through the reinvestment and reform initiative, which would have been linked to the Bank of England base rate?

Mr P Robinson: The figure will be determined by those who have knowledge of the bids that have already been received, as those bids will indicate the amount of cash that the various bidders are prepared to give regarding the tender.

As Minister, I determined at the very beginning of this process that I did not want to be involved in the bidding process; that was to be left to officials, and they would make their recommendations to me. I felt that that was the right thing to do. Therefore, their judgement, on the basis of their discussions and the tenders that they have received, was that a figure in that range was appropriate.

Needless to say, I hope, as I am sure that the Member does, that when we get to the best and final offer the two bidders sharpen their pencils further and we get a better deal out of it. We are talking about funds coming from the private sector to the public sector for us to use. Thus, the second part of the Member's question requires no answer.

DHSSPS and Health Service Funding

8. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what percentage of the additional resources in the Budget had been allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety over the next three years. (AQO 916/08)

10. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in bringing forward his proposal for a draft Budget, what account he took of differences in spending per head on the Health Service in Northern Ireland and England. (AQO 986/08)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 8 and 10 together.

Northern Ireland spends more per person on health and personal social services than England does, and it will continue to do so under the draft Budget. The draft Budget was developed over recent months, taking into account the CSR and work on a draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. The draft Budget has involved striking a balance between promoting economic growth, which is the Executive's

top priority, and the need to continue to improve our public services, including health and education. That is demonstrated by the fact that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been allocated 51.5% of the additional resources that are available to the Executive from 2007-08 to 2010-11.

Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, I did say that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is to receive more than the other 10 Departments added together. The public would be entitled to be disappointed if, with the largest budget for health in Northern Ireland ever, and with expert advice provided by Professor Appleby's report to inform decisions, they were not to see significant improvements.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister will have heard, as I have, the suggestion that the Department of Finance and Personnel has accepted that the need for health spending is 14% greater in Northern Ireland than it is in England. What does the Minister think of that suggestion?

Mr P Robinson: Anyone who has taken the time to read the Appleby Report will know that there is a plethora of different formulations for determining whether Northern Ireland is behind or ahead of England when it comes to health spend. It is possible to look at our health spend in terms of gross value added (GVA) or per capita, and several other, more complex, formulae have been tried. My officials have registered significant reservations about the model that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety used to calculate that figure of 14% and, in particular, about the proxy indicator that is used to measure deprivation. It is important to recognise that that figure is largely meaningless unless considered in the context of the relative level of need for other public services. My view is that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should focus on how it will spend the additional £800 million a year allocated to it in the draft Budget rather than on producing ever more desperate arguments to receive more funding.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answers. The Minister, like the rest of us, is aware of the allegation that the allocation to the Health Service has been cut in the draft Budget. The Minister has outlined some of the facts and figures already. How does he view those allegations in the light of the overall Budget that will be presented tomorrow?

Mr P Robinson: Let me lay down some basic principles. The Department of Health receives more than 48% of the Northern Ireland Budget. That is a substantial sum. Its budget has almost doubled over the past seven years. I ask Members whether they believe that improvements in the Health Service have doubled in that time. Do Members believe that there has been a

substantial improvement in the Health Service, simply because more money has been pumped into it?

When I met with the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I told it that I wanted a better Health Service, not a more expensive one. Therefore, it is vital that we recognise that, in the draft Budget, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety ends up with the largest amount of money that it has ever had and with a larger percentage of the Northern Ireland block than it has ever had.

Everyone agrees with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that we want Northern Ireland's Health Service to be the very best. However, I have a finite cake that will not grow simply because people throw more appeals and bids for more money towards me.

If anyone asks for more money for one Department or another, they must be able to tell me from where I will take that money, and which other Department should be deprived of those resources. Are they asking for an additional burden on the ratepayers of Northern Ireland, like Ed Curran of the 'Belfast Telegraph'? If so, I must inform them that, in order to fund the type of increases sought by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, we would have to triple our rates.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister for Finance and Personnel explain the Barnett formula and why, for many years, the ratios among Northern Ireland, Scotland and England have stood at 1·5, 1·1 and 1? Will he explain why it is important that there be no convergence of that formula, which would spell financial catastrophe for Northern Ireland? Will he explain the impact that convergence will have on the health budget?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

4.00 pm

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Programme for Government and the Draft Investment Strategy

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister:*]

Which amendment was:

At end insert

“; but expresses its concern at the limited vision, scope and proposals contained in the documents.” — [*Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Dr Farry, Mr Lunn.*]

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It was obvious to certain Members during the first session of Question Time that there was only a few seconds remaining, and I understand that you were looking at the clock. Would it not be better procedure to follow the House of Commons and allow a Minister to answer a question that has been started? As Magnus Magnusson used to say: “I’ve started so I’ll finish.”

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the honourable Member’s good suggestion has been listened to and will emerge at the appropriate Committee.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate that sets out the Executive’s future work plan and how we will make a difference to the lives of everyone in the North of Ireland —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could you clarify the procedure for Question Time? Will I receive an answer to the supplementary question that I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister is not required to reply in writing, but I am sure that your question has been heard.

Mrs D Kelly: Often, it has been said that organisations and individuals are inextricably linked in Northern Ireland, and it is unfortunate that that is not clear when one looks at the connections among the Programme for Government, the public service agreements, the Budget and ISNI. The theory is that the Programme for Government, supported by the Budget and ISNI collectively set out the Executive’s strategic vision for Northern Ireland, and how that vision is to be resourced and delivered.

I admire Mrs Robinson's optimism in respect of the Health Service but, bearing in mind that there is not enough money for the Health Service to stand still, never mind to implement the Bamford Review, I am somewhat bewildered by how she came to her conclusion.

I share the concerns of the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Danny Kennedy, about the lack of linkage between goals and commitments in the Programme for Government, and the targets and actions included in the public service agreements. I hope that, when the documents have been finalised, the comments will have been heard, and that it will be easy to see clear targets, measurements and outcomes.

However, the Programme for Government has to rely heavily on efficiency savings and, under the CSR, the belt around the public purse is set to tighten further, which does not bode well for the successful delivery of the Executive's priorities. Although I welcome the Executive's support for investment in social and affordable housing, and I congratulate the Minister for Social Development on securing additional investment, I am concerned that that commitment is over-dependent on the selling off of publicly owned land, and the largesse of other Departments.

Therefore, will the First Minister and deputy First Minister, on behalf of the Executive, inform the House of the timescales for the evaluation of progress towards targets that have been set? What remedial actions do they intend to take if targets are not met, and what is plan B?

As a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, I am also concerned to note that, while respect for the rule of law is one of the Executive's aspirations, neither the draft Programme for Government nor ISNI make mention of the tripartite agreement that was established to plan for the new police college, which will also include training facilities for the Fire and Rescue Service. At a recent meeting with the Security Minister, Paul Goggins, he made it clear that £90 million remains the Treasury's sole contribution, and that the additional £30 million will have to be found in the devolved Administration's existing Budget.

The SDLP wishes to be reassured that the investment strategy has undergone a full equality impact assessment and that the historic underinvestment, west of the Bann, will be robustly addressed. We also note the Executive's intention, in the draft Programme for Government, to drive improvements in public services. Therefore, the successful delivery of the investment strategy is dependent on whether the public and the private sectors are fit for purpose. Deloitte and Touche's commissioned report assures us that the private sector is fit for purpose. However, we remain to be convinced that the public sector also is, especially when we see

that all organs of Government are unable to work — as yet — as one.

With regard to international relations, we would like to see greater evidence of new areas for North/South implementation bodies and cross-border co-operation — that is, if one accepts that North/South is international. The draft Programme for Government states clearly that the eradication of child poverty is a key target — yet, there is no discrete budget set aside to do so. Therefore, will the First Minister and deputy First Minister tell the House how that will be achieved and what processes will be used to ensure joined-up government? The SDLP wants to see greater target setting, action plans and evidence of monitoring of systems.

Mr Durkan: The Member has posed several questions to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. No Ministers from that Department are present for the current debate. Will the Deputy Speaker find out when a Minister from that Department will be present in the Chamber to listen to the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That information will be passed back.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for that intervention. I would like someone from that office to be present in the Chamber.

The draft Programme for Government states clearly that equality is an important issue for the Executive and for society. Inequality exists, and we must try to eliminate it in all of its forms. Why, then, is there a cut in funding for the Equality Commission? Why are there delays in the implementation of the EU's gender directive and the single equality Bill? As Mrs Naomi Long said, why has no specific priority been given to tackling sectarianism? I hate to burst the First Minister's and deputy First Minister's bubble by telling them that the imagery of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness will not, of itself, see us through the next few years to a future of inclusivity, or a fairer society.

A clear statement is needed, from the Executive, on how they are going to tackle sectarianism and build good community relations. Ignoring the issues and relying solely on photocalls of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will not improve the situation one iota. In fact, many of their previous followers are asking themselves what the past 30 years was all about. While the IRA has decommissioned its weapons, it is the only paramilitary organisation yet to do so. Sadly, the decommissioning of bigotry will take much longer and, some will say, has yet to be commenced.

The draft Programme for Government lacks clear accountability for Government Departments to deliver on some of the key areas in creating a fairer society, improving equality, improving community relations, and in the eradication of child poverty.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has had many discussions about the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, and the positioning of the agriculture sector in the Northern Ireland economy. It is obvious to all Members that agriculture faces a number of severe difficulties: the catastrophic deterioration of the red meat sector, heralded by the report by the Red Meat Industry Task Force; the continued decline of the pig sector; and the reduction of our white-fish fleet from 40 boats to two boats.

Regrettably, agriculture does not appear to have been afforded appropriate consideration in the draft Programme for Government, being limited to a couple of mentions of investing £45 million on improving competitiveness and £10 million on a renewable energy programme. The Committee is well aware that that is not the extent of the investment in agriculture, and it is genuine in its welcome for all moneys. However, there is a feeling that the Department has gone for “headlines” rather than the required long-term strategic approach.

The draft Programme for Government outlines strategic priorities and themes, and the Committee does not disagree that the Executive should attempt to raise standards or that it should seek to:

“protect and enhance the physical and natural environment”.

Farming, and farming communities, remain the backbone of the rural economy and are the true guardians of the rural environment. The Committee believes, therefore, that agriculture should have a significantly greater profile and that it should be supported and enhanced to ensure the survival of the industry and the natural environment.

The Committee also wishes that the strategic priorities took cognisance of the issues that face the industry, and it is not content that the draft Programme for Government achieves that. The Committee would prefer, therefore, that a re-prioritisation exercise be undertaken to ensure: the countering of the findings of the Red Meat Industry Task Force and the protection, support and enhancement of the red meat, pig and fishing sectors; the eradication, rather than the reduction, of tuberculosis and brucellosis from Northern Ireland, in line with the vast majority of the rest of Europe; and, finally, the promotion of produce that has its origins in Northern Ireland.

I now turn to the key goals and priorities that are identified in the draft Programme for Government, and I would again assert that a re-prioritisation of objectives associated with agriculture is required. The Committee welcomes the investment of £55 million in competitiveness and renewable energy, and it looks forward to seeing the details associated with those programmes. However, in the past, the Committee has heard arguments

that striving to increase the area of agricultural land in Northern Ireland that is covered by environmental enhancement agreements could spell the end of intensive farming in the countryside; the Committee believes that, in the long term, that would be detrimental to the environment. The environment, and the economy, need agriculture.

The Committee cannot accept the targets that seek to reduce incidence levels of tuberculosis and brucellosis, which are public-health issues. The Committee believes that the Department has remained in a comfort zone about those diseases for too long, which has often resulted in complacency and an increase in incidence levels. The Committee calls on the Executive and the Department to seek the eradication of those diseases, in line with the vast majority of EU countries.

The Committee is concerned that Northern Ireland’s agricultural competitiveness is being further diminished by allowing imports of meat from South America, with proven inferior welfare and animal-health standards. The Northern Ireland farmer is only asking for a level playing field; I can assure Members that, if that is provided, farmers will be more than capable of meeting the challenges.

The Committee welcomes the investment of £100 million towards diversification under the Northern Ireland rural development programme. The Committee has provided its views on the issue of voluntary modulation on a number of occasions in the past, and it will not revisit the topic at this stage. However, the Committee is concerned at the EU plans to increase the rate of compulsory modulation, which will further reduce the ability of the Northern Ireland industry to compete with its counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, in Europe, and globally.

4.15 pm

Finally, in looking at the key goals and strategic priorities, the Committee welcomes all attempts to reduce the bureaucratic burden on farm businesses. There is, however, concern in the Committee that the Department is not doing enough in that regard. On the one hand, it says that reducing bureaucracy is a priority; on the other, it refuses to listen to the voice of this House when it passes a motion to remove the bureaucratic burden known as the Agricultural Wages Board. Even in the PSA framework there is an apparent contradiction: a 25% reduction in the administrative burden by 2013 is one target; another is 90% compliance with one of the most bureaucratic matters facing a farmer, namely that of cross-compliance inspections.

The Committee has several queries regarding targets defined in the draft Programme for Government and the PSA framework; however, I shall only mention them and not go into them in detail. First is the invest-

ment of £45 million to improve competitiveness of the agricultural sector, including £10 million to support the modernisation of farms. That investment is welcome; however, there is no indication of the competitiveness baseline, the level of increase to be sought, and how that investment will increase competitiveness.

Secondly, with regard to the reduction of bureaucracy by 15% by 2011 and by 25% by 2013, from what level does the reduction start, and how is it to be achieved? We still do not know the answers.

Thirdly, concerning the reduction of the incidence of TB and brucellosis, the Committee strongly advocates that that should be rewritten to read “the eradication of TB and brucellosis by 2013.” That would bring Northern Ireland into line with most of Europe. The Committee is concerned that the Department of Agriculture has established a comfort zone with regard to those diseases, and that is not acceptable.

Fourthly, there is the targeted reduction in the number of properties at significant risk of flooding from 28,000 to 27,300 by 2011. What a historic reduction by that time. The Committee queries whether that target is challenging. I certainly do not believe that it is, particularly in light of the experiences earlier this year in Cushendall and Cushendun.

The Committee wishes to see targets relevant to the issues that face the industry, particularly to the support and protection of the red meat, pig and fishing industries.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: I am sorry; I would gladly give way, but time is running out.

The Committee remains to be convinced that the objectives and the targets in the PSAs are measurable and deliverable. The Department needs to re-prioritise in light of the severe difficulties facing the red meat, pig and fishing sectors. The Committee’s opinion is that the Department needs to establish long-term, strategic goals to retrieve the industry from those long-term difficulties, rather than from short-term hits.

I turn now to the investment strategy, and the Committee notes — and fully supports — the inclusion of compliance with the nitrates directive. I have no doubt that farmers will do all that is necessary to meet those targets; however, I and the Committee are not as confident with regard to a positive response from the Planning Service, and I call on my good ministerial colleague to ensure that farmers are not penalised through no fault of their own.

The Committee, undoubtedly, would have preferred an agricultural pillar to reflect the position of that great industry in the economy of Northern Ireland, and in light of the well-publicised decline of the red meat and pig sectors. The Committee is concerned that, even under the environmental pillar, agriculture — arguably,

the backbone of the environment — is reduced to a mere mention under “Water and Waste Water, Waste Management, Flood Risk Management, Environment”.

My Committee has expressed its opinion on many issues, and I trust that the Minister, rather than going for specialised hits and photographs, will take them forward in the Executive.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat. The role of the Department of Employment and Learning is central to the delivery of two of the key priorities in the Programme for Government: “Grow a dynamic, innovative Economy”, and “Promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being”. The role of the Department, both in delivering an innovative approach to economic development and working towards reducing social disadvantage, is critical.

In briefings that the Committee has received to date, the importance of developing the economy has been stressed as the key priority. It is this economic development that will be the main instrument to lift people out of poverty and social disadvantage. The delivery of a challenging skills agenda is clearly central to that.

Similarly, we are being told that we are moving to a highly technical knowledge-based economy and that, in addition to increasing the skills base, innovation and research and development capacity are central to remaining ahead of the game.

The Committee is now well into the process of responding on the draft Programme for Government. However, that will not be complete until this Wednesday, when we have an opportunity to discuss final matters with the Minister. It is in that context that I wish to make the following points on behalf of the Committee. I am going to start with a number of positives before addressing a number of concerns.

The Committee welcomes the focus on small and medium-sized businesses. A number of members of my Committee bring significant private-sector experience to the Committee setting and continually stress the need for support — for example, R&D and skills support — to be geared towards the SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) sector. The Committee considers that the demand-led approach being pursued by the Department, if appropriately resourced, should allow this to happen.

The Committee will be taking a very keen interest in the welfare reform agenda and the Executive’s focus on reducing economic inactivity. The Committee is keen to see that achieved, but within a robust and highly professional environment. The Pathways to Work initiative offers the vehicle for that to happen. As with the Committee’s scrutiny of the rollout of Training for Success, however, we will wish to be

satisfied that Pathways to Work delivers the employment opportunities required while protecting the most vulnerable in society.

I will now move to the areas of concern. Some of these overlap with the discussion of the Budget tomorrow.

The Programme for Government states that there will be an increase of 300 PhDs by 2010. The Committee strongly supports that, within the context of economic development. However, the Committee has concluded that there currently do not appear to be the resources to fulfil this commitment. We hear continually about the negative impact of the so-called brain drain; here is an opportunity for the brightest to remain and conduct technological research in our two excellent universities. If the Executive are stressing the need for high-value jobs, then leading-edge research has a key role to play. The Committee wishes to see this commitment delivered in full.

The Programme for Government also makes a bold statement relating to the university sector and the commercialisation of college research, with a target for this to be complete by 2010. The Committee is unclear as to what this actually involves and is not convinced that there is anything new in this commitment. The Committee asks for clarity on what precisely this involves and what differentiates it from other statements related to increased commercial focus.

Closely linked to that is the goal of securing £120 million in private-sector investment and encouraging 300 companies to engage in R&D activity for the first time. Again, the Committee is very of this goal. However, the Committee has found it difficult to get clarity on how much money will be available for leveraging and supporting innovation moneys. In support of this goal, the Committee asks for an urgent, clear statement of intent from the Executive with regard to innovation funding in order that the private sector and the universities can plan to allow for the achievement of this goal.

A key goal in the Programme for Government that the Committee fully supports is the proposal to increase the number of adult learners who achieves a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT (information and communication technology) skills by 90,000 by 2015. However, the Committee has serious reservations about the Executive's ability to deliver that goal. The subject has been on the Committee's agenda every week since devolution was restored and has also been debated extensively in many plenary sittings.

The Committee acknowledges that the Department is working extremely hard to achieve that aim. However, we were somewhat shocked to see its poor CSR outcome. We have received assurances from the Department that it considers the resources available to address the number of adult learners achieving those

qualifications to be a good start and something on which to build. The Committee will keep a close eye on developments, and it urges that resources for adult learning be kept continually under review.

The Committee also supports the key goal to increase the number of students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects — science, technology, engineering and maths — and the parallel goal of increasing numbers of higher-education students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am not entirely sure, however, that those two goals should be linked. The Committee has expressed a strong desire to see the outcome of the research done on the profile of students who take up all courses at our universities for the forthcoming review of variable tuition fees. We will return to the issue of general student finance in the new year.

On behalf of the Committee, I want to make some points on priorities and goals that are linked to social inclusion in the Programme for Government. I have already mentioned that the Committee will scrutinise the implementation of the Pathways to Work initiative, on which it is too early to make any judgements. The introduction of the employment and support allowance in April 2008 is a major policy change that obviously overlaps with DSD's work. We recently received welcome and encouraging correspondence from the Minister on the front-line services that jobs and benefits offices are delivering. The Minister was greatly enthused and impressed by the new, personalised service-delivery model that is in place. The Committee will follow up on that assessment in the new year.

The Programme for Government mentions the new careers service that is to be put in place. My Committee and the Committee for Education recently held a joint presentation on that service, and we will fully engage on the consultation after Christmas. From the Committee for Employment and Learning's perspective, the provision of quality and comprehensive careers-advisory services for adults is a priority. We have been told that, as the economy's structure changes, training and careers needs for those who are currently in work will be extensive.

In addition to the broader economic-development agenda, those adults who are currently excluded from mainstream careers and education advice have specific needs that require specialist services. The Committee has expressed some concern that those who are currently involved in the delivery of both guidance and courses face an uncertain funding future, which makes it difficult for community-sector providers to plan in the medium and longer term. The Committee asks that that delivery continue to be a priority for the Department and that it be reinforced, at the earliest possible opportunity, through the development of the long-

promised learner access and support strategy. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I welcome the strategic and cross-cutting nature of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy.

We must abolish silo thinking. It is time for Departments to choreograph their activities in order to achieve the best outcomes and to avoid duplication of effort. Furthermore, resources must be used most effectively.

The Committee is content with the priorities that are set out in the draft Programme for Government, because they embody the Department for Social Development's role in tackling disadvantage and building communities.

I welcome the five key strategic priorities, even if I do express some surprise at comments that were made just last week on private-sector investment and job creation in the wake of job losses across Northern Ireland. The top priority focuses on growing a dynamic and innovative economy, and economic growth is the driving force behind the creation of wealth and the regeneration of our communities.

Working to reduce poverty and disadvantage among individuals, families and communities is at the heart of DSD's policies and programmes, alongside building sustainability and self-sufficiency.

I welcome the commitment in the draft Programme for Government that increased prosperity will be used to tackle ongoing poverty and disadvantage across our communities.

4.30 pm

I want to emphasise the role that other Departments have to play in tackling disadvantage and poverty and in protecting the most vulnerable in our society. The Department for Social Development may have the lead role in a number of strategies and policies to address those issues but in the majority of cases, other Departments will also be involved. Joined-up Government and working strategically and effectively with other Departments will be critical if the targets and desired outcomes set out in the draft Programme for Government are to be achieved.

I welcome the priority that is being given to tackling the housing crisis and the planned investment in social and affordable housing. If the ambitious target of up to 10,000 new social housing completions over the next five years is to be achieved, all relevant Departments must play their part; the housing crisis is not just an issue for the Department for Social Development.

On the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities, I welcome the priority that is being given to urban regeneration and

the planned investment. However, I stress the need for strategic and cross-departmental working to address the issues. For example, while the Department for Social Development has the lead in this issue, PSA 12, objective 1 lists six Departments that also have responsibilities in the area.

I welcome the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to work towards the elimination of poverty, in particular child poverty. Too many people, particularly the most vulnerable, continue live in communities that experience high levels of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. Many vulnerable households face fuel poverty. Therefore, the commitment to eradicate fuel poverty is welcome — indeed the excellent work being carried out under the warm homes scheme is an indicator of that commitment.

However, the Committee has serious concerns about the targets that have been set in relation to the eradication of fuel poverty. It was reported in the media just last week that Northern Ireland households are paying three times more for home heating oil than they were five years ago. There has been a 40% hike in prices since August 2007 and, unfortunately, that does not bode well for the fuel poverty target, especially when the level of the winter fuel payment has stayed the same in spite of that increase.

In closing, I welcome the expressed desire to work in partnership, as an Executive, across the public, private and voluntary sectors, to harness the ideas, energy and commitment of all the sectors. By joining up the plans of Government Departments and other stakeholders, we will maximise outcomes.

By working together in this way, I believe that we can build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in which everyone can enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the years to come.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McNarry): Speaking personally, it would be churlish not to acknowledge the achievement in producing this document, and foolish for others not to recognise some of the emerging gaps putting distance between the Executive and the scrutiny functions of the House.

We are where we are because we could not stay where we were. The next steps involve agreeing where we want to be. Do we have an Executive coalition of parity between equal partners or a dominant coalition within a coalition? We, in these seats, are committed to ensuring that violence does not return and that the Union is not threatened ever. Liking what we see, supporting it, defying it, or denying it, are no longer choices for this House. However, totally buying into a finalised Programme for Government and accompanying Budget remain, for us, matters to be resolved.

Speaking for the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; the Committee has noted the overall aim of the draft Programme for Government. In relation to the top priority of growing a dynamic and innovative economy, the Committee has noted that there is a huge potential for cultural tourism to contribute to the economy and believes that a more joined-up approach between the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment could maximise the potential that cultural tourism can bring to the economy.

One of the key goals in relation to growing the economy is to grow the creative industries sector by up to 15% by 2011. What is meant by “creative industries”, and will that include cultural tourism? Although growing the creative industries is an admirable objective, the Committee notes that the Department is still exploring opportunities to secure additional funds to increase activity in this area from the innovation fund.

That suggests to the Committee that adequate funding is not contained solely in the draft Budget. We are informed that the Department does not have a dedicated creative industries branch. Therefore, how does the Minister expect to be able to deliver that ambitious target?

The Committee believes that the DCAL target in relation to the priority of promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being — for Northern Ireland to host at least 10 countries at training camps for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games — is a soft and easy target, whereas DCAL could have a real impact on the promotion of tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being through arts and sports, which can deliver community integration. Those are issues that, along with addressing sectarianism in sport, the Committee feels should be included in the target.

One of the targets is to invest £110 million in sports facilities by 2011, thereby ensuring a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, there is no detail available about how that money will be allocated, or which sports will benefit and what the geographical spread of the funding will be. The Committee believes that the target of getting 125,000 young people participating in sport by 2011 is weak. There should be staging posts along the way. How many young people will be participating by 2009 or by 2010? How will the Department measure that target? What is the Department of Education’s role? Surely all young people should be participating in sport while at school.

There is also the issue of funding. Where is the money to pay for the coaches and facilities to allow young people and those with disabilities to participate in sport at a community level? There is no funding allocation for capital projects at that level.

In relation to the priority of protecting and enhancing our environment and natural resources, the Committee is very concerned that there is no reference to inland fishing. DCAL has a role in the protection and conservation of salmon in inland fisheries. Our rivers need to be protected, and the case for an independent environmental protection agency should be looked at again.

I turn now to the public service agreements. In PSA 4, all of the targets appear to relate to DARD. Why is no target required of DCAL in relation to inland fisheries?

DCAL’s role in PSA 5 is pouring capital into buildings. The Committee believes that DCAL must be more innovative in the way that it contributes to tourism — particularly, cultural tourism — and in how it works with local councils and the Tourist Board to achieve its tourist potential.

PSA 6 makes reference to re-establishing a ministerial subcommittee on children. When will that be done, and when and to whom will the subcommittee report?

PSA 8 gives DCAL a target in halting the decline in adult participation in sport. How will that be done? Is there money in the health budget to deliver that, and are there plans for a dual approach between DCAL and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to get it organised?

The proposed Northern Ireland library authority is referred to in PSA 9. The Committee believes that the new library authority should be accountable at a local level. Further detail is required on how that accountability will be achieved.

PSA 10 gives DCAL a responsibility in relation to a literacy and numeracy strategy for young people. However, the Department has informed the Committee that it does not have a responsibility in that area. Why then is DCAL listed under that PSA?

With regard to PSA 12, we know that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure appointed a new ministerial advisory group in September 2007 to advise him of the implementation of the architecture and built environment policy. Why is there no corresponding target for the advisory group? How will its success or otherwise be measured?

The Committee also examined the investment strategy. It noted the three cross-cutting themes — economic, societal and environmental.

Bearing in mind the importance of culture and the wider benefits that it offers to society, the Committee proposes that a further cross-cutting theme be included, under the heading: “cultural”.

In respect of the investment pillar termed “skills”, DCAL has been allocated £31 million. The Committee cannot say whether that amount will be adequate for the modernisation of the Library Service because it has

not, at this stage, been provided with details of how that £31 million is to be spent.

Turning to the investment pillar termed “social”, DCAL has been allocated a whopping £210 million for culture, arts and leisure. Again, the Committee cannot say whether that amount will be adequate because we do not know, at this stage, how that amount will be broken down.

Overall, insufficient information has been provided to allow for a proper assessment by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee asks that the Executive work to ensure that a much more comprehensive document is produced between now and when we have the final papers before us. The case for the DCAL Committee rests.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I can report that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been carefully considering the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, and will continue to do so. We have benefited from the views of a number of stakeholders, including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Federation of Small Businesses, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), and the Carbon Trust.

I believe that the Committee is generally content with the overarching aims, strategic priorities and cross-cutting themes of the Programme for Government. Obviously, we particularly welcome the emphasis on growing the economy as a significant priority over the lifetime of the Programme for Government. I recognise that, of course, that goal is not new — it was included in previous Programmes for Government, and was also agreed as part of the work of the Committee on the Preparation for Government. However, to see that priority repeated and restated, accompanied by cross-cutting PSAs, in a Programme for Government is a very welcome and positive development.

We welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy on a number of levels, as they relate to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, we recognise that balancing policy ambitions with resource constraints is going to provide a challenge for Ministers, the Executive — and this Assembly, which holds authority for the Budget. Therefore, the choices do not rest only with Ministers and the Executive, and we as Members, must recognise that.

With a real-terms increase in public expenditure of just 1·2%, we must recognise that things are tight. My Committee is particularly concerned about the degree to which the overall Budget, which supports the Programme for Government, relies on the achievement of very significant efficiency savings, which are

already factored into the allocations. If Ministers run into difficulties in delivering those efficiency savings, resulting in a hole in the Budget, we would not wish to see the DETI budget used as the first port of call when it comes to remedial action, because that has certainly happened in the past.

We welcome the fact that the Programme for Government cites a growing, dynamic, innovative economy as the top priority. Obviously, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have an important role to play in the delivery of that goal, working with other Departments, as well as with its own agencies.

Halving the private-sector productivity gap with other parts of the UK, excluding the greater south east, is an ambitious goal that presents a challenge, particularly when — as now — the private-sector productivity gap is, in fact, widening. That represents a failure of wider UK Government regional policy, but it presents a challenge to us too. It is not clear that sufficient resources will be committed to deliver that target, or what means are planned to deliver it, beyond wishing it. We wish to see exactly what the Executive have in mind in respect of developing actions. We also recognise, of course, that the Assembly and the Executive do not have the fiscal discretion that would help us to deliver that target. We await the results of the Varney Review, but hardly with bated breath.

Furthermore, the Committee has some questions on whether sufficient resources have been made available to improve the skills supply as it is emphasised in key high-value added sectors in the economy. The Committee would like milestones to be set to monitor progress in that regard.

4.45 pm

The Committee welcomes some of the targets for productivity growth in the region, such as support for new businesses and the commitment, by way of inward investment, to secure 6,500 jobs by 2011. In its reporting on the draft Programme for Government, the BBC constantly repeats that target for job creation as a global target, despite the fact that it is specifically related to jobs created as a result of inward investment. That target must be questioned, and constantly tracked and monitored, not least given the recent experiences of the bad news from Limavady and elsewhere.

In responding to the type of situation that arose in Limavady, the Committee has noted that the draft Programme for Government and draft Budget anticipate the demise of the integrated development fund, which was the final remainder of the Executive programme funds that we had during the previous period of devolution. For circumstances requiring a coherent, strategic response to a crisis, as is the case in Limavady, the integrated development fund would be a

useful tool, and the Committee asks the Executive to further consider that option.

The Committee welcomes the target of securing £120 million of private-sector investment commitments in innovation and for 300 companies to engage in research and development and innovation for the first time by 2010-11. That will be necessary if we are to develop an innovative economy. However, the Committee is concerned that there is a lack of visibility in and around the innovation funding that was announced by the then Chancellor when he met all the parties last year and earlier this year, and a lack of visibility in the additional innovation funding that has been made available by the Irish Government. There is concern that that money is disappearing into the woodwork of existing innovation measures. The Committee wishes to see that money creating additional measures with additional outcomes. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive have more work to do in that regard.

The draft investment strategy contains key issues in relation to network development. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have an important role to play in improvements in telecommunications and broadband availability, and the Committee wants to see that role developed positively. However, we also want to ensure that there is comprehensive coverage across the region as we take up the next generation of broadband provision. The Committee also recognises that wider measures in the draft investment strategy around networks and infrastructure development, although not directly under the delivery arm of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will be central to ensuring competitive economic performance.

We welcome the broader investment in infrastructure that has been committed to in the draft investment strategy, and the 10-year investment plan that arose from decisions that were taken during the previous period of devolution, when we saw the need to frame a much longer-term capital investment strategy to take the region forward.

Although the Committee welcomes the overall commitments to enterprise support, we want to see more detail on the instruments and actions that will provide that support. The Committee noted that no particular measures have been adopted in relation to the social economy; nor has any target been associated with the action to consider projects that will bring specific benefits to areas of economic disadvantage. That is an important commitment, but so far no targets have been associated with it. The Committee recommends that an action be included that addresses that issue.

The Committee wishes to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises are actively supported and promoted.

We welcome the fact that the Minister has emphasised that alongside the importance of continuing to pursue foreign direct investment. However, the Committee is concerned that the positive statements from the Minister do not seem to be matched by an active commitment on the part of INI to work with the local enterprise agencies as they support small and medium-sized enterprises.

There is a sense of psychological withdrawal from that area, as there is on the issue of the social economy, where DETI should take an active working policy lead. It could borrow from some of the work of the Office of the Third Sector across the water and take a more proactive approach to developing the social economy. Some of the Committee's other concerns touch more on Budget issues, and we may address some of those in tomorrow's debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. The Committee for Finance and Personnel recognises the importance of both documents, and, especially, their relationship with the Executive's draft Budget.

The Committee has taken evidence from DFP on the Department's contribution to the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy. Although the Committee has not yet agreed its final response, I wish to highlight its thinking on the areas of the Programme for Government and investment strategy to which DFP will contribute directly. DFP has now provided detailed follow-up information on issues requiring clarification, and the Committee will consider those matters when it meets on Wednesday to finalise its position.

In relation to the strategic priorities contained in the draft Programme for Government, DFP's main contribution relates to the delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services. Reference is made under that priority to the Civil Service reform programme, which is being co-ordinated by DFP, realising significant savings that will be redirected to delivering key services.

The Committee requested quantification of the savings to be generated by the reform programme over the three-year budgetary period. These savings are vital to the Executive's draft Budget and will play a key role in the delivery of the Programme for Government. Given that the savings are specifically mentioned in the draft Programme for Government under that priority, the revised Programme would be enhanced by their being quantified.

The key goals and priorities for DFP relate to the delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services and the delivery of efficiency savings, the generation of additional capital by the disposal of surplus assets and the consolidation of public-sector websites.

The Committee had initial concerns about the objectives and targets contained in the public service agreements that are relevant to the Department of Finance and Personnel. PSA 11, objective 4 is to:

“Support the wider Public Sector in taking account of sustainable development principles when procuring works, supplies and services.”

The Committee is concerned that the target for embedding sustainable development principles in capital investment decisions will take three years to achieve. It wishes to see implementation being brought forward in the revised Programme for Government.

Also under that objective, small and medium-sized enterprises are to be given opportunities to do business with public-sector organisations by September 2008. The Committee has queried what that process involves and why such opportunities have not been maximised already. The Committee will consider whether suitable measurement arrangements need to be put in place to determine the success of the policy and to enable progress to be reported to the Assembly.

In relation to sustainable development, DFP has a central role in promoting sustainability in the procurement, operation and maintenance of buildings and the procurement of sustainable supplies and services. It is also responsible for regulating building standards and promoting energy efficiency across the public sector.

The Department has informed the Committee that it is soon to finalise its own action plan on sustainable development, and the Committee has already requested quarterly updates. DFP has the main responsibility for objective 1, the delivery of a programme of Civil Service reform under PSA 20, “Improving Public Services”. Target dates for the various Civil Service reform programmes are included under that objective. The Committee sought clarification from DFP that those targets are for the full implementation of the various programmes as opposed to the piloting of the programmes, and it also requested a comparison of those targets with the original implementation plans.

Objective 4 of the PSA aims to promote and improve access to public services and information. Under that objective, a single telephone number point of contact for selected public services is to be in place by December 2008. The Committee has learned that four Civil Service organisations have been selected for this first phase: DARD; DFP’s Land and Property Services; the General Register Office; and the Planning Service.

It is planned that it will include the majority of citizen-facing services, and, although a time frame has yet to be agreed for the inclusion of those services, roll-out is expected to start in 2009-10. The Committee has queried whether there is any study of the benefits of including key stakeholder organisations in the community and voluntary sector as part of that ongoing study. The Committee believes that, because of the potentially high-profile nature of the project, it must work effectively from the outset.

The Committee considers that the target for this NI Direct project should be strengthened in the revised Programme for Government to include: the proportion of public services to be covered when the first phase is introduced in December 2008; further detail on subsequent roll-out within the 2008-11 time frame; and a specific target to deal effectively with a given percentage of calls at the first point of contact.

DFP also has a major role in PSA 21, “Enabling Efficient Government”. Under objective 1, which aims to support the First Minister and deputy First Minister in leading the Executive, the Committee notes that the target for the first review of the Budget for 2008-11 is to be completed by January 2009. The Committee has already raised with DFP the issue of an annual timetable for Budget setting and review, which would build in sufficient time for the effective involvement of the Assembly’s Statutory Committees, and it will work with the Department to achieve that as soon as possible.

Objective 2 of PSA 21 aims to build the capacity of the Civil Service to deliver the Government’s priorities by improving leadership, skills, professionalism, diversity and equality. The Committee has been briefed on the actions to be taken by DFP to encourage applications to the Civil Service from under-represented groups and on new research to be undertaken into perceived barriers to employment in the Civil Service. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of that research, but it is concerned about the absence of a timescale for the Civil Service to be reflective of the diversity of our society.

The Committee has also highlighted to DFP the absence of timescales for the delivery of the target to ensure that the Civil Service has the right skills and expertise to deliver effective public services. More specific and measurable targets may need to be included in the revised Programme for Government in both those areas.

Under objective 3 of PSA 21, a target has been included to ensure that public spending delivers value for money. The Committee wishes to see more detail included as to how the delivery of value for money in public spending is to be measured objectively. The Committee understands that departmental efficiency delivery plans will be published alongside the final Budget and will, therefore, be available to Statutory

Committees for scrutiny. The proposed performance efficiency delivery unit is expected to play a key role in that matter. The Committee will be briefed on the role of that unit this week, and it has yet to respond formally to the proposal. In any event, there will be a need to monitor the outputs from the unit in its drive to achieve higher levels of savings.

Under objective 5 of PSA 21, which aims to deliver value-for-money gains in Government procurement, the Committee requested further detail on the structure of the centres of procurement expertise, which are to deliver those gains. The Committee wishes to see the revised Programme for Government include dates for delivery against some of the targets under this objective, including the 3% value-for-money gains on procurement spend.

I now turn to the draft investment strategy. DFP bid for approximately £94·2 million over the three financial years from 2008 to 2011, and it was allocated £68·7 million. The Committee will continue to monitor the potential impact that the allocations proposed for DFP in the draft strategy may have on its ability to deliver and how DFP plans to manage with an allocation that is significantly below the amount sought.

5.00 pm

The Committee has concerns as to whether the capital allocations for Land and Property Services were sufficient to allow the organisation to alleviate the difficulties associated with its IT systems, which were discussed during Question Time, especially with regard to rates relief. The Committee will keep a watching brief on that matter, particularly in the light of the outcome of the current review of domestic rating, the first stage of which will be announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 27 November. Land and Property Services will have a key role in the implementation of the rating reforms to be introduced in April 2008 and beyond. The Department of Finance and Personnel must consider how any further funding requirements that arise from rating reform can be met in any revised allocations.

The Department has also bid for £15 million over the three-year period for the central energy efficiency fund, which is used to support measures to improve the energy performance of, and reduce carbon dioxide emissions from, Government buildings. The Committee believes that the £6 million that was allocated to the fund in the draft investment strategy runs contrary to the prominence that was given to sustainability by the Executive in the draft Programme for Government.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr S Wilson: Although many Members will find pieces in the draft Programme for Government that they are not happy with or have concerns about, it probably deserves better than the comments that have

been made by certain parties during the debate. As usual, the Alliance Party has taken its lofty, patronising, talk-down approach, which came from the apprentice from East Belfast, Mrs Long: wait until the House hears the speech from the leader of the party, Mr Ford, who has perfected the ability to talk down to people without even trying.

Members have listened to all the self-seeking stuff that comes from the Alliance Party about there being more means to delivering a shared future. The party wants more money to be spent on integrated education in order, the House is told, to save resources, even though it is known that in areas where Alliance Party supporters have promoted integrated schools, it has often been to duplicate or triplicate the provision that already exists.

The theme has also been taken up by the SDLP, which seems to have latched on to quangos. Mrs Kelly lamented that less money is being given to the Equality Commission, as if relations in Northern Ireland could simply be improved by spending more money on quangos. I understand why the Alliance Party wants there to be more commissions for this and more commissions for that — the Fair Employment Commission, the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council, and so on — because, of course, those bodies are job-creation projects for the Alliance Party's failed politicians. Given the number of them, more of those quangos must be created.

I cannot, however, understand the SDLP's attitude when it produced that argument. I listened to Mrs Kelly's speech, which was more like the 11-plus paper that youngsters had to do last week than a speech. There were more questions in it than in the 11-plus. I believe that I counted 18 questions. Mercifully, the First Minister was not present to hear it. What amazes me is that if the SDLP have all those questions about the draft Programme for Government, what on earth was its Minister doing when the document was being drawn up? I assume that —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will give way in a moment, although I am not sure to which Member.

What on earth was the Minister for Social Development doing? It certainly seems as though she has not been able to answer the questions that Mrs Kelly has raised in the Assembly.

Mr Ford: I appreciate that the Member was not present to hear the contribution by his colleague the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee who asked as many questions and made as many complaints about the programme as Mrs Kelly did.

Mr S Wilson: I was not present for Dr McCrea's speech. However, I assume that, as Chairperson of the

Committee, he was asking questions on its behalf. There is a difference.

Mrs Kelly was asking questions on behalf of her party — a party that has a Minister in the Executive and who sat down with the other Ministers to agree the draft Programme for Government. Other Members attempted to do the same. Mr McNarry also tried to wash the fingerprints of the Ulster Unionist Party from the document. He joined in the cynical approach taken by other Members who want to distance themselves from a document in which their party colleagues played a part. He said that the Ulster Unionist Party had not made up its mind as to whether to sign up to the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. The Ulster Unionists are either in the Executive or they are not; they either sign up to the documents, or they do not.

Mr Cobain: Oh.

Mr S Wilson: I hear the Member for North Belfast saying “Oh”, but at least he is honest. He wants the Ulster Unionist Party to come out of the Executive and not be part of it. However, considering the party’s manoeuvring — it was even prepared to do a deal with the PUP to gain an extra Minister in the Executive — I assume that there is not any great desire among his colleagues who are Ministers to leave the Executive. Some Members are attempting to wash their hands of any responsibility for the draft Programme for Government.

The draft Programme for Government is a joint document from all the parties in the Executive, and, as with any document, it will generate concerns. Members of the Committee for Education — of which I am Chairperson — have expressed concerns about, for instance, the targets that have been set. Members may get an opportunity to discuss those today or, if not, they can talk about them tomorrow during the debate on the draft Budget. Committee members are concerned about how the targets have been linked to the draft Budget and whether they were linked to the budgets that were given to the Departments. If they were, there is no reason why Departments should not deliver them, because the Ministers — presumably — agreed the targets on the basis of the resources allocated to them.

I have another concern about education, and I am reflecting the views of all the parties represented in the Committee for Education when I highlight my concern about the commitment to having — *[Interruption.]*

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Member clarify whether he is speaking in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Education?

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

Mr S Wilson: Had the Member been listening he would know in what capacity I am speaking. Maybe

that is one of the SDLP’s problems: it does not listen to its Minister, so it has to ask questions here. The Member cannot even listen to the introduction that was given to me when I got up to speak. I was introduced as a Member — not as Chairman of the Committee for Education. That is the answer, but, perhaps, if the Member paid more attention, he would not have such problems in the future.

Although I am not speaking as Chairman of the Committee, may I say that all parties expressed concerns about the education and skills authority, which is part of the draft Programme for Government. They are concerned about that piece of legislation, its terms and whether the efficiencies that the Department hopes to achieve through it — which seem to be the main efficiencies — can be achieved, because it seems that the costings were based on unrealistic figures from the education and library boards. We do not know what the structure will be in the future, so we do not know how much the new education and skills authority will cost. However, it is included in the draft Programme for Government as one of the Education Department’s main sources of efficiencies.

There are other questions about the education and skills authority and whether it is the right way to proceed with the administration of education. We do not know what input there will be at a local level in respect of monitoring and delivery of the services provided.

The one thing that I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that I do not believe that the date that has been set for the delivery of the education and skills authority, given the amount of discussion that still appears necessary, is deliverable. If that is not the case, efficiencies may not be delivered.

One of my other concerns, which is shared by a number of Members, is the fact that the Youth Service will continue to be delivered by the Department of Education. I am fairly sure that many Members believe that the Youth Service ties far more closely to community services and leisure services in local councils and ought to be devolved to local councils under the review of public administration. As it stands, the Programme for Government places the Youth Service in the education framework. A concern shared by many is that that is, perhaps, not the best way to deliver that programme.

The other area that there is grave concern about is the investment strategy. One hundred new schools or major investment projects in schools have been planned over the next three years. The Department of Education has not been good at delivering on major educational projects and, indeed, has handed back money — in fact, it has handed back the largest amount of money almost every year. There are good

reasons for that and good reasons why there have been delays. The Committee is concerned that the investment projects will depend upon area-based planning, which will be part of the second education Bill, probably will not come to the House for another two years. If the investment programme in education is dependant upon proper planning at a local area level, it could well be that the programme will come unstuck because we do not even have in place the infrastructure in which to deliver that investment programme.

Reaching agreement will be even more difficult given the fact that in the discussions that we have had so far on the review of public administration, the Minister and the Department have made it clear that they intend to maintain the sectoral interests in education. In Northern Ireland, those same interests have delivered a surplus of school places and those sectors have fought over whether schools should be closed or amalgamated or whether a certain sector should be protected as opposed to another sector. That situation will make it difficult to decide on the spending of the money.

Those are legitimate concerns for the Executive to consider. They do not in any way destroy the Programme for Government as it is drawn up but they do raise questions that must be considered more closely before the final Programme for Government is presented, meaning that when we do get the final Programme for Government, we have document that is resourced, deliverable and allows the Executive to say that they have delivered on their promises.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. My points are similar to those from many of the other Members who have spoken. I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, particularly their overarching aims and strategic objectives and the promotion of a more equal society. However, like some other Members, I have some concerns that should be considered before the final documents are issued.

First, I welcome the priority given to the growing of a dynamic, innovative economy, because there is no question that that is needed, if we are to create the conditions to deliver the equal, fair and tolerant society to which we are all aspiring. The economy needs to change to deliver a Programme for Government that ensures that people have equal access to an enhanced quality of life and increased prosperity, resulting in the reduction of poverty and disadvantage.

5.15 pm

Two main cross-cutting themes in the draft Programme for Government are “sustainability” and “a better future”. Although there is a strong focus on building the private sector by attracting foreign direct investment and by supporting smaller local businesses, that is not

matched by a similarly strong focus on building the social economy. This is in spite of an acceptance that social enterprise can be very proactive in delivering economic and social change, particularly in areas of need and disadvantage. The realisation that social economy projects provide much needed services in the community and employ local people must be written into the draft Programme for Government, and appropriate targets and outcomes must be set.

The delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services is given high priority in the draft Programme for Government. Although any reduction to bureaucracy and red tape must be welcomed, I hope that it will not result in any cuts to front-line services. My experience, which is like that of many in the community of West Belfast that I represent, is that public-sector cuts usually result in public-sector projects that the community and voluntary sector deliver losing out.

To attract high-quality jobs, investment in skills and lifelong learning projects is essential, as has been outlined in the draft Programme for Government and in the draft investment strategy. A recent report illustrated the educational attainment gap that still exists, even at primary school age, between children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who do not.

There must be investment in a high-quality education system that will enable everyone, regardless of social background, to access the high-quality jobs that are mentioned throughout both documents. Every child has the right to realise his or her potential, and that applies in further education too. I want to see first-rate apprenticeships being made available to people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to develop the skills base necessary to ensure equality of opportunity when they access employment.

I welcome the draft investment strategy’s reference to:

“including consideration of social outcomes in procurement issues, will be issued to public bodies in the near future.”

I particularly welcome the fact that that will apply to the delivery of all plans for infrastructure investment. That will create an opportunity to ensure that local people, particularly the most disadvantaged in society, and local companies will benefit from any new employment opportunities that will arise.

However, I am concerned that capital investment over the next three years will be dependent on current, or proposed, PFI projects. The difficulties and delays, to which some previous PFI projects have been subject, and taking into account the Finance Minister’s earlier comments about Workplace 2010, illustrate the weakness of any capital investment being dependent on PFI.

I broadly welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. I hope

that they will deliver a better future for everyone and that they will tackle the social and economic inequalities that create and perpetuate poverty and disadvantage in our society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I have been able to listen to the proposals that are before the House at first hand. I am among many Members who have asked for additional issues to be included. I compared the priorities that were agreed in OFMDFM with the proposals of the draft Programme for Government and found that they will deliver and address the issues.

Do not mistake what I am saying: the document by no means addresses all the issues on the wish list. However, it addresses the issues that were identified as priorities. Unlike some Members, I do not believe that there is an inexhaustible fund from which money can be drawn to achieve all that we would love to achieve in the Province. For that reason, the Committee made issues that are imperative to the future of the Province the top priorities in the draft Programme for Government.

For a while, it would be nice to live in the dream-land that some inhabit, and I suggest that the Alliance Party is among them. That party chases the shiny pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The next time Members see a rainbow in the sky, they will see David Ford in his green wellies, followed by Naomi Long in her pink wellies, digging with a spade as they try to find that pot of gold.

The Budget is limited. Consequently we must make the most of what we have to produce more and better for the next generation who can in turn make more provision for the next generation, and so on. I agree, to some extent, with the statement that the proposals are somewhat limited in scope. They are there to provide the essentials for giving Northern Ireland a secure future and do not take into account the far regions of the imagination of some of the Members here who called for abstracts at the expense of fundamentals.

The aims of the investment strategy and the Programme for Government are not a wish list. They are methods of achieving a credible goal: a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with a respect for the rule of law.

As much as I would love to be able to go through the investment strategy and the Programme for Government, I will leave that to others. I will, however, highlight a few issues that are of particular importance to me, and which have been addressed in the investment strategy. Three objectives are clear — to accelerate economic growth in business; to ensure equality of opportunity; and to promote the care

of the environment, with a view to implementing EU Directives on the matter.

The desire is to achieve a balance of investment to ensure the long-term sustainability of public service infrastructure. That has been addressed by some £5.6 billion spending for the next three years for the new infrastructure, which will measure out in the next ten years to some £18 billion. This has been specifically addressed in this manner to rectify the legacy of underinvestment during the Troubles and direct rule. The fact of the matter is that there is no point in the wide-scale promotion of tourism, investment and business opportunity when our infrastructure is substandard.

I have put the marker forward for Strangford. Quite clearly, it has the potential to be developed. Jobs and opportunities can come from tourism. There is more pressure than ever on regional infrastructure. For the first time ever, there has been a shift from net emigration to immigration, with statistics showing that by the end of 2006, there were 19,000 immigrants from Europe and further afield living and working in the Province.

Therefore, instead of people leaving and the subsequent lessening of strain, there are more people arriving, with a consequent build-up of pressure. It is for this reason that the placement of funding is essential and timely. The basics must be addressed first, and the investment of £5.6 billion is the first step in that direction.

Six pillars have been identified for the investment strategy. These are further made up of 23 sub-pillars. Time does not permit me to go into all of those. The pillars are made up of network, skills, health, social care, environment, and production, on which the £18 billion will be spent over the next ten years. Rural and primary industries are addressed, which, in practical terms, means a boost to tourism and the modernisation and diversification of agriculture by the year 2013. We all know — those of us who represent rural areas — that diversification in agriculture is the key to the future of farming.

Some £25 million of public and private investment has been focused on the fishing industry through the European fisheries fund programme. Again, a cause that is very close to my heart, as I represent Portavogie. Between 2008 and 2011, £410 million will be spent on rural development. The Strangford constituency comprises urban and rural districts. Therefore, I am aware of the need for investment. Also, through the Programme for Government, there is a commitment to facilitate the reduction of the administration burden on farms by 25%. That addresses the red tape plea brought forward by farmers, not just in my constituency, but from across the Province.

There is also the commitment made to invest £45 million by 2013 to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, and to improve local development in the rural community with an investment of some £100 million, with a view to improve the quality of life of rural residents and address poverty in the rural area.

I will mention child poverty and the priority that OFMDFM has set — 30% of children in the Strangford constituency are subject to child poverty. Child poverty is a big issue.

For housing, £1,388 million has been proposed over the next ten years. The commitment is to build over 10,000 new homes in the next five years. In Strangford, 2,500 people are on the waiting list, and that number is rising. Social housing is a tremendously big issue. It is an issue that is plaguing most of our young people and young couples today. It is, therefore, a timely commitment to ensure that there is affordable housing for the Province, as well as £50million for neighbourhood regeneration.

Within DCAL, there is a commitment to invest £504 million over the next ten years, including a desire to promote Northern Ireland as a training ground for 12 countries for the upcoming Olympics and Paralympics. That is why a 50 m swimming pool will be built, and why I will continue to push for some local shooting sports clubs to be granted funding to facilitate Olympic teams. There is provision for up to £110 million to go towards sports facilities, which can — and should — be used to raise the profile of the Province for the Olympics and leave a lasting legacy for our people.

The investment will include £5.6 billion for infrastructure; £3.1 billion for roads over 11 years; £1.4 billion for water and waste; £3.5 billion for education; £3.5 billion for health; and £1.4 billion for housing. All the essentials are accounted for, as well as propositions for businesses, on which other Members will expand. In citing the aims and goals of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, and the ways in which funds are allocated, it must be stressed that it is still up to the Departments to administer funds in the right way — OFMDFM can do only so much. The responsibility of Ministers cannot be overlooked or sidelined.

The Programme for Government is wide ranging and covers the essentials for the rebuilding of the Province in a global context. Although all Members will have pet peeves and issues that have not been directly addressed, the needs of the Province have, on the whole, been measured and a recipe has been created that uses the ingredients in the right way. It is now the job of the individual chefs to ensure that the outcome is palatable.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Chairpersons of Committees — and there are a number who wish to

speak in the debate — that when they speak as Chairpersons, they speak on behalf of the Committee. Should they wish to make a personal or political contribution, it is vital that they alert the House of that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee for Regional Development, in common with other Committees, has scrutinised the draft Programme for Government over the past number of weeks. It will finalise its views on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy at its meeting this week. It is in that context that I make this contribution.

Over the past number of weeks, the Committee has heard from a variety of stakeholders, including the Quarry Products Association, the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Group, Help the Aged, Age Concern, NICVA, the Federation of Small Businesses, and the Confederation of British Industry. On behalf of the Committee, I thank all those individuals and organisations who generously placed their time and expertise at our disposal.

I do not propose to deal with all the aspects of the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy, but I wish to make some points about the Executive's cross-cutting themes, the priorities and goals that are relevant to regional development, and the investment strategy. The Committee notes that, of the five strategic and interrelated priority areas identified by the Executive, growing a dynamic, innovative economy is identified as a top priority. That is followed by a discussion of the cross-cutting themes termed "a better future" and "sustainability", which the Executive state will underpin the delivery of their priorities.

In its evidence to the Committee, NICVA noted that a shared future had become "a better future", with no definition of the watchwords of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity. NICVA was also critical of what it saw as the trickle-down assumption inherent in the approach of the Programme for Government.

The Committee believes that a radically different approach to sustainability is required if Northern Ireland is to play its part in achieving the 60% to 80% reduction in carbon emissions that the Prime Minister outlined in his speech on the environment on 19 November 2007. In its evidence to the Committee, NICVA also highlighted the imbalance between spending on roads, and planned spending on public transport, and what it saw as the scant consideration of carbon emissions from transport in the draft Programme for Government.

5.30 pm

However, the Committee's view is that the issue is not simply one of bus and rail versus roads. A more useful discussion — one that is yet to be held — would focus on carbon emissions from different modes of

transport, with consideration being given to green energy and the use of hybrid-based modes of public transport. As a cross-cutting theme, it is not clear to the Committee what force, if any, sustainability has in implementation. Although public service agreement 22 refers to the reduction of our carbon footprint, it does not contain an explicit carbon-emissions reductions action or target, nor does DRD have a target for that.

There are several priorities and goals in the draft Programme for Government that are relevant to the Department for Regional Development. The Department has responsibility for delivering PSAs that contribute to each of the five priority areas that the Executive have identified in the draft Programme for Government. I will consider those in turn.

Priority 1 is entitled “Growing a dynamic, innovative economy”. Infrastructure has been identified as a key driver of economic growth and productivity, a crucial factor in competitiveness and in the decisions of foreign direct investment in choosing host locations. DRD contributes to the achievement of that priority through its investment in roads and public transport, and through its management of policies that concern water and sewerage services, ports and airports.

Priority 2 is to promote tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being. Key goal 10 of that priority is:

“Reducing by 33% the overall number of people, and by 50% the number of children, killed or seriously injured on our roads by 2012.”

The Committee notes with some concern that the road-safety targets for percentage reductions in those killed and seriously injured are broadly similar to those in previous years. Although road conditions are responsible for a small proportion of such incidents, the Committee is firmly of the view that reductions will not be achieved without adequate funding for structural road maintenance and local traffic measures. The Committee calls for adequate funding for structural maintenance programmes.

Priority 3 is to protect and enhance our environment and natural resources. Key goal 5 of priority 3 is:

“Delivering a new sewer project for central Belfast by 2010.”

Priority 4 is to invest to build our infrastructure. Its key goal 2 is:

“Investing £3.1bn in our road network by 2018.”

Its key goal 3 is:

“Investing £1.4bn in our water and waste water infrastructure by 2018.”

The achievability of the key goals in priority 4 is dependent on the availability of funding outside the current Budget programme and period and on decisions that a future Executive will make.

Priority 5 is to deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services. Its key goals 1, 2, 3 and 5 are as follows: to achieve 5% efficiency savings on administration costs for the next 3 years; to deliver 3% per annum on resource budgets; to contribute to the generation of an extra £1 billion of capital realisation; and to streamline Department and agency websites by 2009. The Committee’s view is that achieving those efficiencies must not come at the expense of service levels or of road and public safety.

As the draft Programme for Government sets 38 key goals, it may not be helpful to add to the list at this time. However, it might be useful if, in future revisions of the draft Programme for Government, the centrality of environmentally sustainable infrastructure and connectivity were made more explicit and given a higher priority.

Greater clarity is needed in the draft investment strategy. It is not clear that its six pillars and 23 sub-pillars are sufficiently aligned to the five priorities and two cross-cutting themes that the Executive identified in the draft Programme for Government. In the case of the Department for Regional Development, the 23 sub-pillars appear to align closely with the draft Budget objectives. That is not surprising, because years 1 to 3 of the ISNI map to the Budget period. However, it is not sufficiently clear how the sub-pillars relate to the 23 public service agreements.

Perhaps understandably, given the indicative nature of funding for the ISNI beyond year 3, the draft ISNI’s key goals are aspirational. Although that is at odds with the role of the ISNI as a strategic forward consideration of infrastructure needs, it may be inevitable, because the ISNI is tied to the Budget. That is problematic, because the infrastructure industries and others will be seeking clarity and certainty in order to prepare to compete for forthcoming Government business. The nature of infrastructure projects is that there is a long lead and development time, which often falls outside the three-year planning period. That contributes to the aspirational nature of the key goals and means that most of the milestones of relevance to the Committee for Regional Development that are contained in the draft ISNI refer to projects that are already well advanced.

In some cases that means that commitments are being made on those projects, which are on the way to being delivered, and the observer might be tempted to ask where the challenge for the Department lies.

The Committee again highlights the lack of discussion of carbon emissions in the final ISNI’s networks pillar, although the measure for investment proposals submitted as part of the ISNI bidding process devoted considerable attention to that topic.

On the environment pillar, the discussion is limited to consideration of water and waste compliance with

EU directives, rather than a fuller consideration of the carbon footprint in all of our investment activities. Reference is made to investment in the water and waste infrastructure, but the Committee is of the view that until the Executive have made decisions on the outstanding strand-one and strand-two issues of the independent water review, which is to be published in December, it is not in a position to make further comment on the proposals in this pillar.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you for inviting me to address the issues on the response to the draft Programme for Government 2008-11 and the investment strategy NI 2008-18 on behalf of the Committee.

The Committee welcomes the overarching aim to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland that has respect for the rule of law, and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in years to come. The Committee believes that that should be done in ways that protect and enhance the physical and natural environment, using sustainable resources as effectively as possible, as stated in the draft Programme for Government. The Committee also welcomes the cross-cutting themes set out in the investment strategy NI and, in particular, the theme that building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental policies and programmes.

The Committee particularly welcomes the priority given to protecting and enhancing the environment and natural resources. We also welcome, subject to proper resources being made available, the priorities in the Programme for Government that relate to delivering a fundamental overhaul of the planning system by 2011; strengthening the protection of key habitats and species by declaring 200 new ASSIs by 2016; reducing landfill significantly; and increasing the area of agricultural land in Northern Ireland covered by environmental-enhancement agreements to 50% by 2011.

We also welcome the key goals of reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint by at least 25% by 2025; enabling 4,700 farmers to comply with the nitrates directive by 2009; increasing the area of forest and woodland by 1,650 hectares by 2011; and halting the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2015.

However, the Committee would prefer to see a higher profile for climate change included as a key goal in the Programme for Government, including an explicit commitment to tackle climate change and highlight its implications for society. The Committee is aware that the Department sought the inclusion of a specific goal relating to raising awareness of the impact of climate change on Northern Ireland.

The Committee supports a further crackdown on illegal waste disposal through the pursuit of prosecution for offenders. It also endorses the key goals, as set out by the Department, of strengthening a partnership approach to cutting the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads by at least a third by 2012; halting the biodiversity loss, as far as possible, by taking into account the effects of climate change in Northern Ireland by 2015; and compliance with the water framework directive to achieve good water quality by 2015.

The Committee also notes that there is no reference to the establishment of an environmental protection agency. The Committee recognises the cross-cutting nature of sustainable development and the role of all Departments in its implementation, believes that there is a specific role for the Department of the Environment in sustainable development and recommends that adequate and sufficient funds be provided to ensure the delivery of the key goals. The Committee acknowledges that the PSA annex to the Programme for Government addresses the cross-cutting issues and challenges across departmental boundaries, and that many of the outcomes are interdependent.

The Committee commented on some of the PSAs. On PSA 4, "Supporting Rural Businesses", we welcome the aim to increase the area of agricultural land in Northern Ireland covered by environmental-enhancement agreements to 50% by 2011.

In respect of PSA 14, on the promotion of safer roads, the Committee acknowledges that the statistics on the numbers of people killed or seriously injured on our roads are currently under review by the Department, and believes that more ambitious targets should be agreed. We took into account the recommendations of the report on Northern Ireland's road safety strategy, published on 9 November 2007.

In respect of PSA 17, which refers to rural infrastructure, the Committee noted and welcomed the target to ensure that rural issues are mainstreamed into all relevant Government policies and programmes, and would welcome sight of the proposed rural White Paper, when published.

In relation to PSA 20, which refers to improving public services, the Committee notes the objective to modernise and reform the local government sector. The Committee has already engaged with the Department and looks forward to further engagement on those matters. The Committee was briefed recently by the Department on the emerging-findings paper.

In respect of PSA 22, on the protection of our environment and reducing our carbon footprint, Committee members agreed — in response to questions from Arlene Foster, the Minister of the Environment — to sign up to the draft UK Climate

Change Bill as presented, but with a commitment to provide for Northern Ireland targets at a future point. The Committee also supported UK carbon-reduction targets as set out in the draft UK Bill, including an overall UK target of a 60% reduction by 2050, with a 26% to 32% reduction by 2020. The Committee welcomes the target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025 and to improve energy efficiency in homes, which is consistent with targets in the draft UK Climate Change Bill.

Committee members are content with the objectives to improve the quality and ecological status of the water environment and to take forward action to improve air quality and improve the condition of our monuments and listed buildings, including structures currently on the Northern Ireland buildings-at-risk register.

In relation to objective 5, the Committee has already stated that the issue of illegal dumping should be given a higher priority, and would support the inclusion of waste management as a key goal in the Programme for Government.

In relation to objective 8, the Committee notes the aim of delivering a modern, effective planning system, and the priority commitment to a fundamental overhaul of the planning system by 2011. However, Committee members are concerned that the proposed efficiency reductions set out in the draft Budget will impact on the delivery of a modern, effective planning system to meet the needs of the whole community and the economy, while protecting the environment. Committee members are also concerned that there may not be sufficient resources for the Planning Appeals Commission to deal with its backlogs. Concern was also expressed at how proposed efficiencies will be achieved, considering possible staffing cutbacks in the Department.

Furthermore, the Committee notes the target of ensuring that a fit-for-purpose suite of draft adopted development plans is in place by 2011, and is concerned that, in reality, that target may not be achievable. The Committee noted that judicial reviews have stalled that process in three major area plans. Nevertheless, the key concerns that have been expressed need to be taken into consideration.

In relation to PSA 23, which examines the management of the risk of flooding from rivers and the sea, although the Committee feels that there is a need to consider future planning in order to deliver sustainable flood-risk management policies, it recognises that there is a role for planning in the delivery of sustainable flood-risk management.

The Committee noted that the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland sets out a framework for the creation of a sustainable twenty-first-century infrastructure, and welcomed the cross-cutting

objectives in the strategy, particularly the environmental objective relating to investment in infrastructure to enhance and protect the environment, addressing key areas such as EU directives.

The Committee notes that £18 billion will be invested in the next 10 years to deliver essential infrastructure, with £5.5 billion invested in the next three years. It notes the framework for infrastructure investment in six pillars, and welcomes the environment pillar.

The Committee notes and welcomes the key goal of a new approach to waste management that is compliant with EU regulations and uses more sustainable technologies. It welcomes the inclusion of the need to invest in waste-management infrastructure to ensure compliance with EU regulations, both as a key goal and as a milestone in the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

With regard to local authorities' delivery of the waste management infrastructure, the Committee notes and welcomes the key milestone of supporting local authorities to deliver the waste management infrastructure by 2011.

The Committee noted and welcomed references to investment in our environment, such as nature reserves, monuments, archaeological sites, etc, to promote the enjoyment of our heritage, and acknowledges the goal of sustainable flood-risk management to meet the social, environmental and economic needs of the region. However, the Committee recognises that there is a role for planning in sustainable flood-risk management.

5.45 pm

For each issue, we recommend that there should be a clear indication of which Department will have the lead responsibility for the goals and milestones listed in the environment investment pillar. The Committee recommends that the Department of the Environment should take the lead on the waste management agenda.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Speaker and Members for their time and for listening.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy, and I congratulate those Members who have driven them forward.

The draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy signify a positive agenda for Northern Ireland. They contain ambitious targets, and such ambitions should be encouraged and aided by those in the House. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the Alliance Party has again exuded negativity in the Chamber. We have seen few meaty proposals from the members of that party — only the tired old rhetoric that we have been listening to for many years.

The first line of the draft Programme for Government states:

“We are entering a more optimistic and promising era.”

Perhaps, the Alliance Party might care to participate constructively in this new era.

Northern Ireland faces many challenges and, in order to make it the country that we all know it could be, placing economic growth at the core of the Programme for Government is a sensible approach. By aiding the Northern Ireland economy, we will reap the benefits for years to come. It will be the foundation stone on which many other building blocks will be placed.

The draft Programme for Government recognises the need to bolster economic innovation. To achieve that, the skills shortage in the Northern Ireland workforce must be addressed. As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I welcome that commitment. On a personal level, I welcome key goals such as 70% of school-leavers achieving five GCSEs at grades A* to C, and steps to encourage and promote adult literacy by 2015, which are moves in the right direction that will help to produce a highly-skilled workforce in Northern Ireland, ensure that indigenous companies meet their recruitment needs and attract overseas investment.

The draft investment strategy attempts to tackle the skills issue by committing substantial levels of funding. That demonstrates that the Executive mean business and are not just indulging in rhetoric. The draft investment strategy states that:

“Over the next 10 years, we will deliver a modern and sustainable schools estate with links to the further education estate across the region, better aligned to the needs of the population and the skills required by tomorrow’s economy.”

The crux of the matter is that we must be responsive to the needs of employers by creating a workforce in Northern Ireland that has the skills to meet their demands. Those are ambitious goals; however, with the right attitude, determination and will, they are within the grasp of the Assembly and within the capabilities of the Northern Ireland population.

The draft investment strategy recognises the brain drain. Given that almost 30% of students in Northern Ireland leave to continue their education elsewhere, we must be proactive to ensure that the conditions are right to entice people to stay in order to further their education. We cannot continue to lose so many of our young people — many of whom never return.

The further commitment to our universities as demonstrated by complementing investment to support teaching and research infrastructure is positive. The Executive has also stated that a key goal is to increase the number of graduate and post-graduate students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects by 25% by 2015.

The special emphasis on bringing those from disadvantaged communities into further and higher education is particularly encouraging.

Those examples of good practice are espoused by the Programme for Government. Let us work to ensure that we reach those goals, rather than engaging in negativity and defeatism from day one. I hope that the Alliance Party and some members of the UUP and SDLP will take that challenge to heart.

By investing more than £500 million in the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities by 2012, the Executive have committed to an initiative that I hope will greatly benefit my constituency of South Belfast. Devolution must deliver in communities such as the Village, Sandy Row and Taughmonagh to improve people’s standard of living. That can be aided by the commitment to neighbourhood renewal, but hand in hand with that must come the investment in social housing that is required to meet the needs of our constituents. That problem must be addressed in my constituency of South Belfast.

The draft Programme for Government and investment strategy are good news for Northern Ireland plc and for the people of Northern Ireland. Unlike the previous Programme for Government, which was championed by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, this programme will bring about real change to the lives of the people, who have put us in a position of great responsibility. Unlike the previous Programme for Government, this one will benefit from real leadership at the top and will build a better future. If we fail, we can be judged on that failure; however, I am confident that this is a positive first step on a long road. The House should unite behind the Programme for Government and investment strategy and commit its energy to their delivery.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government, which is out for consultation. Like other Members, I see issues that I wish to tease out and commitments that I would like to be added, but those are issues for the Assembly to consider in the weeks and months ahead.

I will mention some matters that are specific to my constituency of South Belfast. Mr Spratt mentioned his representation of that constituency. I accept that, although I will talk about my constituency, some of the issues affect all constituencies and cause concern to all Members.

In the coming consultation period, I wish to tease out the issues of diversity; regeneration of housing; planning and traffic management; education; and youth provision. Some of the issues will be dealt with under the changes to local government, and the Programme

for Government has already made commitments to them, such as an overhaul of planning and investment in regenerating disadvantaged communities, as has already been mentioned. I look forward to seeing progress on those matters.

I have heard much criticism of good relations or what has been called the shared future. I am satisfied that the need to build an inclusive and fair society is encompassed by the Programme for Government.

Much criticism has been levelled against the Alliance Party, but its members have argued that there are no commitments on the need to promote good relations or to build a shared future in the Programme for Government. One paragraph of the document states:

“We must also continue our efforts to address divisions within our society. Progress has been made, but sectarianism, racism and intolerance are still too evident.”

It goes on to say that:

“it is imperative that we all embrace the opportunity to create a better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity.”

The core difficulty for the Alliance Party is that it finds it easier to deal with the old, direct rule style of shared future, rather than with the need for equality for all citizens.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maskey: Mr Ford can speak after me.

I will be involved in more discussions, and I want some of those matters to be teased out further.

I look forward to hearing the views in the next number of weeks of people from the ethnic minority communities to find out how they believe the matter of building a tolerant, fair and all-inclusive society can best be taken forward.

Dr Farry: The title of the document refers to “a better future”. I thank the Executive for clearing that up, because we were in some doubt for a moment. Has there ever been a woollier phrase than “a better future”? It stands in stark contrast to the phrase “a shared future” and all that that entails in bringing the people of Northern Ireland together and trying to overcome divisions.

It is difficult to come to the conclusion that the document will create a better future for Northern Ireland. The defensiveness of both the DUP and Sinn Féin Members who have spoken has been striking so far this afternoon. I was under the impression that both parties believed in democracy. Part of democracy is being able to criticise what the Government are proposing. Both parties seem to have difficulty accepting that what they are producing may be flawed.

The DUP and Sinn Féin need to be conscious that they cannot continue to dine out on what happened on 8 May 2007. As time passes, the people of Northern

Ireland are moving from merely being satisfied with a semblance of political stability to demanding real delivery from the devolved institutions.

Looking past all of the pats on the back, I have to say that there are grounds for real disappointment with both the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget. The Executive need to face up to that reality. Rather than simply laughing off criticism, or failing to engage and address the very real criticisms that not just the Alliance Party, but large chunks of civil society are raising, they need to face up to what is being said. Denials will not wash with the people of Northern Ireland.

The most rational approach for preparing the draft Programme for Government would have been to analyse the main challenges facing Northern Ireland, the main opportunities to be exploited, and to work out the appropriate policies. Instead, we have a mere 17 pages. Either that reflects a total lack of ambition on the part of the Executive, or an inability to agree much beyond the lowest common denominator.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister would have us believe that, six months on from devolution, the draft Programme for Government should be treated as a good effort. However, there is no good reason why the wheels of Government should work any slower in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the world. The Government at Westminster and the new Administration in Scotland, for example, produce much more detailed programmes in a shorter time. Frankly, what we have before us could have been produced in a week, or even a day. Let us not forget that the Executive parties have had special advisers — funded by the taxpayer — for the best part of a year for the explicit purpose of devising a Programme for Government.

The draft Programme for Government is heavy on platitudes, but there is little detail regarding how the Executive intend to deliver Northern Ireland to the promised land. I make no apologies for the Alliance Party being ambitious for Northern Ireland. We are optimistic, and we believe that the people of Northern Ireland have great potential. However, the policies need to be in place to exploit that potential to the full.

The real story of the draft Programme for Government lies in what is missing. My comments will give the DUP and Sinn Féin Members some flavour of what the Alliance Party would do if we had the opportunity to be in Government. The critical strategy for creating a shared future has been binned. There is an absence of any commitment in key areas such as development of integrated education and the promotion of mixed housing. For most people, the human, social, economic and financial costs of the divisions in Northern Ireland are unsustainable.

The direct rule Administration, for all their faults, belatedly woke up to the fundamental challenges when they produced their shared future strategy. However, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister argue that their friendship is all the shared future that Northern Ireland requires. The failure to engage with the shared future agenda ranges from ignoring it in the draft Programme for Government — there are no commitments, just flowery language — to failing to embed it in the public service agreements.

6.00 pm

Among 31 cross-cutting themes, “good relations” is nowhere to be found; therefore, it will remain in the silo of OFMDFM and no pressure or challenge will be levied against any Department or agency about their responsibility to promote sharing over separation. The Deloitte Touche report ‘The Cost of Division: A Shared Future Strategy’, which was commissioned by OFMDFM, has been put on the shelf and will not be looked at.

The draft Programme for Government is being sold as a recipe for economic development. However, it is clear that the deep divisions in Northern Ireland have a major impact on our economy and we cannot have economic change without addressing those divisions. It is time that we woke up to that fundamental reality.

The creation of a single equality act seems to have disappeared. I understood that that was a major aim of Sinn Féin, but clearly that party has given up and bowed the knee to the DUP.

Before the Assembly election, all parties made commitments in their manifestos to deliver free personal care for the elderly. I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made a bid for it, which was tenth on his list of bids, but it is nowhere to be found in the draft Programme for Government. Similarly, all parties promised to make dealing with mental health a much greater priority. Again, the draft Programme for Government says little on that subject.

Nothing is being said about the huge challenges, that the public is aware of, relating to sustainable schools and an agreed alternative to the 11-plus. Are those simply to be washed away and forgotten about?

Protecting the environment is the greatest political challenge on the planet; yet the document is almost silent on environmental issues. Where are the commitments to marine conservation and to an environmental protection agency? Critically, an indication must be given on how Northern Ireland will play its part in combating climate change — the major challenge facing us all. Members have referred to the target of a 60% reduction in carbon emissions: they should note that some of our devolved partners in the

UK are talking of an 80% reduction. Let us get serious about the issue.

The multi-sports stadium has been reduced to a mere mention in the small print of the PSAs. That, again, is something that is very much in the public eye: yet there is no reference to such a high-profile project in either the draft Programme for Government or the draft investment strategy. I wonder what conclusions we are to draw from that.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of projects in the draft investment strategy are being re-announced by the Administration. Some originate as far back as 2001. There is little that is new in the draft investment strategy: all we are doing is announcing the same stuff, over and over again — another trick the Executive seems to have learnt from Gordon Brown.

Let us look at transport funding. In the rest of the UK, well over 60% of investment goes into public transport. Here, it is the opposite: in the short term — the first three years — 60% of the money will be spent on roads, while over the 10-year lifespan of the investment strategy, 80% of investment will be in roads with a mere 20% for public transport. How Belfast is to become a modern, twenty-first century city on that type of investment, I am not entirely sure. What about the implications for the planet of such a heavy investment in roads? Where is the vision in that respect?

The major plank of this draft Programme for Government is the economy, but I do not think that the figures add up. There is much flowery, aspirational language about how many jobs will be created and how a step-change in the Northern Ireland economy will be made. However, when you look at the fine print, all you will see is aspiration. There is no joined-up thinking: the dots cannot be joined up in order to get from A to B, or to show how policies will change. The Executive seem quite satisfied to accept the situation in which Northern Ireland remains a dependent part of the UK. We are not prepared to challenge the orthodoxy that the UK economy is based around London and the south-east of England. Northern Ireland needs to become a lot more sustainable: financially, environmentally, economically and socially. I see no effective challenge to the status quo coming from the Executive.

In the absence of the Varney report, Northern Ireland is dependent upon the same four economic drivers that were identified in the failed draft regional economic strategy in January 2007. All we are doing is more of the same. There is an absence of creative thinking on how we will change Northern Ireland society.

There are major flaws in the Programme for Government. The Alliance Party does not oppose merely for the sake of opposing, but when there are documents that are genuinely flawed, we owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to point out the criticisms

that we have identified, and that a vast range of organisations have also identified.

The document needs serious reform, and to be beefed up significantly. The last devolved Executive, for all its faults, produced a Programme for Government of 144 pages.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: The last contribution is all the more reason why we are glad that the Alliance Party is not on the Executive, and does not have the electoral mandate to speak on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the strategic direction of the Programme for Government. It is vital for the future of Northern Ireland that we concentrate on developing our economy. A strong economy will help all aspects of our society, including our Health Service and our education system, by creating and generating greater wealth. Although I recognise that the current political arrangements are not perfect, and would not be my first choice for delivering such a Programme for Government, surely it is better for those who once encouraged and engaged in the destruction of Northern Ireland's economy to be forced and harnessed into developing and delivering an economy for which they are accountable, and which is vibrant and for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom.

I listened to a contribution earlier from Mrs Kelly, who said that the process was not accountable. The reason that the DUP negotiated for the last number of years was to make this House and the institutions accountable. The problem that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists have is that they are outside the tent and cannot grasp the fact that there is accountability. The previous arrangements failed, and were incapable of delivery. Is it not strange that we now hear a chorus from the Ulster Unionist Party urging a move away from a mandatory coalition, when it was they who failed to deliver on such arrangements? The DUP is picking up the pieces of their failures. Of course, that is nothing new in the politics of Northern Ireland.

As well as aiming to halve the private-sector productivity gap with the UK average, excluding the greater south east, by 2015, the draft Programme for Government has 10 other key goals that are aimed at developing our local economy, which include, among others: increasing the employment rate; supporting exporters; securing inward investment; and improving people skills. Surely the recent events in my constituency of North Antrim, with the devastating news about Reid Transport and the confirmation at the weekend of the closure of Tyco Healthcare Manufacturing in Ballymoney, underline the gravity of the task that faces us.

In respect of economic development, the key goal is to halve the private-sector productivity gap with the UK average, excluding the greater south east, by 2015. Currently, excluding the greater south east area, Northern Ireland is ranked last of the nine remaining UK regions. Private-sector productivity in Northern Ireland is 94% of the UK average. Without reaching the goal of halving the private-sector productivity gap, Northern Ireland will continue to have the lowest private-sector productivity of the nine regions, with private sector productivity decreasing to only 92.5% of the UK average.

However, by achieving that goal by 2015, productivity in the private sector will increase to 97% of the UK average, excluding the greater south east, and Northern Ireland will no longer be ranked last of the remaining nine regions. That is an ambitious goal, but one that reflects a realistic position, which also gives due regard to the limited policy levers available to the Northern Ireland Executive. The Northern Ireland economy is measured relative to the UK, excluding the greater south east of England, encompassing London and the surrounding regions, which is responsible for over 40% of the total UK output, from regional comparisons.

Inclusion of those regions would skew the relative data. DETI, DEL, the Department of Education and DARD are the key Departments with a strategic role to play in promoting economic growth in Northern Ireland. Those Departments have all been allocated increases in the recurrent expenditure budget that is in excess of the average increase of 3.6% in total planned spend over the period. Those are facts and not some woolly aspirational writing on a piece of paper. I am surprised that the Alliance Party is worried that we are now not producing more paper. I thought that that party was environmentally friendly.

Here are the facts. The average increases over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 are: 4.8% for DETI; 3.9% for DEL; 4.3% for the Department of Education; and 6.5% for DARD. I have grave concerns about the way in which the education budget will be handled during the current Assembly's mandate, despite its 4.3% increase in funding. The recent announcement by the Minister of Education about the amalgamation of two schools in Ahoghill, in my constituency, demonstrates her inability to be trusted with making the right decisions for our children. She is to be trusted as much as 'Blue Peter' is when naming a cat.

That decision — and it is a serious point that we make — will cost the North Eastern Education and Library Board, not the Department of Education, £500,000. We now understand that that decision is under review. Why did the Minister make that decision in the first place? Clearly, it was made on the basis of political expediency, without any recourse to the financial advice that she had been given by the North

Eastern Education and Library Board. There is now a situation in which six children in one school — which we were told was going to be amalgamated with another school — are being taught by two teachers. That is a deplorable situation, which the Minister of Education must address urgently. However, if it is addressed as urgently as the classroom assistants' dispute and the introduction of proposals for academic selection, we will have to wait for more and more time to be given.

The Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionist Party have a problem in that, when one brings the facts and criticises, they are our partners and are in Government. The Ulster Unionist Party is in Government and so would the Alliance Party be if enough people had voted for it. The Ulster Unionist Party likes to play Pontius Pilate politics, washing its hands of responsibility and claiming that it is always someone else's fault. We will not allow that party to delude itself.

Despite those genuine concerns about specific issues on the way in which we are governed, Northern Ireland has benefited. When the situation is compared with direct rule, there is benefit to be derived from the devolved arrangements. For instance, there was the additional money for the victims of flooding and the settlement of the nurses' pay award — a decision that the Minister was able to take. There is the decision over an Irish language Act — which we are glad not to have — which was made by an Executive Minister. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party remains silent on that issue. Those have all been positive results of devolution.

There are also several outstanding important matters, but I do not have the time to mention all of them. We must have a settlement on the issue of parading; it must be resolved. The so-called army council must disappear. We must bring the RPA to a conclusion in which the unionists who live west of the Bann do not feel utterly deserted. Victims and survivors of the Troubles must be kept to the fore, and republicans must show wholehearted commitment to the issue of policing, over a period of time, and not make the partial excuses that were witnessed in places such as the Markets area of Belfast, where a Member of the House made disgraceful comments about a DPP (District Policing Partnership) meeting that did not take place. We must reconfigure the entire equality agenda. One outstanding issue, which for many years was seriously addressed only by my party, is the inherent weakness of the form of Government that is currently in place in the Assembly.

Remember, it was the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP who harnessed us to d'Hondt and the current mandatory coalition arrangements. Now they want to move out of a mandatory coalition —

6.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: No. Now they do not want d'Hondt, for the simple reason that they cannot stick the heat that they are under, and they cannot deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP will deliver, and will do so for the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I have had the opportunity to address many important issues as a member of the Committee for the Environment, but I speak today as an MLA for Newry and Armagh.

The fundamental overhaul of the planning system by 2011 should be implemented sooner rather than later in order to alleviate the concerns of rural communities. I want to address the issues raised by draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 14, and I know that the Minister of the Environment has agreed to produce a new draft PPS 14 within six months. I hope that the Minister will give serious consideration to that new draft policy, and Members will make their contribution. The draft area plans are also due a serious review, but I welcome the proposed overhaul of the planning system.

The Committee has agreed to sign up to the UK carbon footprint-reduction target of 60%, but even Gordon Brown said recently that that is not enough, and that the target could be increased to 80%. I welcome that, but the problem must be tackled on an all-Ireland basis. Those of us who live in rural border areas are faced with the serious issue of illegal waste dumping. That situation must be addressed, because people in rural areas are paying the price of that illegal dumping.

Mr Storey: Close the border.

Mr Boylan: The Member got to write his book earlier. Give me the opportunity to speak — good man yourself.

The target to reduce landfills by 2011 is welcome, but we must get it right. The proper treatment of waste, both mechanical and biological, in a way that benefits the environment and inhibits climate change, must be a priority for all.

I welcome the Minister's ongoing commitment to a review of the Department's road safety strategy, but continued education is required to ensure that targets for reducing road fatalities are met, particularly at school level, and in the 17- to 24-year-old age bracket, which, sadly, seems to claim the most victims. We must take the opportunity to look at this problem on an all-island basis, given the number of road deaths in the border areas.

Unfortunately, there is no mention of an independent environmental protection agency in the draft Programme

for Government. That should be a fundamental priority in any future plans to protect and enhance the environment.

I welcome the key goals that have been stated in relation to tourism, and on a purely parochial note, I wish to note that the Armagh area has a lot of potential. However, something must be done about the roads infrastructure in the area, particularly the Armagh link road and I will speak to the Minister about that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and welcome the opportunity to address these issues in more detail in the coming months. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Ms Purvis: The theme of my contribution to the debate on the draft Programme for Government is economic justice. The reasons for that are simple. First, Bill Clinton was right to remind everyone that the answer to every question, according to the famous 1992 campaign poster on his war room wall was “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Secondly, a strong economy creates wealth not only for entrepreneurs and business owners, but for also workers. Through taxation, the state can distribute resources to those who would not otherwise benefit.

Thirdly, the Progressive Unionist Party supports the role of the state. We recognise that the market can help the state in a creative, three-legged stool, with the state, the market and the community working in partnership for mutual benefit.

My party supports the principle of a strong economy; let no one suggest that we are soft on the economy or soft on the causes of the economy. We believe in progressive economic development for the many, not the few, in the interests of those whose labour has been sold, who work for a living and who deserve better from the state and from the Executive, in particular.

Economic justice is my theme today, but the Programme for Government is neither truly economic, nor is it just. It is unfair, unprincipled and will prove wholly ineffective. The programme is not truly economic, because the Administration has not negotiated the real levers of power to allow it to claim to run an economy. It is pretending. Emperor Paisley has no clothes and Chancellor Robinson enjoys no taxation powers, no fiscal powers, no real economic powers to lead and direct the economy. There is a need for those powers, for real devolution, for real control, but the negotiation skills of the DUP and Sinn Féin were found wanting.

There has been plenty of hot air about a huge peace dividend and much bluster about the size of Gordon Brown’s cheque. However, as I predicted a long time ago, nothing was delivered; however, we will not cry over spilt milk.

Is the Programme for Government just? I fear not. It is little wonder that businesses are queuing up to commend the DUP for swallowing their agenda hook, line and sinker. The shallow shift for the economy in this programme is headline-grabbing but completely unjust. Where is the vision to which economic growth will be directed? I will tell you: it will go to that great cash machine for businesses and bosses in Bedford Street — Invest NI. Nowhere in the Programme for Government can I see a vision that mentions how we share Northern Ireland, how we tackle division and neglect, how we unite our communities and how we build a new society together. Mr Storey mentioned many of the outstanding issues. However, all I see is subsidy to businesses and snubs to those who work for a living in our forgotten communities.

Is the Programme for Government unfair? Yes, it certainly is. I will give the House some examples of that unfairness. Chancellor Robinson has made the ludicrous decision to maintain the blanket subsidy to manufacturing companies by continuing rates relief. How will that be targeted and means-tested? There seems to be an insistence on means-testing people for welfare benefits, but not when fat cats get benefits. Corporate welfare seems to be alive and well in “Robinsonland”.

Is the Programme for Government unprincipled? Yes, the Progressive Unionist Party believes so. Does it come from collective Cabinet discussion and agreement? Clearly, it does not. Does it come from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister as joint heads of our Administration? Again, clearly it does not. Martin McGuinness must have been taking an afternoon nap when the draft Programme for Government was being agreed. There is not an ounce of Sinn Féin policy in it — not a bullet point. Where is the vaunted equality agenda? It is not mentioned. The redistribution of wealth has been reversed. Where is targeting social need? It is absent without leave. Five Ministers missing in action — what a let-down.

Will this Programme for Government turn out to be ineffective? Undoubtedly. The appallingly weak understanding of how the economy works runs through this programme like a virus.

First, if the housing budget is slashed, more people will be in housing need. More people will join the waiting lists, more will remain in the extortionate rented sector, and more will be homeless. All those moral and political priorities have been shirked. Even more amazingly, they do not seem to get it; if the Minister for Social Development is forced to slash the housing budget, the backbone of the economy — the small business sector — is immediately condemned to join the dole queues. If there is no capital spending, no builders will be needed. If there is no housing refurbishment programme, no plumbers will be needed. If there

is no heating replacement programme, there will be no central-heating engineers, fewer gas connections, and so on down the food chain. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Members, please take your ease for a few seconds. *[Interruption.]*

Ms Purvis, please continue.

Some Members: Time.

Ms Purvis: I was just thinking that some Members will go to any lengths to get me off my feet.

This is not a wealthy food chain. It comprises people who are hungry for every job, the lean and efficient small businesses of my constituency — and Minister Robinson's. Let me remind him of those 800 people on the waiting list for the warm homes scheme in East Belfast; the pensioners and single parents, the people with disabilities and the low-paid — my voters and Mr Robinson's. Are they consigned to wait forever while big business gets cash withdrawals from Mr Robinson's party colleague, Minister Dodds from "DETI-land"? Or should that be Disneyland, with unreal claims, cartoon characters, lots of bright orange colours, but little substance, no delivery and no answers to hard questions. So much for tackling fuel poverty.

Who will benefit from this Programme for Government? It will not be the voters, the hard-working or immigrants, who do so many important jobs and bring so much to our developing new society. It will not even be the DUP and Sinn Féin. The voters are too clever to be taken in by this delusion. I wish that I could be a fly on the wall at the next Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis, as party members ask how Sinn Féin can have repeated the colossal error that it committed in the Southern elections earlier in the year. They will take the party apart for letting the DUP walk all over it on public-private partnerships, less Government and equality issues.

As for the SDLP, its members may regret going into Government. *[Interruption.]*

What have they achieved in Government? Please tell us. They have been rolled over. I am sure that I will welcome them to these Opposition Benches soon enough, just like Reg and Michael.

I will tell Members who will benefit from this Programme for Government — big business. The already rich, those who have yachts — rather than the have-nots — those who build roads, pollute the environment, drive big cars and farm big fields. There is precious little economic justice in this draft Programme for Government, and I shall be opposing it.

Mr Moutray: Since devolution, we have reached many milestones in this Assembly. Without doubt, the two documents under debate today are momentous

documents of which the Executive and the House can be proud.

The Assembly can bask in a sense of satisfaction at the benefits and prosperity that the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy can bring to the Province. Those documents will undoubtedly instil in locally elected representatives a duty to carry out their mandate to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. The contents of both documents will enable the Government of Northern Ireland to be placed in the hands of local politicians who are undoubtedly more aware of local needs. I want to place on record my party's support for those complex but practical and well-balanced documents. They secure Northern Ireland's economic and social future. I commend the Executive for delivering those documents within a limited time frame, and particularly their inclusion of a wide range of local issues. That demonstrates the Executive's long-term interest in the Province and, indeed, in our constituents.

Unlike that of the previous Administration, 'Building a Better Future — Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011' includes clear and measurable targets. In their consideration of the programme, Members will note that the recurrent theme is sustainable business and economic growth, which will provide opportunities and the means to reduce poverty, increase wealth, health, well-being and will enhance the overall quality of life in the Province.

6.30 pm

The clear economic focus of the draft Programme for Government is welcome. The previous Administration were hallmarked by an almost total absence of focus toward building a strong and prosperous economy. As I will make clear in my speech, I do not suggest that social issues should be sidelined; however, if the Assembly wants to build a more peaceful society, economic prosperity is an important factor in the achievement of that aim. Sadly, for the people of Northern Ireland, the previous Programme for Government overlooked the economy. Due to the absence of such economic focus, the challenges that the Assembly faces have been multiplied. In the previous Administration, the Ulster Unionist Party allowed the SDLP to push its socialist agenda at the expense of the economy. Now, the Assembly must deal with the consequences.

The draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy also demonstrate the sea change that has taken place in Northern Ireland. Once, republicans were committed to bombing businesses and stopping economic growth in the Province; now, it is hoped that they are committed to building economic growth. Only the fullness of time will tell if that is the case.

The emphasis on growing the private sector is a welcome plan that will increase employment and

financial well-being in society. The Executive's commitment to create the conditions in which enterprise can flourish will create an innovative and vibrant Province. Everyone in Northern Ireland will benefit from such investments. For example, the Executive's intention is to deliver more than 6,500 new jobs by 2011 and to ensure that at least 75% of those jobs will provide salaries that are above the local private-sector average. The repercussions of that will be investment in infrastructure that will drive forward economic enhancement, social transformation and environmental improvement, which will create a high quality of life.

The focus on social inclusion will ensure that the most vulnerable in society are protected and cared for. That should be the fundamental aim of any Government. In addition, there is a focus on various groups in society; for example, children. Often, we wonder what children stand to gain. The programme will support young people to reach their full potential and to become more independent, which will result in their becoming well-adjusted adults. The draft Programme for Government rightly aims to eradicate child poverty; improve educational outcomes; ensure that children are cared for, that they can live safely and be protected from abuse. Does society not need all of that to happen? The elderly are also provided for in the programme, which ensures that they are not isolated. Can the Assembly not endorse those plans and ensure that it is united to provide a better future for all constituents?

When Members scrutinise the draft Programme for Government, they can see that its entire content is underpinned by equality and good relations. That is reflected in its priority to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being. In line with that, Members must be committed to take action in order to deal with key differentials that exist in society and ensure that everyone receives the opportunity to contribute and benefit from a better future.

The draft investment strategy must be noted for its contents and ability to underpin one of the main priorities in the draft Programme for Government. The priority to invest to build our infrastructure is extremely important. For instance, the improvement of social and affordable housing, health and care facilities, and the need for better roads, modern information, communication links and educational facilities are essential for the health and well-being of our constituents. The House must address those issues and many others that have been brought about by many years of the Troubles and direct rule. Members will see upon scrutiny that the draft investment strategy will enable such tasks to be tackled and allow the establishment of a modern infrastructure. Such improvements will assist business growth, tackle social and economic inequalities and improve the quality of life for everyone.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No, I will not. I hear enough of the Member in another place; I will certainly not give way tonight.

The investment of £5.6 billion in new infrastructure over the next three years offers an unprecedented opportunity. No investment of that scale has ever taken place in Northern Ireland. The draft investment strategy also offers the potential to invest more than £18 billion in the next ten years. That will benefit everyone in Northern Ireland, and it will be particularly focused on such areas as roads, public transport, schools, youth services, regeneration, housing, water and sewerage reforms and enterprise and innovation.

Such draft programmes are a far cry from what was delivered by direct rule. I am sure that I do not need to remind Members of the repercussions of direct rule. The draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy have been appropriately named by the Executive — 'Building a Better Future'. Upon analysis of them, we can say without doubt that they do exactly what it says on the tin. This is our chance to govern on local issues and to bring about more beneficial and positive changes and to rubberstamp them with the stamp of approval — "Made in Northern Ireland".

Mr B McCrea: At this time of the evening, it is sometimes hard to speak without covering ground that has been covered by others. For that reason, I commend Dawn Purvis for her thoughtful speech, which was no less powerful for having been delivered with soft words. I share her concern about the lack of focus on those in society who need it most. There is a clear lack of resources, and there was a failure to get the financial package that we were promised. Some Members present repeatedly said that there was no point in having an Executive unless we had the financial package to do it justice. We now reap the rewards of that failure.

Some Members on the opposite Benches talked about equality. However, I am not persuaded by equality as a strategy, because it seems to be a dumbing-down measure. The crucial word for the Assembly should be "empowerment". We should empower our people to do better. I am surprised when Members talk about equality — and I do not want to go on about it too much — but an opportunity has been missed. Members talk here about wasted lives and wasted talents, but we have come a long way from those days, and we do not want to go back. It is hypocritical of some Members to lead with those examples.

The main challenge facing our Administration relates to social mobility. I am sure that Members present have read the recent report by the Department for Work and Pensions in another place. On reading that, they will have concluded that, following years of investment in social programmes and comprehensive education, among other things, social mobility has

ground to a halt in Great Britain. One might ask why that has happened, but it is linked into such things as the problems with housing, lack of attainment in skills, lack of confidence and lack of opportunity. Those are the issues that we must tackle, and they should be on the top of the Assembly's priority list.

One of the main ways to tackle such issues is through education.

Literacy and numeracy are major education issues — and I must commend many of the Members who are here today on the immeasurable improvement in their reading skills since I first heard them speak. They are all doing well, but resources should be going to the 25% of the population who are unable to attain even basic levels of reading, writing and numeracy.

Where in the draft Programme for Government is there a proposal to tackle problems in early-years education or the failure of parenting? It is difficult for children to go through school without support from home, and a way must be found to invest in that area. Has any attempt been made to tackle the pupil/teacher ratio, which is fundamental to raising educational standards and central to allowing people to escape from poverty?

Members have talked about academic selection. If there is to be a greater focus on those in most need, how can that be achieved without some form of selection, and how can resources be delivered to them? One size does not fit all: there must be some form of selection, and there must be some form of targeting those most in need.

It was strange to hear Members argue that it was a terrible shame that there would not be a single all-embodying health authority. Other Members, who are not here at the moment, said that they were unsure about the establishment of an education and skills authority, because it would be the largest educational establishment in Western Europe. Where are the economies of scale that can make a real impact? Why do some Members pursue such a contradictory argument?

Without an economy that enables people to use their skills, education is simply a recipe for migration: it is a conveyor belt carrying people out of Northern Ireland, and we cannot afford to lose those people. Wages here are only 80% of those in the rest of the UK, because the majority of women take low-paid part-time work in environments that allow no prospect of advancement. People talk about level-one and level-two jobs, but how can people move into level-two cleaning or level-two shelf-stacking?

There is a target to increase the number of economically active people in Northern Ireland from 70% to 75%, but other parts of the UK are aiming for 80%. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report states that

120,000 new jobs are required for the yearly cohort and to increase the number of economically active people. If the creation of 6,500 jobs is considered in that context, is the issue really being tackled?

People talk to me about productivity, and Mervyn Storey gave me a good lecture on the subject. Let him explain to me how to increase productivity when Northern Ireland is losing well-paid manufacturing jobs, with a GVA of £49,000, and is replacing them with part-time jobs in tourism and retail, with a GVA of £12,000. Productivity has been going in the wrong direction for years, and I see nothing in the draft Programme for Government to tackle that.

People have not got their heads around the fact that Northern Ireland's one competitive advantage is its educational attainment, for which it is famous throughout the world. Why are we not investing more in higher education? Why do we not capitalise on Queen's University or the University of Ulster by increasing the number of students who achieve PhDs?

Some 40% of those who are employed in the manufacturing sector are guest workers, and they may not be here for much longer.

Mr P Robinson: The Member started off by lauding the Member for East Belfast Dawn Purvis, who argued that there should not have been a freeze on industrial rating at 30%. Given that Mr McCrea is an Ulster Unionist, it is interesting that he felt it worth applauding her remarks. I wonder whether he is in denial and does not recognise that his party is in a four-party coalition. Despite all the points that he raised during the debate, his party did not suggest an amendment to a single issue.

6.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: I did the Member the courtesy of taking his intervention, which is a courtesy that is not often given to me. I will deal with those issues. I said that Dawn Purvis raised some important questions — I did not agree with everything that she said. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will recognise that I commended his attitude to, and decision on, industrial derating.

The Programme for Government lacks ambition and resources — there are not sufficient resources to do what is required. The Minister of Finance and Personnel promised that there would be £1 billion, and that it would not be worth going into an Executive without it. We did not get that £1 billion, which means that older people will now have difficulty getting respite as they will not get into nursing homes. We will have difficulty providing for children and mothers: there will be no budget for the early years; no budget for parenting; no budget for reducing the pupil-teacher ratio; and no budget for dealing with the oversupply of teachers. The list goes on.

If we are going to genuinely advance a Government in Northern Ireland, Members must get serious and start listening to people. Government is not about telling people what to do when they are needed, and when they are not, forget it. Members must find a way of prioritising the issues that we have to deal with — if we do that, we will be successful.

I will deal with the Barnett formula tomorrow, because it is fundamental to the inequities in health.

Mr O’Loan: Earlier in the debate, Mr Sammy Wilson questioned the right of any Member from a party with a Minister in the Executive to speak in this debate at all, or to seek any change in the Programme for Government and its Budget. That was strange. I wondered why he took the trouble of coming to the Chamber to listen to himself speak. However, he did not stay long, so maybe he was wise enough.

There is considerable substance in the Programme for Government; whether it can all be realised remains to be seen. Together, the draft Programme for Government, the draft investment strategy and the public service agreement framework present a substantial programme. I will confine my comments to the content of the programme, as there will be a further opportunity to discuss budgetary elements. However, the two are intimately linked. In particular, concerns about the deliverability of elements of the programme relate to the availability of the necessary budget.

Like any reasonable person, I endorse the principles and key priorities of the Programme for Government, with one important proviso. Reading the documents, one would hardly know that this society is emerging from nearly 40 years of intense conflict. Many died or are seriously scarred by that bitter period. The activities of some of those centrally involved in the events of those years have built up deep wells of resentment. The forces that gave rise to that period of violence are still present in our society, although there is no doubt that political agreement — which appears to have been achieved at last — has made a huge difference to public perceptions across the board.

It is that change in the public view that has mandated political leaders to make decisive changes. Thus, with only a few exceptions, unionists have accepted that they must treat their nationalist neighbours as equals and that — in their own interests as much as anything else — they must engage with the whole island in a way that they had previously rejected. Similarly, republicanism has had to recognise the futility of physical force. What a pity that such harm was done before those two major, and inevitable, shifts took place. They have now happened, but Members should not forget that we still have a fragile society in which to develop broad social and economic progress. That

requires a particular response in the Programme for Government, but it is not adequately expressed there.

Yes, the SLDP believes — as John Hume called on all to do — that by working the common ground of responding to economic and social needs we can come together. However, I have no doubt that we must do specific work to bind together a fractured society. I find that context and response largely missing from the programme. I wonder whether that obvious omission is a reflection of the fundamentally different stance of the two parties in OFMDFM regarding the history of the last 40 years. It may suit those parties not to confront those realities, but it is not good enough for the rest of us.

I return to some positive aspects of the programme. We all want, as is stated:

“a prosperous, fair and inclusive society, supported by a vibrant and dynamic economy and a rich and sustainable environmental heritage.”

I support putting the growth of the economy at the heart of Executive activity. It is not that our public sector is fundamentally too big, but it is quite clear that our private sector is too small and too weak. We have far too many economically inactive people. There are serious gaps in the provision of the four economic drivers — skills, innovation, entrepreneurship and infrastructure. All of those demand to be tackled in a concerted way, and there are themes in the draft Programme for Government which do that.

Building the economy cannot and must not happen in isolation from wider social development. I referred earlier to the legacy of the Troubles. Part of that legacy is a weak economy, and part is a society where division is still a key attribute. For our economy to take off, we must pull together, and those historic divisions must be broken down.

There are other divisions too. Our society is far from equal in its distribution of wealth and the capacity to earn wealth. Too many children are born, not with a silver spoon in the mouth, but with a list of disadvantages caused by poverty, and a lack of family and community support that dog them from the outset and, in many cases, predetermine their personal educational and economic future. For those reasons, the test of a Programme for Government, here and now, is whether it has a coherent plan to reconstruct our economy while healing our society and tackling disadvantage. Those three requirements are inextricably linked. Failure to achieve any one of them will severely damage the others.

The five priority areas in the draft Programme for Government, subject to the comments that have already been made, are well defined and have many valid key goals attached to them. Priority 1, the economy, has key goals which, if achieved, will radically improve the situation. Those include targets on productivity;

employment rates; new businesses, including foreign direct investment; tourism; and qualifications, including STEM subjects. However, there is not much visible indication of how those will be achieved. The PSAs provide some detail, but without clear action points it is hard to assess them. Nobody needs a wish list; the responsibility is on OFMDFM and the Executive to deliver.

Priority 2 of the draft Programme for Government deals with tolerance, inclusion and health. It is striking that the short paragraph on addressing divisions is high on rhetoric but low on specifics, with no key goals at all for that area. That must be changed, and we must hear from OFMDFM that it can be explicit and concerted in its vision of a shared future.

There is good and challenging content on reducing disadvantage, particularly on child poverty. There are valuable promises on health, although more can be said on that during the Budget debate. At last, progress is being made on road deaths. This year is two thirds through and deaths are running at three quarters of the figure for the two previous years. The target that is set out in the draft Programme for Government should be reduced further if that is sustained.

There are some serious environmental targets in priority 3, but there would be more credibility in those if an independent environmental protection agency were to be announced. Effective strategic management of waste by DOE is long overdue, as is substantial reduction of carbon emissions. We must see substance behind the phrase “improve energy efficiency” with regard to homes, including much higher building standards and full support for the warm homes scheme. That will also be the subject of critical debate when the draft Budget is considered.

At long last, we seem to be getting to grips with our appalling infrastructure deficit, which is dealt with by priority 4. A sum of £5.6 billion over the next three years, and a total of £18 billion by 2018, will make a tangible difference. I welcome the £572 million that is to be spent on our roads over the Budget period as part of £3 billion on roads by 2018. Of course, I also welcome the promised investment of £1.4 billion by 2018 in social and affordable housing. However, even if all of that were spent on social housing, I could not square that figure, either in money or timing, with the need to build 10,000 social homes within five years.

The budget for housing is just not adequate, and I will say more about that in the debate on the draft Budget.

The theme of enhancing equality and efficiency throughout the public service, as expressed in priority 5, is vital and will provide a hard task for all Ministers. The 3% and 5% targets for efficiency savings, and the development of that issue more generally, is crucial.

The PFG refers to North/South and east-west linkages. I call on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to upgrade its treatment of North/South development. That is about more than co-operation, as it is termed in the document. We are one corner of an island, and the rest of the island has outstripped us in economic terms. Its rate of growth and increase in public spending are forecast to be still well ahead of ours for years to come.

I welcome the practical work on North/South matters from unionist parties now, but for the real progress that we vitally require, it needs to rise to a new level. We cannot afford not to plan so many matters on an all-island basis. Energy is an area that exemplifies that point. Let us apply that to planning for the island as a whole, including all infrastructure, as well as health provision, research, agriculture, inward investment and public transport. No one loses in that, and it is no obstacle to using east-west links, including those with Scotland, to our maximum advantage.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le fáilte a chur roimh an Chlár Rialtais agus ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi. I wish to make a number of observations about the Programme for Government and, in turn, the draft investment strategy, both of which I broadly welcome. I shall concentrate on two areas: the impact that the Programme for Government must make on balanced regional development and on the north west; and in particular, on the constituency of Foyle. The points I shall make about Foyle could no doubt be made for any other constituency.

I am very conscious that the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee has spoken and has brought the Committee's view on those documents to the debate, and there is no need to do a rerun of that, because he covered the broad points well.

The core of the Programme for Government is that all parts of the region must share in sustainable and economic growth, and we must strive to eliminate all forms of inequality. If that happens, we will build a better future based on fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity. All of that is very welcome, but that must now translate into action and deliver for those who, in the past, have been at the wrong end of a system that did not have fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity at the core of its policy programmes. As we move forward to ensure regional balance, there must be an acceptance that regional disparity did not take place in a vacuum, but was a direct result and consequence of deliberate policy.

I welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy to invest in, and build on, our infrastructure, and the recognition that there is a need to effectively tackle the major

deficiencies in areas such as roads, public transport, water and sewerage infrastructure. Many of those deficiencies are to be found west of the River Bann.

The infrastructural needs of the north west are well known, and they are vital to the necessary growth for job creation, investment and expansion of the education sector. I stress that the Executive should distil their targets down to the expected impact on the constituencies. For example, the target of 6,500 new jobs should have an appropriate target for each constituency. Derry, Strabane, Enniskillen and Larne all need jobs and are all of one mind: how does the Programme for Government and ISNI specifically intend to deliver?

The same can be said for transport, and the road and rail networks — jobs cannot go to Derry, or elsewhere, if the roads and rail networks remain as they are. Social exclusion and lack of mobility will remain a problem unless proper resources are allocated to rural transport, which is another objective of the Programme for Government.

The Minister for Regional Development has outlined his desire to tackle regional disparity, and the Budget should be resourced to make that possible. The Programme for Government and ISNI are the first positive steps in the process of a future built upon the principles of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity. That is not flowery language, as it was described by Stephen Farry, nor is it something that we will have to explain to our next Ard-Fheis.

7.00 pm

Dawn Purvis said that she wanted to be a fly on the wall at our next Ard-Fheis. She is welcome to come. Basil McCrea, who seems to have a habit of attending those things, can also come. I would also welcome the SDLP, but it will be having Ard-Fheiseanna of its own in the future, perhaps with Bertie Ahern as its new party leader.

I will refrain from inviting anyone on the opposite Benches to our next Ard-Fheis, lest they do not get invited to their own party conference. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I listened with interest to the comments of several Members. I heard much negativity from the Benches opposite and from those on my right-hand side. Where is their vision for the future of Northern Ireland?

Mr Storey: Where are their Members? Where is their party?

Mr Simpson: To be honest, I predicted that at about 7.00 pm they would all go like snow off a ditch.

Mr Storey: ‘Emmerdale’. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Simpson: Yes, ‘Emmerdale’ is about to start; I forgot about that. At 7.30 pm it will be ‘Coronation Street’.

Basil McCrea has returned to the Chamber.

There is great negativity, but, as my colleague Mr Storey pointed out, there have been increases across the Departments. The draft Programme for Government has a positive outlook.

The DUP was the first political party — and for several years the only political party — in Northern Ireland to identify key changes that were needed to our economy, and hence, by definition, to the political strategy that the Province needs to follow if we are to shape a prosperous future.

I am glad that where once there was opposition to the DUP’s arguments, there is now general acceptance of what were so long uniquely DUP principles. I am glad that when we engaged with representatives of the business community — the Federation of Small Businesses, the Confederation of British Industry, the Chamber of Commerce, and right across the spectrum — they all broadly welcomed this initiative.

Dawn Purvis referred to the jobs of ordinary working-class people. Many of the so-called working-class people that I have spoken to welcome the draft Programme for Government; they see prospects for the creation of new jobs in all sectors in the Province.

The draft Programme for Government states that:

“Our over-arching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come.”

It continues:

“To achieve this we need to pursue an innovative and productive economy and a fair society that promotes social inclusion, sustainable communities and personal health and well-being.”

I wholeheartedly support those ideals.

However, where this draft Programme for Government departs from previous visions for Northern Ireland is that the economy is now the top priority, but in a manner that is not undisciplined or unconnected with the other needs of society. That is a DUP position. Looking at the Assemblies of the Trimble-Mallon and the Trimble-Durkan years, this is not only the DUP’s position; it is territory marked out by the DUP long ago. I am pleased that others have begun to catch up.

My party’s efforts have forced that shift in attitude and direction.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: No, I will not. You have talked enough. *[Laughter.]* With the greatest of respect, Mr Speaker, I do not think we could handle much more. The Members should save it for his Committees.

Mr Storey: Save it for the Sinn Féin conference.

Mr Simpson: That is right. The draft Programme for Government represents a huge success for those people who want Northern Ireland to prosper and nurture a strong economy. The liberal agenda has been cast aside, and that is to be welcomed. The fact that Sinn Féin has signed up to the draft Programme for Government may cause some eyebrows to be raised. However, that is a matter for Sinn Féin.

I welcome the plans to grow the private sector in order to foster a SME-friendly environment. As the draft Programme for Government states:

“A successful economy is characterised by high productivity, a highly skilled and flexible workforce and employment growth.”

As well as increasing productivity and encouraging growth, we must have well-paid, high-skill jobs. In the light of recent job losses at places such as Seagate Technology, Tyco Healthcare and Reid Transport, that is all the more urgent.

The wealth and revenue that the Programme for Government creates will drive society forward and finance the rest of the Executive's and the Assembly's priorities. Alternatively, the failure to create that additional wealth and revenue will hold back those priorities and wound our people. I care about that. From recent comments, I wonder whether others in the House care as much as they say they do — or as much as they should.

The aim is to increase the employment rate from 70% to 75% by 2020. We look forward to securing inward-investment commitments that will create more than 6,500 new jobs, and to ensuring that at least three quarters of those jobs will come with salaries that are above the private-sector average. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McCrea cannot help himself from chirping in from the background, but we have listened to —

Mr Storey: His party signed up to it.

Mr Simpson: That is 100% right. Despite what his colleague behind him said a few moments ago, his party signed up to the draft Programme for Government. All of a sudden, the Member has gone quiet. That can only be good.

Further prosperity will depend on the ability to respond quickly to business prospects. There is now a challenge for businesses and entrepreneurs. The Assembly must promote a pro-business environment that supports entrepreneurs — people who are not afraid to take risks in order to succeed. That is what I did in my business life — I had to. I know the pressures and stresses of trying to grow a business from scratch. However, I also know the rewards that can be gained from taking such an approach.

Northern Ireland must have, and be known to have, a knowledge-based economy with a highly-skilled workforce. There must be investment in research and development, coupled with deliverable innovation.

The welcome that business leaders have given to the draft Programme for Government is encouraging. However, that welcome highlights the failures of others who appear to have put their fortunes above the future of the Province. In calling for the shift in approach that the draft Programme for Government signals, the DUP stood almost alone among other political voices. We are keen to get on with the job of making Northern Ireland a business, investment and tourism success story, and the draft Programme for Government will allow us to proceed along that road. I welcome it.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy.

However, I want to deal with the issue of housing — or perhaps I should say the lack of housing — which has been debated many times in the House and has received the support of all Members. I will try to be as brief as possible. The housing issue has brought statements of condemnation from all parties, and, if it is not tackled, will condemn people to spending years on waiting lists while they lie in hostels or, in many cases, on the streets.

The Housing Executive estimates that we need to build at least 2,000 houses a year. That is an under-estimation, especially if one considers that there are 36,000 people on the housing waiting list. In the first two quarters of this year alone, 10,000 people have declared themselves homeless. However, according to the draft Programme for Government, only £1.4 billion will be made available for housing between 2008 and 2018, and only 10,000 houses will be built in the next five years. If my calculations are correct, the budget works out at about £127 million a year over that period. That amount will build fewer than 800 houses a year, which will not allow us even to keep pace with the number of people who declare themselves homeless let alone deal with the housing crisis.

Will the First Minister tell the House whether the £1.4 billion outlined in the draft Programme for Government will definitely be committed to a newbuild programme, or is the document simply a wish list of things to do if the money is available? Will the First Minister take on board the serious underfunding of the sector? Does he agree that much more must be done?

The housing issue requires a programme that is properly costed and resourced. In Dublin, billions of euro have been made available to deal with housing, and, in England, billions of pounds have been made available to deal with the serious problems of social

housing supply and affordability. We must follow those examples.

Housing is a cross-cutting issue; it impacts on health, education and employment. I ask the First Minister to re-examine that section of the draft Programme for Government and deal realistically with the allocation of resources for housing. The sector needs at least £400 million for newbuild in the coming year and annual increases thereafter to keep pace with rising costs. Anything less will condemn those who are most in need to years of no prospect of owning their own home or being allocated social housing. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: It is a delight to be involved in the debate, and it is always good to listen and learn at the feet of the master, Mr McCrea. Lest I offend my colleagues from Mid Ulster or South Antrim, I should point out that I mean Basil McCrea. We have heard the usual exposition from the unofficial leader of the Opposition, which will set us on the right road.

We have this opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government. Unfortunately, we have heard the usual negative remarks from Alliance Party Members, who seem able only to carp from the sidelines. Their solution is a magical figure that they conjure up by calculating the cost of division. They seem to be able to use that as a bottomless pit of funding to cure all the ills in society, financial or otherwise.

I am reminded of its sister party, the Liberal Democrats, which, in the 1990s, consistently promised to put 1p on income tax. It was keen to spend that amount over and over again on every conceivable matter. Again, we have heard about the magic-bullet solution for Northern Ireland, and we have heard that, if only those changes could be made overnight, everything in our economy would be right.

To be fair to the Alliance Party, at least its position is consistent — it is consistently wrong. However, its position is slightly more coherent than that of the Ulster Unionist Party. It seems to be engaged in some type of hokey-cokey politics. Members from that party seem to think that they can close their eyes and let the world drift away, and they will no longer be part of the Executive.

Indeed, the Member for North Belfast Mr Cobain vehemently rejected the suggestion of them being involved in any way, shape or form, and seemed to be apoplectic at the suggestion that they were part of the coalition.

7.15 pm

Mr Basil McCrea, Mr Cobain and others may not want it this way, but, when the UUP opens its eyes it will find; that it is part of the Government; that it has agreed to the draft Programme for Government; and, indeed, that it cannot simply denounce parts of the

programme while being part of the Government. UUP Members cannot have their cake and eat it. Unfortunately, that lesson seems to have been lost on them.

Mr B McCrea: I could be wrong, but was there not a previous Administration in which DUP Ministers were half in and half out? Was that not a case of them having their cake and eating it?

Mr Weir: We were against the system at that stage, and we indicated that. *[Interruption.]*

The UUP went into the election on the basis that it would be in Government from day one, no matter what happened. However, its members now want to be in Government and in opposition; they do not know what they are involved in.

As regards inconsistency, Basil McCrea seems to be facing in two directions. He castigated the draft Programme for Government for not being business-friendly enough and for not creating enough jobs. However, on the other hand he seemed to say that he could support a lot of what the Member for East Belfast Dawn Purvis said, and, indeed, the far left agenda of the PUP, a party that still has as part of its constitution the old Labour constitution containing clause 4, and which would nationalise just about everything. I appreciate that the PUP, at least, has some intellectual and honest consistency.

However, I cannot work out whether Basil McCrea wants a more business-friendly Programme for Government, or whether he wants to hoist the red flag — as he does the red tie that he consistently wears — overthrow the Government and the middle classes and implement the kulak system that that entails.

We have a draft Programme for Government that is based on support for business and puts at its heart the growth of “a dynamic, innovative economy”. It was the failure by successive predecessors of the current Administration to grasp that nettle that is fundamentally at the heart of current economic problems.

The draft Programme for Government is clearly focused. There are some who criticised it when it was published for not being some sort of version of ‘War and Peace’ that goes on for thousands of pages. We have a document that is clearly focused and can deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

I serve on the Committee for the Environment, and I want to touch on a number of the issues that relate to that area. As was mentioned by one of the Members opposite, all Members should welcome the commitment that has been made to reduce road deaths. Many issues discussed in the Assembly are regarded as matters of life and death. However, few are so directly and literally matters of life and death as road deaths. I welcome the commitment to reduce overall road deaths, and, in

particular, the commitment to try and reduce child deaths on the roads.

I also welcome the commitment to proceed with the reform of local government in Northern Ireland. The review of public administration is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Many Members feel that there is still work to be done. Indeed, it has been acknowledged by the Minister of the Environment that the emerging findings are simply the initial stage in that regard. It is a challenge to Ministers across the board to ensure that there is proper delivery for local government. A system that can better deliver to the people at local level is vital.

As someone who has been involved in local government, I also strongly welcome the pledge to fundamentally overhaul the planning system by 2011. All Members, whether they represent an urban constituency, a rural constituency or somewhere that is a mixture between the two, will be aware of the fundamental problems that exist with the Planning Service. The review that will clearly lead to changes to PPS 14 is to be welcomed. Fundamentally, the Planning Service is in massive need of overhaul and reform.

In particular, there is a very strong economic dimension: one of the major barriers and disincentives to bringing new business into Northern Ireland is the creaking planning system. Businesses see the speed with which they can locate in other parts of the world and compare it to the long, drawn-out process here. That is something that we must tackle with alacrity.

A range of other matters connected with the Department of the Environment are worthy of note. The commitment to reduce landfill significantly, by creating a network of new waste treatment facilities at council level, will be of practical benefit to the environment and will have financial implications. That issue was heavily neglected under direct rule. If Northern Ireland does not tackle it, we will run into difficulties with the European Union, and the taxpayers of Northern Ireland will pick up the tab for that. Waste management was neglected time after time by previous Administrations, particularly under direct rule. I welcome the commitment to that.

I also welcome other commitments, such as the reduction of carbon emissions and the strengthening of key habitats and species by the declaration of 200 new ASSIs by 2016.

We have a coherent, environmentally friendly Programme for Government that looks after all our citizens and puts the economy first. It will be seen in years to come as a key turning point for Northern Ireland. It protects the interests of our citizens and faces up to challenges which, for too long, were ducked by direct rule Ministers.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the fact that a draft Programme for Government and a draft investment strategy have

been laid before the House. It has been a long wait — almost six months — for Executive action. I suspect that we might have had to wait longer had it not been for the Ulster Unionist Party, which brought forward a successful motion demanding that a legislative programme be laid before the House.

I have heard much criticism today. Members of the DUP, too numerous to mention, have criticised the Alliance Party, the SDLP and my party. It is good to see, however, that they have some friends in the House, just across the Floor from them — their partners, Sinn Féin.

Mrs D Kelly: Is it not somewhat ironic that we must listen to lectures on negativity from the party of which Seamus Mallon once said that, if the word “No” were taken out of its vocabulary, it would have nothing to say?

Mr Elliott: If that is the Member’s thought, I have no comment.

I was pleased to hear Members such as Alex Maskey talk about good relations. However, I wonder how far that stretched last week, when a local district policing partnership meeting in his constituency had to be abandoned because of republican protests. I should like to hear Mr Maskey, when he returns to the Chamber, speak on that: perhaps he will condemn that action.

I also welcome the consultation period for the document, which lasts until 4 January 2008. Normally, I would question the brevity of that period, but, because we have waited so long for the programme, I am content not to make too much of that.

It is important to observe that the Programme for Government and the investment strategy are at a consultative stage. That is something that the Health and Social Development Minister seems to appreciate, but which other Ministers seem not to understand; it appears to have eluded them.

In broad terms, no one can argue with the principles outlined in the Programme for Government: providing good leadership; working energetically in the interests of everyone; working in partnership across public, private and voluntary sectors; raising standards across Government; and delivering fair outcomes and social improvements. All are laudable in themselves.

We are told that the Executive will grow a dynamic, innovative economy; promote tolerance —perhaps not excluding South Belfast and the district policing partnerships; promote health and well-being; protect and enhance our environment and natural resources; invest to build our infrastructure; and deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services. They would say that, would they not? We should be no more surprised at that exposition of worthy aims than we are when we hear a Miss World contestant say that she wants world peace.

As legislators, we must ask the hard question. What precisely does the Programme for Government explicitly promise that will provide a qualitative improvement in Government and administration in Northern Ireland, and which will realise the lofty aspirations to which the Executive has signed up?

The 23 public service agreements that aim to deliver that strategy appear sound enough in their own way. The correlation of objectives, actions and targets on a matrix framework that cuts across all Departments is a clear and measurable way to proceed. The inclusion of specific targets sets ambitions and, in some cases, difficult tasks for the Government to achieve. We have been seeking that level of detail, and it will provide a real task for the Committees of the House in assessing the performance of the Executive and the individual Minister. I applaud and support the thoroughness of that approach.

I will deal with two issues, the first of which is child poverty. In the Committee for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister that is part of an ongoing investigation. It is close to my heart, as in my constituency the Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area has the highest child poverty percentages in the province.

A recent Government report found that in Northern Ireland up to 120,000 children live in varying degrees of poverty. If we add to that the number of children who are deemed to live in deprivation the figure increases to 160,000. Those figures are highly disturbing, given that in 1999 the Prime Minister pledged to end child poverty in a generation.

It is important for us as a regional Government to choose a focal point from which to tackle child poverty. 120,000 children live in poverty, that figure might drop by more than 50% if the target groups were to include only those children who live in severe poverty, and not those who live in general poverty. When the focus is shifted, the number of children in Northern Ireland whose situations require what we would call immediate action decreases to 44,000.

Furthermore, we must ask what the difference is between immediate and long-term action in child poverty. Differentiating between levels of poverty does not take away from the overall problem. Nevertheless, were we to make such a differentiation, the Assembly and the Executive could execute a more strategic plan to help those who are in most immediate distress. To attempt to tackle an issue of that scale in a single move could lead to miscalculations of judgement, and could prove erroneous in the long run.

The second issue is agriculture and rural development. I listened to the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr William McCrea, and I agree with much of what he said. It is

difficult for me to comprehend a situation in which many who are directly involved in agriculture and farming through the rural development programme should be almost encouraged to cease farming activities in favour of diversification. I have no difficulty with diversification; it does have a specific remit. However, it is not the answer to all problems. I am concerned that many in the agriculture industry are encouraged to leave it in favour of diversification, and that alone will not solve the problem. I am sure that many of those people would not welcome such a move, particularly those who have started their own beef-import businesses, importing large amounts of beef from South America.

Where will all the money come from? I assume that that will be the first major problem the Executive, and the Programme for Government, will come up against. For that reason, it is impossible to separate meaningfully the Programme for Government from the Budget, which realises it.

I suppose that one difficulty has been the failure to get the expected money and secure the financial deal that was supposed to come from the then Chancellor, and now Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. That is something that, I assume, we will live to regret.

It is easy to talk in vague generalities, or even in specifics, about principles. Discipline comes when one has to explain, convincingly, how one is going to pay. I am concerned that some of the financial assumptions in the draft Programme for Government may be unsound. Much depends on the sell-off prices of assets and on the as yet unspecified additional income from as yet unspecified sources. However, that is a debate for another day.

7.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Through its role in providing opportunity for all children and young people, and in preparing them for life and work — and in reforming its administration — education is meant to contribute to the Programme for Government priorities of growing a dynamic and innovative economy; promoting tolerance and inclusion; health and well-being; and delivering modern, high quality and efficient public services. Those priorities and goals are underpinned by a range of education-related public service agreements — in particular PSA 2, which deals with skills for prosperity; PSA 10, which deals with helping our children and young people to achieve through education; PSA 16, which deals with investing in the education estate; PSA 19, which deals with raising standards of schools; and PSA 20, which deals with improving public services. The key education goals for the first two priorities are ensuring that 70% of school-leavers achieve five or more GCSEs by 2011, and achieving a position by 2011 whereby 30% of school-leavers who are entitled

to free school meals obtain GCSE passes A* to C in English and Mathematics.

The use of the GCSE qualification as an indicator for the future is questionable, given that a revised curriculum is being introduced. Even assuming that CCEA will adapt its syllabuses to suit the revised curriculum, many schools in Northern Ireland enter pupils for GCSE examinations with other examination boards whose syllabuses will not be linked to the curricular changes that are taking place in Northern Ireland. If that is the case, we must ask how accurate an indicator GCSE will be in the future and consider what other relevant indicators can, and should, be used.

Although the key goal under priority 3 is that of establishing an education and skills authority by 2009, there is still quite an amount of work to be done on fashioning the shape of that authority. One of the main concerns that has been expressed about the new authority is its size. The ESA will be the biggest authority of its type in Western Europe. It remains to be seen how it will deliver its services on a subregional basis, and how accountable it will be at local level and at board level. Since ESA is seen as the main means of improving schools in the future, it is essential that there is satisfaction with the accountability and delivery mechanisms at all levels.

The teaching profession, of which I am a member, is the most valuable resource that education has in Northern Ireland. Over the past number of years, teachers have lost parity with their counterparts in England and Wales. This is particularly true in relation to the 10% planning, preparation and assessment time that has not yet been implemented in Northern Ireland. Likewise, teaching principals in small primary schools need two days administration time to ensure that their workload is manageable. The Department of Education will claim that one day is already factored in — under the common funding formula — but since that resource is not ring-fenced, it is more often than not subsumed in the attempts to balance the school's books.

Public service agreements 10 and 19 would benefit from proper investment in the teaching workforce. There is concern that available resources from the draft Budget will not enable many of the public service agreement actions and targets for education to be realised.

Objective 1 of public service agreements 6 and 10, which relate to the early-years strategy, is very much in doubt due to reduced resources. Given the savings that investment in early-years education can bring — a point underlined strongly by Nobel laureate Professor James Heckman in his recent Belfast lecture — a future reduction in spending in that area of education could prove costly not only in financial terms, but in

human terms, in the social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of children.

Professor Heckman pointed out that investments in social policies that intervene in the early years have very high later rates of return, while social policies that intervene later in the life cycle have low economic returns. A large body of scientific evidence shows a persistent pattern of strong effects derived from early interventions. Significantly, those substantial long-term benefits are not necessarily limited to intellectual gains, but are most clearly seen in 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, become teen parents or participate in criminal activities. Rather, they become productive adults.

The quality of pre-school provision appears to be a crucial determinant of educational attainment. High-quality provision involves small group size, high adult-child ratios, a balanced curriculum and trained staff. The House has previously debated how the benefits of enhancing the skills of the early-years workforce through a transformation fund would greatly enhance that effect.

A reduction in resources would also cast doubt on objective 2 of public service agreement 10 regarding the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy and the school improvement scheme. Each child has a basic right to leave primary school competent in literacy and numeracy. The Public Accounts Committee report of December 2006 underlined the need for a revised literacy and numeracy strategy. Twenty-six million pounds was spent on the previous strategy and we have 660 co-ordinators in reading recovery in our schools, yet only 160 of those co-ordinators are active, because schools do not have the resources to release teachers from the classroom.

Any literacy and numeracy strategy must be strong on practice as well as policy. The three-wave approach at each of the key stages 1, 2 and 3 should be implemented: wave 1, quality first teaching; wave 2, group withdrawal of underachieving pupils; and wave 3, one-to-one teaching. A framework for language should be developed to guide teachers as to the language competencies that children should have in relation to their development. As is good practice in other areas of education, early identification of difficulties and appropriate early interventions are required that will lead to savings in future both in human and financial terms.

Initial teacher training must be reviewed in order to ensure that newly qualified teachers are aware of the literacy and numeracy strategy and have the most effective methodologies for teaching literacy and numeracy as

part of their professional skills. As with the recently established inclusion and diversity service, a regional approach should be taken to implementing the literacy and numeracy strategy under a regional organiser, with local delivery teams supported by trained learning support assistants.

Although time prevents me from going into detail, I believe that the available resources from the draft Budget may not allow other specific education-related public service agreement actions and targets to be met.

Depending on the final Budget allocations and the use made of resources available for education, the following PSA actions and targets may have to be revised or scaled back: PSA 2, objective 4, regarding the increase in skills and career choices in science, technology, engineering and maths; PSA 2, objective 3, regarding the Department of Education's contribution to the implementation of the strategy and framework for careers education, information, advice and guidance; and PSA 10, objective 2, regarding improved access to the Youth Service for young people most at risk of exclusion, and its associated targets.

Programme for Government priorities and their underpinning PSAs, objectives, actions and targets should be more than mere aspirations. They should be achievable goals, backed by the necessary resources to realise them, for the benefit of our citizens in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCausland: I broadly welcome the strategic direction of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. Before turning to culture, arts and leisure, I want to pick up on some issues that have been raised by previous Members.

Dr Stephen Farry spoke at length about the size of the documents. He expressed the concern that they were comparatively brief. I reflected on that and thought that the moral law of God is expressed in 10 short commandments, which possibly suggests that it is the quality of a document, rather than the quantity, that matters. Basil McCrea should take that point on board and apply it to his speeches.

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

Basil McCrea surpassed the Alliance Party in negativity. His whingeing and gurning knew no end. He must have been attempting to bolster his bid for the leadership of his party. A common theme ran through the Ulster Unionist Party speeches: it was a theme of denial and the delusion that it is not part of a four-party coalition Executive. This is the draft programme of a Government in which the Ulster Unionist Party has two Ministers and of which it is a part. Fred Cobain nearly had apoplexy when that was said, and he had to leave. I am glad that he recovered and has returned. However, that is the situation.

Declan O'Loan spoke in very measured tones, but he seemed to have a great desire to speak at length and repetitively about "the island". He continually referred to "the island". He should be less insular and more inclusive in his thinking. I hope that, in due course, he will become more expansive and inclusive and realise that we are part of the British Isles and that there are two islands that are very close together.

I am delighted that the draft Programme for Government contains a commitment to promoting access to culture, arts and leisure. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, David McNarry, referred to funding. He spoke at length about the need for more funding. I would like to see more investment in that area, but we are starting from a lower base than most other Departments. Why are we starting from such a low base? Who was responsible for that? Under the previous devolved Government, the Ulster Unionist Minister Michael McGimpsey was responsible for ensuring that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had such a low budget. His failure — in fact, the Ulster Unionist Party's failure — was carried on by direct rule Ministers who operated a care and maintenance model.

For the sake of our society, I hope that Mr McGimpsey makes a better job of health than he did of culture.

7.45 pm

I now turn to the priorities identified in annex 1 of the draft Programme for Government. I want to highlight the fact that culture, arts and leisure are not only seen as important in their own right; they are also important because they impact on tourism, health and education.

In particular, the tourism sector in Northern Ireland must be developed. There is a commitment to manage and develop the Northern Ireland cultural infrastructure — £229 million of capital investment by 2011 in arts, sports, museums, libraries and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. That shows the scale of the need, and re-emphasises the scale of past failure. It is good to see that resources have been allocated for the provision of a number of major arts, cultural and sporting centres; to renovate the Ulster Museum and for other developments in the museums; to restructure our libraries so that there is a better library infrastructure right across Northern Ireland; and to ensure that we have a properly resourced Public Record Office that is suitable and appropriate for a place such as Northern Ireland.

PSA 6, on children and families, also relates to sport. It is important to address the issue of childhood obesity, and an increase in sporting provision will provide young people with greater access to sport and thus will undoubtedly help to tackle that issue.

Sport also has a key role to play in PSA 8, on promoting health and addressing health inequalities. As time and effort are invested in promoting sport, good health will, at the same time, be encouraged. Thus, the provision of better cultural, artistic and leisure facilities in Northern Ireland will help to address a number of the Government's key priorities.

One area in which greater commitment is needed is education. There has been a failure to address the cultural rights of children in education, particularly those in the controlled sector. There has been a tremendous amount of investment in the Irish-medium sector, which provides an Irish cultural tradition for children from that background. Likewise, there has been a great deal of investment in the Catholic-maintained sector. I hope that we will see more commitment to recognising the cultural rights of children who are educated in the controlled sector, and to meeting the requirements at an international level in respect of those rights.

Both the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy refer to the creative industries. We must realise that many of the heavy industries that were so important in the past are now no longer here, and that the areas of potential growth — and very substantial growth — are tourism and the creative industries. It is clear from the number of hotels that are being built in Belfast and across Northern Ireland, and from the number of international cruise ships that are bringing tourists from around the world into our ports, that there is a tremendous potential and opportunity to develop our tourism industry, which can create many new jobs for the people of Northern Ireland.

I shall pick up on a couple of points in the draft investment strategy. I hope that, in carrying forward the commitment to the modernisation of our libraries, reference will be made to the good model that already exists in north Belfast — the Grove Well-being Centre, which not only offers library provision, but a major leisure centre and recreational and health provision. Therefore, libraries, leisure and health are all tied in; the three services are brought together in one context. I hope that that integrated approach to the provision of library services will be at the heart of future provision.

I am glad to see a commitment to creating a new Belfast central library by 2015. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have a national library, and therefore it is important that a significant regional library is provided, and that it is suitable and adequate for maintaining the cultural wealth that is part of our heritage in Northern Ireland. The provision of a new Belfast central library will contribute to that.

Finally, under the investment pillar termed "social" in the draft investment strategy, it is stated:

"Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood ... offer the potential for a transformational development ... that will provide social and economic regeneration within North Belfast."

That is the type of major opportunity that lies before us. I hope that instead of the negativity that we have heard from certain Members, there will be a change of heart — perhaps something of a political conversion from a few of them — a commitment to being positive towards such initiatives that will, in the future, bring many new jobs not only to north Belfast through that particular project but to the entire Province through the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the take-note motion. Since the publication of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, Members have debated the strengths and weaknesses in their respective Committees and parties. That process is ongoing. Therefore, anything that I say in the debate is not definitive: I fully reserve the right to scrutinise, and comment on, the documents further.

What initially struck me as positive in the draft investment strategy is the departure from a silo mentality in Government. It has long been the case that, in Government, one hand did not know what the other hand was doing. However, the positive thinking behind the draft investment's strategy's six pillars will help to join up departmental plans and other stakeholders, avoid any duplication and allow them to recognise opportunities to maximise outcomes by working together. The Assembly must ensure that that filters down to all levels, especially to local development level.

With regard to building a sustainable future through social, economic and environmental policies and programmes, the draft Programme for Government refers to the need to:

"ensure that the principles of sustainability — development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs — underpin our approach to all our activities."

I welcome that commitment from the Executive. However, as the Assembly is forced to move further down the line of Departments' use of private finance initiatives and public-private partnerships for procurement rather than conventional methods, it may leave a legacy for future generations that is steeped in Government debt.

I welcome the commitment to modernise the mental-health service's estate and support for a move away from long-stay settings to care in the community. That must be welcomed, particularly after a year in which instances have been highlighted of children and older people with learning difficulties being held in long-term settings when a sufficient care package would enable them to be at home. I am concerned that there is no

commitment from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to deal with the lack of respite provision and that neither document refers to that issue. It should be a priority for the Executive, because it affects the most vulnerable people and their carers.

My constituency of Mid Ulster is a rural area that is situated west of the Bann. I am glad that the draft Programme for Government includes a commitment to deal with regional imbalance. However, it is not strong enough. I want a commitment in black and white from the Executive that they will deal with years of underinvestment in that area by successive British Governments.

I am concerned about the draft Programme for Government's claims that widespread broadband access will be delivered. People who live in rural areas do not have full access to broadband, and those who do pay over the odds for the privilege. The Assembly must not allow such claims to be made by companies such as BT, because, by doing so, it ignores the situation that many people face in rural areas of the North.

In order to deal fully with the effects of underinvestment west of the Bann and to make progress, there must be a clear Executive-led strategy to tackle the problems in that area with a view to establishing more favourable outcomes for all people and to eradicate inequalities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: My party colleagues have already outlined the reasons for my party's critical amendment, as, indeed, has Basil McCrea. I will try not to repeat their arguments. However, I wish to highlight further what my party considers to be the draft Programme for Government's deficiencies: its lack of vision, detail and firm commitment. My party considers that there is virtually nothing in the draft Programme for Government that would not have been included in a direct rule document. It is hard to see the effect of local input after long months of deliberation by local Ministers. Instead, the flimsy document indicates the difficulties of reaching agreement among the four Executive parties and the resultant acceptance of a lowest-common-denominator approach.

Much of the draft Programme for Government is a continuation of work in progress. Where are the new initiatives — the release of new thinking that is based on the particular needs of the Northern Ireland public? Neither the draft Programme for Government nor the public service agreements contain any significant details of policy proposals or of priorities to be given to policy areas, particularly to changes of policy direction after devolution.

This is not a momentous achievement, as claimed by the First Minister, or in any way strategic as claimed by the deputy First Minister. It is, unfortunately, a bland, disappointing effort that has been constrained

by the lack of agreement in the Executive. The draft Programme for Government argues that the framework of PSA's confirm the key actions to be taken in support of the five key priorities, but an absence of detail runs through both documents.

PSA 1, which covers productivity growth, aims to allow Invest NI to continue what it is doing — unsuccessfully, some might say — and for the energy market to be opened up for competition, as has been planned already.

PSA 2, which covers skills for prosperity, promises a series of reviews and as yet unwritten action plans, and PSA 4, which covers supporting rural businesses, contains vague measures. PSA 5, which covers tourism, states that we will have to manage and develop our inland navigations and cultural infrastructure. Are they not being managed already?

The draft Programme for Government does not contain any promise of action on the shared future agenda or good relations, unless one counts societal relationships. There is no promise or commitment on integrated education, unlike the Irish-medium sector, which is to be maximised under the terms of the agreement: nor is there any promise of action in the arts, except that the 'Arts Council for Northern Ireland Corporate Plan 2007-10' is to be promoted — not implemented or funded, but promoted.

I could go into detail on education because I am a member of that Committee for Education, but I do not need to, because Dominic Bradley has done so, rather eloquently, a few moments ago. It does not sound as though education is to be prioritised? How is vocational education to be promoted? How is entrepreneurship to make its way into schools? What industries are to be targeted so that careers services deliver appropriate advice?

The inadequacy of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy are plain to see, and, in summary, their aims are not prioritised; the actions are not detailed, and existing targets are not changed. Education has been left out of the priorities; tackling sectarianism is not referred to, and the arts are all but ignored.

The Alliance Party has been accused of negativity — I have never heard that word used so many times in one day — and mention has been made of our churlish attitude to what is being portrayed as some sort of visionary document, which, in its present draft form, it patently is not. I hope that the Executive will seriously consider the draft Programme for Government's deficiencies and look positively at the suggestions that have been made and which will be put forward during the consultation period.

All of the suggestions have not come from the "negative" Alliance Party; they have come from all

parties in the House. I have listened with interest today. I heard Alex Maskey refer to matters that he would like to be teased out, which is a diplomatic way of saying that there are matters about which he has major concerns. He mentioned the shared future and the draft Programme for Government's lack of commitment to it. Mervyn Storey expressed grave concerns about education, and he had genuine concerns on other matters. I cannot help but think that his concerns about education are not so much to do with the education programme as the potential antics of the Minister of Education.

Mr Boylan expressed concern about planning regulations, global warming, the need for an all-Ireland approach on road safety, and the lack of an environmental protection agency. Those concerns have come from Members of parties in the Executive. Basil McCrea also contributed to the debate: what can I say to my Lagan Valley colleague? I agree with some of his comments about early years, pupil/teacher ratios, selection, and the education and skills authority — and he was not the only Member to mention that.

Fra McCann, a Member who is also from a party in the Executive — the coalition — talked about housing, and he was quite right.

Mr F McCann: Members are putting their points across today in order to try to influence the Minister to change aspects of the draft documents. That is why one of the documents is called a draft Budget. Members may not have much impact when the draft Budget becomes the Budget.

8.00 pm

Mr Lunn: I could not agree more. It is supposed to be a discussion about draft documents.

However, there is a perception that all the comments from this end of the House have been negative and those from everywhere else have been cosy and friendly. I was encouraged to hear people from the far reaches of the Chamber being critical. Some people might see that as constructive comment, but I call it criticism of the draft Programme for Government.

I commend the Alliance Party's amendment to the House. We have not been quite as negative as has been suggested, but when it is four parties against one, we are an easy target.

Mr Hamilton: Even at this late hour, I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate. I know that some Members are tempted to nod off when they have to work at such an hour. I will give it 10 minutes, but it seems that some Members have fallen asleep already — Fred Cobain must be dreaming if he believes that his party is not in Government.

I am increasingly surprised and shocked at the Alliance Party's attitude in the House. After years of

demanding that all the parties get together and work for the betterment of Northern Ireland, I suppose that I should not be surprised that the party now opposes what it wanted for so long. The only conclusion to be drawn from such extreme hypocrisy is that the Alliance Party opposes the draft Programme for Government simply because the electorate did not give it the mandate to be in Government, and that is churlish.

I am not surprised by the attitude displayed again today by the Ulster Unionist Party. Members of that party want to be in Government and enjoy the fruits of being in office. However, at the same time, they want to appear to the outside world as some type of Opposition. It depends on who is being spoken to, or who speaks to the Government, whether the Ulster Unionist Party wants to be in or out of Government.

With the majority of people in Northern Ireland, I am positive about the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. I could talk at some considerable length this evening about the specific benefits that those policies will bring to my Strangford constituency, such as the new rapid transit system that will start in Dundonald and go throughout Belfast, or the new accommodation for the South Eastern Regional College, including investment —

Mr McNarry: Where is the money for that coming from?

Mr Hamilton: As David McNarry knows, all that information is contained in the draft Budget, should he wish to read it. I am surprised that he has not read it, and I hope that he does so in time for tomorrow's debate so that he can make a knowledgeable contribution — but perhaps that is too unrealistic a dream.

Despite what the Health Minister may have suggested, there are also new hospital facilities for Downpatrick that will serve my constituents. The programme also includes the completion of the first phase of redevelopment at the Ulster Hospital, not to mention more general issues, such as free public transport for everyone over the age of 60.

I am sure that Members all around the Chamber could talk about how the draft Programme for Government specifically benefits their own constituencies —
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr P J Bradley: Mr Hamilton referred to reading the draft Programme for Government and to the various other publications. As a representative of a rural area, is he surprised that there is no reference to agriculture in this booklet? The word does not even appear.

Mr Hamilton: The word "farming" appears in the document, but perhaps the Member does not like that choice of word and prefers "agriculture".

Mr Paisley Jnr: Perhaps it would be helpful if the Member for South Down were to read about the intended £45 million investment in the draft Programme for Government:

“to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector.”

Mr Ross: That is agricultural, as opposed to agriculture; it is a question of grammar —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the junior Minister for his contribution. It is unfortunate that P J Bradley is contributing to the awful literacy figures in Northern Ireland. I suggest that he sits down and does not embarrass himself further. It is in his interest to do so. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hamilton does not wish to give way.

Mr P J Bradley: I was referring to a particular version of the document. As Naomi Long mentioned earlier, there are several publications and a number of printed versions —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must resume his seat.

Mr Hamilton: I hope that I will be allowed a wee bit more time after that crude intervention.

I am pleased with the centrality given to the economy in the draft Programme for Government. Economic growth is not included as an afterthought; it is the Executive’s priority, front and centre. There are many targets and proposed outcomes, such as inward investment and the creation of 6,500 high-quality and better-paid jobs and increasing the employment rate to 75%. *[Interruption.]* I hear murmurings from sedentary positions and can only assume that those Members are unhappy about 6,500 new high-quality jobs, and do not want them in Northern Ireland. The programme plans new exporting companies, £120 million private-sector investment in innovation and growing creative industries.

Coming from Strangford, I am pleased to see the huge commitment to tourism. I praise the Executive’s concentration on the economy and their decision to make economic expansion their priority, which has met — and will meet — with criticism. However, those dogma-driven dinosaurs from a different age must be challenged.

The many structural weaknesses of Northern Ireland’s economy have been well noted — in the Assembly and elsewhere — and need no re-rehearsal. Failing to focus on the economy first and foremost and make it our priority in the Programme for Government and draft investment strategy will, at best, perpetuate the problems and, at worse, see them deteriorate. A Programme for Government and an investment strategy that continue

with the same direct rule mindset will do nothing to achieve the step change required in our economy.

I praise the Executive for their prioritisation of economic expansion and encourage them to resist any temptation to change focus. Continuing with the old formula of prioritising public services would produce the same results. Although previous programmes could not be blamed for the historically poor performance of our economy, they did little or nothing to address it. The absence of focus in the economy today has made the Executive’s task much harder.

It is muddle-headed to think that continuing to expand the size of, and spending on, the public sector at the same rate as recent years — which would exacerbate the prime problem of over-reliance on the public sector for growth and employment — will correct our economy. That is not to say that the aims of economic growth and more efficient and effective public services are mutually exclusive. In fact, a transformed economy, through substantial wealth creation, can be the key to unlocking better public services.

I encourage the Executive to keep the economy as their primary priority and to resist the easy option of reverting to type. The hundreds upon hundreds of people who have lost their jobs in recent days in Limavady, Cloughmills and Newtownards — which is in my constituency — would not thank us for letting the economy and the creation of new jobs slip down the agenda. In concentrating on the economy, it is essential that the right infrastructure — both physical infrastructure and people — be in place. That is why I welcome the inclusion —

Mr McLaughlin: Simon is right-wing now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: The Member will accuse me of being a Thatcherite next, which is not a label that I am prepared to wear.

That is why I welcome the inclusion of networks and of productive and skills pillars in the draft investment strategy. When we compare our physical infrastructure to that of our competitors in the rest of the United Kingdom — and in the Republic of Ireland — it is easy to see how substandard roads, energy and telecommunications can be a distinct disadvantage in Northern Ireland’s competitiveness. A common complaint about our economy is the lack of certain key skills; there is little point in attempting to attract new investment if there are not the right people with the right skills to take up the jobs that will be generated.

I welcome the commitment to tackle bureaucracy and to produce additional efficiencies. That includes a review of the number of Departments to tackle the bloated political bureaucracy created by the Belfast Agreement; a 25% reduction in the administration faced by farmers, which I am sure that Mr P J Bradley

will be pleased to hear; a single telephone number as a point of reference for public services; and a capital-realisation programme, which will obtain an extra £1 billion for infrastructure.

Strangely, the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy have been criticised in some quarters for being aspirational— as if aspiring to something was wrong. I welcome the aspiration and ambition in the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. If Northern Ireland is to be economically vibrant and have world-class public services, some aspiration is essential. To expect the multi-faceted problems of Northern Ireland to be overcome immediately is to aspire a little too much. It took more than three decades to create Northern Ireland's problems through a combination of terrorism and the ineptitude of direct rule, and it will take longer than the three years of the Programme for Government to undo them.

However, the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland offer a vision of a better and brighter future for Northern Ireland. We must start somewhere, so let us begin.

Mrs M Bradley: As far back as 19 December 2006, Ian Paisley Jnr, now a junior Minister, told the House how vital it was for effective campaigning for older people to be put in place and:

“We must ensure that we have delivery and not more process.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 21, p184, col 2*].

That is all well and good, but now that we know that Deloitte and Touche has been appointed to carry out a review, is that not merely more process? One of the targets of PSA 7, objective 2, is that the Programme for Government will:

“Deliver a strong independent voice for older people”.

Another target is to:

“Ensure more effective statutory protection for older people as an identifiable group”.

What exactly does that mean for older people? We want to see real action and delivery of the goods, not report after report, more deliberation, and so on. Is the Budget to be spent on consultations and reports rather than on delivery?

Our older people and young people alike are abused, victimised and made to feel worthless daily. Both those sections of our society are considered to be the most vulnerable. Children deserved to get their commissioner, and so do our older people. Although there are PSAs that will assist children in the long term, there is little in the draft Programme for Government for older people, apart from the fact that the minimum age for the free-travel scheme has been reduced to include anyone aged 60 or over. Let us remember, however, that

people in rural areas cannot avail themselves of that scheme, because there is no bus travel there.

The free-travel scheme, which is to be introduced in 2008, is to be welcomed, but I hope that it is not the only party favour on offer for older members of our society. If so, what kind of message would that send out to the section of the electorate who are in their later years? Is it that they are not valuable enough to merit the appointment of a commissioner, who could, on their behalf, fight for policies that would have a huge impact on their current state of health and wealth? It worked for the children when their commissioner was appointed, so why is it different for people who are in their older years?

It is certain that we will all age — some of us more and quicker than others — but we all want to have a dignified life and death. That is not too much to ask for, now that we are in a new political era, with a Budget that can be applied by local Ministers, who should be — if they are not already — au fait with the needs of the people. If old age means going to the back of the queue in hospital because one is too old, if it means that a procedure is seen as simply a postponement of the inevitable, if it means that one can be abused by intruders, carers or even by family members, or if it means that one can be excluded from travelling because the cost of insurance is four times the price of that for anyone else, it is merely an existence and is not worth having. An older life is just as valuable as a youthful one.

Where is free personal care for the elderly? Where is the blueprint for getting to that stage? I acknowledge that it will be expensive, but it is something that our electorate is crying out for, yet they are getting nowhere.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that, on more than one occasion, the House voted to introduce free personal care for the elderly, and that, in every recent election, all the parties in the Assembly have promised to deliver free personal care?

Mrs M Bradley: I agree with the Member, but we need to hear that from the Minister who is responsible for delivering free personal care.

Winter fuel payments must be sorted out urgently, due to the massive hike in fuel costs, electricity and gas. The prediction of a much colder winter than last year, and the proposed cuts in home-fuel-saving schemes, mean that a cold, miserable and dangerous winter is on the agenda for the most vulnerable members of our communities. We must produce a consistent and unified call for winter fuel payments to be increased.

I am pleased to see that the Executive acknowledge children and the need to protect them. However, more stringent legislation must be a main player in that objective. Child protection and the tightening of the legislation that surrounds it must be a priority for the

Government. The recent media reports and debates in the Chamber should stand as testament to that.

The issue of cross-border co-operation and the establishment of an all-Ireland sex offenders register must be agreed, supported and acted on if we are to protect our children and all victims, whether past, current or potential. Children's rights and how they are delivered must be a priority for the Assembly, just as it has been in Wales.

They have got it right. They have agreed and established the Children and Young People Committee so that the Welsh Assembly speaks with a unified voice and deals with any decision-making pertaining to children's issues from one Department. That single-strand approach is working towards the appropriate delivery of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its successful implementation is a priority for the Welsh Assembly.

8.15 pm

Our children have great potential, and how the Government provide a just and equal society will determine how well, or how badly, children will develop into well-balanced human beings with a sense of respect and decency for themselves and others.

Parents, too, must play a pivotal role in achieving that, and the parental role should not be minimised, because it will have more bearing than anything else when it comes to creating and maintaining a lawful and just society. Therefore, the PSAs that refer to children and family must be applied diligently, and the budgetary requirements need to be in place and increased yearly. There are concerns as to whether there is an adequate budget in place for the implementation of the 10-year strategy for children and young people.

Homelessness is also a well-known ailment in my constituency of Foyle; it is at a shocking level. There is quite simply nowhere to build social housing because house prices keep rising, and landowners are attaining previously undocumented sums for their land from developers waiting to cash in on the house-price boom. In historic style, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Ten thousand social-build homes across Northern Ireland are only a drop in the ocean, but it is a start in staving off a long-term problem that is worsening by the day.

We also have to consider the families who own their own homes and live in, what are described as, affluent areas, but who cannot afford to heat their homes properly, nor pay the ever-increasing gas and electricity bills, and who, because both partners work, may be just over the benefit threshold and no more. They have nowhere to go for help. Tax credits, increasingly, cause hardship when huge overpayments are clawed back in ridiculous sums, even when it is proven that the overpayment is the

fault of the Department. Increasing debt and household expenses are an all too common complaint, and we are depending on the decisions that this Executive make and sign off on to improve the lives of people.

I sincerely hope that poverty, and fuel poverty, strategies are capable of delivering what it is claimed that they can and that we will have the budgetary requirements to implement them properly. The effects of fuel poverty are well documented, and given that, I am sceptical of the target of 2016 for total eradication. I am even more sceptical of eradication in vulnerable homes by 2010.

Winter deaths among vulnerable people are a constant worry year upon year. In September of this year, the House was informed that the Social Development Minister's request for an increase in winter fuel payments was denied by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Minister has assured the House that fuel poverty and its eradication will remain at the heart of her Department's aims. I have every confidence in her determination, because, as she has shown in recent months, she can be a formidable force. I hope that the Executive will ensure that the financial means will be in place behind her determination.

People and their environment are, however, at the heart of more than half of the PSAs, so I can only hope that an early-intervention approach, and a mindful conscience, will be the basis that underpins the decision-making strategy in the life of this Assembly. Ultimately, that will determine the future for all our communities.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): My young friend Simon Hamilton was worried about the late hour to which we have been sitting; however, I remember when some of us had to be ejected from this House during the days of the old Stormont Commons. My colleague, friend and deputy spoke for eight hours, and that was only the icing on the cake, because all the others had spoken for hours before that. Eventually, we were hauled out and thrown down the steps, but, behold, we have come back again to haunt this particular Chamber.

I have served in the House of Commons, where there used to be very late sittings. I was able to go to the Tube station at 5.00 am after the House rose, catch a train to Heathrow and return to Northern Ireland. I suggest that my young friend should try that. It is good for one's health. He, too, could live until he is over 80 years of age.

Members will recall that when I launched the draft Programme for Government in the House on 25 October, I said that the Executive were determined to seize the opportunity to make a real difference and to build a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland. I also said that we were determined, through the Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern

Ireland, to produce results that far supersede all that has happened in recent years in Northern Ireland.

Let me nail one issue from the outset. Our vision is not limited, our proposals are not limited and our ambition is not limited. I hope that we will show by our actions in the House not only that we are leading the people of Northern Ireland, but that the people of Northern Ireland are leading us in the right way.

The Executive have taken a new approach to the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. We want the plans to be understood by those outside the House — the people whom we are here to serve. We should all care about the people of Northern Ireland. We want our plans to set out clear goals and commitments, and to set out the issues that we, as an Executive, are committed to delivering for all the people of Northern Ireland. We want them to be ambitious and stretching, and to mark a clear difference from what has gone before. I can do no better than commend the comments of my party colleague Mr Spratt in that respect. I believe that we have noble objectives, and I believe that we will achieve them.

I am delighted to be able to tell the House that our approach has been widely, if not universally, welcomed. I have more to say on that — but I will keep Members in suspense just a little longer.

I am confident that the draft Programme for Government offers a clear framework, at a strategic level, for the Executive to develop their policies and programmes, and make a real difference for all the people of the Province. Our overarching aim in the draft Programme for Government is:

“to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come.”

The main issue that is sealed in the document has been derided in the House today. Everyone should be obliged to join with us in the “peaceful, fair and prosperous society” that Northern Ireland deserves, and that our families’ families deserve:

“with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in the years to come.”

That is a laudable aim for us to set for our Executive, Assembly, Government and people. I am glad that the whole Executive have been able to reach agreement on a shared, safe aim. I trust that we will have many conversions along the way, and that we will be able to say “unity at last”. That appeals to me as a unionist.

Everything that I have heard in this debate and elsewhere suggests that that aim commands widespread support across the whole community. That is as it should be.

Devolution has presented the Executive with a unique opportunity, but, in the coming days, if we are

to deliver that overarching aim, we must face many challenges with all the strength and wisdom that the good Lord can give us. The way will not be easy. The hills are not small hills but great mountains, and there will be much rough riding for us all. However, if we are determined to leave for those that come after us the foundation stones for an Ulster, such as I mentioned, that will be work well done.

Five strategic priorities are set out in the draft Programme for Government. They are not about narrow party politics or sectional interests. Contrary to what some Members said, the Executive thought long and hard before deciding on those priorities. We considered a wide range of evidence, and the views of many stakeholders and interests, before deciding on them. They are the Executive’s agreed priorities, and we believe that we have got them right. They are about tackling our challenges head on and grasping the opportunity to build a better future for all our people.

Among the people in Northern Ireland, especially those on either side of the great divide between unionists and republicans or nationalists, no one can doubt that there has been a change in thinking. Even people who would not listen to me in the past are now prepared to shake hands with me. The other night, as I was getting off a plane, a lady at the end of the runway asked to shake my hand. I told her that she certainly could, and she told me that, 11 months ago, she would have slapped me in the face. I asked her not to do that, and she said that I would be surprised to know who she was — she was the Mother Superior of a local convent. I said, “Thank you, Madam.” We left, and I did not get a slap in the face.

There have been changes; changes are coming, and we should encourage people to go in the direction that we have debated about together. We have put forward our points of view; we have sought what is right, and we will win through in the end. I certainly hope that I will live to see that victory in this country and Province that I love.

Our plans are good news for everyone in Northern Ireland, and we urge all Members of the Assembly to join us on the journey ahead. Even Alliance Party members are welcome, although that party’s leader does not ring me or send me a letter; rather, he uses the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ to communicate with me. Nevertheless, for the good of my country, I am prepared to wear even that.

Mr Ford: Does the First Minister accept that before releasing information to the media, I wrote to him about consultation on the legislative programme, and that that letter was delivered to his office in this Building?

The First Minister: I am afraid that that letter never came to my hand.

Mr Ford: There is clearly a difference between the First Minister and me about the operation of the internal mail system. The First Minister should report that to the Speaker and to the Commission.

8.30 pm

The First Minister: The honourable Member has communicated with me before; he knows my phone number at Parliament Buildings, and he can reach me when he wants to. However, I shall not answer letters that are sent to me publicly through any newspaper. I should not be expected to do that, despite all my gentleness and goodness of heart.

Our priorities for investment in infrastructure reflect our intention to put the economy first. Accelerating economic growth and improving the competitiveness of business are clear objectives of our investment strategy, which is designed to tackle years of underinvestment in our transport networks, water and waste infrastructure, schools, health and a range of other pressing concerns.

We are going to invest £5.6 billion over the next three years and at least £18 billion over the next 10 years. Those are record levels of investment, which will help to set the right conditions for economic growth and the creation of jobs. That investment will boost our construction industry, presenting it with an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen its capabilities.

I hope to go to the United States of America next week with colleagues from the House. We will try as best we can to persuade people to come and invest in Northern Ireland. The more investors create quality, well-paid jobs, the more our aims will be strengthened.

The investment strategy will create high-quality infrastructure to be enjoyed by all our people and will leave a positive legacy for generations to come. The Programme for Government will drive forward economic growth and sustainability. It will build a fairer society, in which everyone is valued and has the opportunity to realise their potential. I hope that all Members agree that those are worthwhile objectives for any Government.

The Executive welcome the very positive response that they have received on their choice of priorities and especially on making the economy their top priority. Many Members have supported those priorities during the debate, and I welcome that.

Once again, I am convinced that we have got the priorities right. My conviction about that has been reinforced by the positive response that we have received. For example, on behalf of the business community, the CBI has warmly welcomed the Programme for Government. The Institute of Directors and the North West Chamber of Commerce have also welcomed the fact that we have placed economic growth at the heart of the Programme for Government.

The National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland have welcomed our renewed commitment to increasing the number of adult learners and the strong focus on school- and university-leavers with regard to future economic growth and stability. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, which represents the voluntary sector, has also recognised that a thriving economy should benefit everyone.

However, the economy is not the whole story. As I said, the Executive recognise that economic growth, social progress and environmental protection must go hand in hand. In delivering our priorities, a key objective will be to ensure that all our people contribute to, and benefit from, increased prosperity. We must use economic growth to tackle disadvantage and poverty.

I agree with other Members who said that we must ensure that there is balanced economic development across Northern Ireland and in every part of the Province. The Programme for Government and the investment strategy create the conditions for that.

This debate has played an important part in the consultation process on the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. I welcome the contributions that have been made. I wish the Committees well as they do their business and put forward their individual views. I trust that we will have help from all those who want to build this Province into a place that will be well worth living in.

A number of Members have commented on the need for clear baselines and milestones for the delivery of the commitments. The key goals and targets of our Programme for Government must be attained, and we must deliver our best for the people of the Province.

A number of Members expressed concern about the absence of information regarding how the Executive's performance in delivering the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will be monitored and reported. Work is being taken forward to develop a clear performance management and delivery framework for agreement by the Executive. Details of those arrangements will be included in the final published versions of the documents.

With regard to public consultation, I can assure the House — and in particular Mr Kennedy, who is the Chairman of the Committee that looks after me and my colleagues — that we are determined that this will be a proper and genuine consultation process, in which everyone can get their oar in, and I trust that they will then pull for the shore as real good sailors on the ship.

The Executive must see to it that many people, particularly the most vulnerable in our community, get their rights and the sort of care that they need.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The First Minister: Excuse me, I must finish.

I am glad that emphasis has been put on those who are old. I am getting old, and I am looking forward to a day when I can sit up in the Gallery and laugh down and say that I am glad that I have become old. However, no one should think that I am old at the moment; both my feet are working and ready for the task.

I also am glad of the emphasis placed on children. The children of Northern Ireland deserve our dedication, and I trust that we will live to see the day when they will be saved from poverty and have all the things that they have been deprived of in the past. The best thing that the children of this Province could have is a Province at peace with itself.

Mr Ford: In the course of his summary, the First Minister said that the Executive wanted to “make a real difference” to what has gone before. The tragedy of the situation that we are in has been highlighted by this debate today — the paucity of proposals in the Programme for Government, the lack of smartness in the public service agreements, and the vagueness of the investment strategy.

It is noteworthy that the comments that I have highlighted have not just come from these Benches — although the process was started by my pink-wellied colleague, the deputy leader of the Opposition. Even more surprisingly, those comments did not just come from our part-time allies on the Ulster Unionist and SDLP Benches. As my colleague Trevor Lunn pointed out, the great majority of contributions from the DUP and Sinn Féin Benches also highlighted the problems in the draft Programme for Government.

I welcome the fact that Members, in recognising what is wrong with the Programme for Government, are being somewhat more open than the First Minister alleged.

Why is it that, after a year of preparation, so much still needs to be done?

The principal theme of most of the DUP Back-Bench speeches was nothing to do with the Programme for Government, but took the opportunity to attack the Alliance Party — *[Interruption.]*

Sometimes the Members managed to weigh into the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP, but they seemed to be unsure as to whether they were trying to woo them to support the programme, or attack them.

The programme is full of aspiration; and that may be desirable, but it is no substitute for action.

I thank Danny Kennedy for the way that he outlined, in a useful summary, the contents of the programme. His was almost the only contribution that dealt with simple facts. Naomi Long highlighted that the real issue was not the lack of quantity in the Programme for Government, but the poor quality of it, including in particular its total failure to tackle sectarianism.

It is impossible to address the serious issues of housing, jobs or education if we do not address the need to build a shared future. That is part of what we need to deal with those issues.

The next contribution came from Mrs Robinson, who started in the usual way by criticising the Alliance Party. She claimed that the programme was tightly focused. I must say, however, when I read the PSA framework, I see no tight focus there. Ms Anderson treated us to a discourse on equality and human rights. She mentioned the process of boats coming in, so much that I believe Naomi Long is hopeful of re-opening the shipyard.

I am not sure whether the sight of two equal MLAs sparring and spitting hatred across the Chamber is doing anything to build the society that we want. The issue is not about equality: it is about a shared future alongside equality and human rights.

In her positive contribution, Dolores Kelly stressed that sectarianism must be dealt with alongside equality.

The next two contributions were particularly interesting. For some reason, Dr McCrea forgot to attack the Alliance Party, and I thought that that was obligatory this afternoon. However, he went over the reservations of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee about all the failures of the Programme for Government. It was one of the best, and most constructive, speeches, and it pointed out everything that was not in the programme. Dr McCrea is no Back-Bencher: he is a fairly senior member of the DUP, and yet he highlighted the concerns of the Agriculture Committee, which represents the four parties of the Executive, about the programme. That was backed up by Tom Elliott in his contribution.

Immediately afterwards, Ms Ramsey made similar contributions in her capacity as Chairperson of the Employment and Learning Committee. She highlighted concerns ranging from PhDs to adult literacy and the issue of student finance — I was going to declare an interest in that, but it will take them so long to do anything that my youngest will be long past being a student. Those are the issues we face.

Gregory Campbell then spoke as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee. He emphasised the need for cross-departmental working, but I was unclear whether that was an aspiration or something that he felt needed to happen.

Mr McNarry made no such mistake. He pointed out that if there is no branch dealing with creative industries, it is difficult to ensure 15% growth in that area of the economy. He pointed out, as many others did in other respects, the need for intermediate targets across different areas. Dominic Bradley did so particularly strongly in relation to educational targets.

Mark Durkan, as Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, referred to his Committee's concerns as to whether efficiency savings can be met, and to the need to identify milestones on the way to meeting the targets. He referred to the fact that there are no measures for the social economy and in that he was backed up by Ms Jennifer McCann. Mr McLaughlin similarly talked about the failure to detail the savings from efficiency. Speaking as Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, Fred Cobain referred to the fact that sustainable development implementation is far too slow, and to the lack of targets in that area.

Sammy Wilson then got into the mood again with the usual barnstorming bluster to replace any argument. At least, unlike Mr McGuinness earlier today, he did not completely lose the run of himself. When he eventually got down to the business, he stressed the concerns of the Education Committee about the problems in the programme for the education sector. He highlighted problems in areas such as the Youth Service and in structural reforms. He is, therefore, yet another loyal member of one of the two parties of Government — there are definitely two parties in Government: I am not sure about the other two — who highlighted major concerns about what needs to be addressed.

8.45 pm

Mr Shannon is clearly well in line for the most loyal Back-Bencher award. He made a good, strong attack on the Alliance Party to keep people happy. However, he nearly spoiled it by expressing his support for what is being done by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development despite the fact that Dr McCrea had criticised it. The DUP Whips should sort out the party line on agriculture.

Fred Cobain, during his contribution on regional development, talked about the lack of clarity and linkages between the PSAs and the draft investment strategy, and the aspirational nature of much of the strategy. Patsy McGlone, speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, gave the full Committee view on the lack of consideration of matters such as climate change and the fact that departmental priorities have been excluded from the draft Programme for Government. In other words, the DUP Minister took proposals to the Executive table that have been rejected.

Mr Spratt made another quite good attack on the Alliance Party, and is doing well for a Back-Bencher, although he did not seem to have discussed some issues with his Committee Chairperson, Ms Ramsey, about which she seems less happy than he, and I am not sure how we deal with that.

Mr Alex Maskey criticised the prospect of a shared future, and quoted the waffle section of the draft Programme for Government, yet he did not acknowledge the fact that there are no goals, no targets, and no PSAs.

Similarly, the point was made even more eloquently by my colleague Stephen Farry, when he pointed out that there can be no better future unless there is a shared future, and the use of the title 'A Better Future' if we are talking about a divided future, is not better for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Storey made a particularly good attack. He attacked the Alliance Party, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists, and even Sinn Féin, which was a bonus and was really inclusive. One does not have to agree with Ms Purvis' economic analysis to say that her question "Where is the vision?" is a reasonable one, because there is no vision.

Mr Moutray forgot to attack to the Alliance Party, though he managed to attack the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. Indeed, Basil McCrea made some interesting comments about the lack of concern for those who are less well-off. Declan O'Loan is suffering from the fact that he is being damned with faint praise by the DUP, but he made the point that the real fundamentals are not agreed between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Mr Simpson also sadly forgot to mention the Alliance Party, though he may learn in time for the next debate. Mr McCann made another useful contribution, as highlighted by Trevor Lunn, with his genuine concerns about the failure to deal with the housing budget, and yet so much more needs to be done.

I apologise that I cannot adequately deal with a five-hour debate in ten minutes, but I will jump forward to some points that were made by Dr Paisley. He said that devolution has provided a real opportunity; the fact is that the Executive have not grasped the opportunity with which they were provided. They produced waffle about talk of tolerance — what a weak phrase. The Alliance Party Members are the people on the Benches who are positive; we are the people who have a vision and who want to see a Government that consist of more than the "Chuckle Brothers" chuckling. We want to see a Government that actually deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Perhaps the cynics on the DUP benches, who believe that that vision only means that the "Chuckle Brothers" chuckle, would like to tell the children in an integrated school watching a peace wall being built through their school grounds whether they will be able to live in a shared future, because those Members seem to think that chuckling is all that matters. I want to see real delivery for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: May I restore calm to the House, in my usual measured way? I thank all the contributors to today's debate and pay particular tribute to those Members who have stayed the course. I single out the First Minister, Dr Paisley, who has been present for most, if not all of the debate, and I compliment the leader of

the Alliance Party, Mr Ford, who was present throughout — but, I suppose, the poor are with us always.

The debate has been wide-ranging of necessity, and therefore, I do not expect to be able to comment on all the issues.

Mr Ford took the opportunity, somewhat unusually, in his winding-up speech to refer to other Members' statements. I will attempt to apprise the Assembly as to what took place earlier in the debate. Obviously, it was a long debate, but it has been worthwhile. The Speaker and the two Deputy Speakers have been used to good effect. Most of the big beasts of the political jungle have taken part. There is some kind of TV programme that is set in the jungle. In it, contestants who do not perform to reasonable expectations are evicted. I am not sure who will be evicted after the debate. Perhaps we will leave that for others to judge.

Some Members raised valid criticisms and suggestions, while others made stinging criticisms. Nevertheless, I hope that all the contributions will be taken seriously. Today, a message has been sent to the Executive, the Assembly and the wider public that everyone should take heed of the debate. The full range of Chairpersons or Deputy Chairpersons of each of the Statutory Committees all strutted their stuff, which reminded me slightly of 'The X Factor'. However, I do not feel qualified to act like Simon Cowell.

I acknowledge the considerable assistance provided to all Members of the House — particularly those Members who spoke on behalf of Committees — by Committee officials and staff, in preparation for the debate. At times, I was tempted to get involved in some of the argy-bargy but, given my role today, that would have been unwise.

There was a general welcome for the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government, as outlined by a significant number of Members. Jim Shannon invoked the image of the Wizard of Oz, although it is very apparent that he is not a friend of Dorothy. *[Laughter.]* He said that we need to recognise that there must be a shortlist of priorities, as set out in the draft Programme for Government, as resources are not unlimited.

Patsy McGlone, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, welcomed the cross-cutting commitment to building a sustainable future. He emphasised the need for resources to deliver that objective. However, Dolores Kelly highlighted the lack of connection between the draft Programme for Government, the draft Budget and ISNI.

Questions continued to emerge throughout the debate, even from Members whose parties clearly support the draft Programme for Government, ISNI and the draft Budget. How will this be done? What do individual targets mean, on various issues? How will those targets

be properly delivered, and who will retain responsibility for delivering particular targets? Specific comments were made about the proposed targets. Iris Robinson and Stephen Moutray welcomed the new, innovative and ambitious targets. Mark Durkan welcomed the proposals on investment and jobs, but underscored his comment by requesting careful monitoring.

Gregory Campbell expressed concerns about fuel poverty. Sue Ramsey expressed concerns about issues concerning literacy, numeracy and IT. Fred Cobain expressed concern about the need to achieve sustainable development.

Sue Ramsey spoke about the commercialisation of research. David McNarry felt that many of the targets set out in the Programme for Government were weak, and that the involvement of young people in sport could have been given greater priority. He felt that targets were missing from the Programme for Government, particularly in relation to the role of sport in tackling sectarianism.

Mitchel McLaughlin contended that some targets in relation to sustainable development had been changed, and that three-year targets should be moved forward and achieved earlier. Mark Durkan made the point that efficiencies would have to be made in the context of the Programme for Government and public expenditure, and reminded the House that the Executive do not have the ability or the overall financial clout to do anything about that.

The theme of the economy surfaced throughout the debate. Mark Durkan, Jimmy Spratt and Mervyn Storey mentioned the strong focus of the Programme for Government on the economy, and Mervyn Storey welcomed the draft Budget increases in areas that would be critical to the delivery of an improved economy. David Simpson was pleased that the economy was the top priority. Dr McCrea highlighted the need to reduce bureaucracy if agriculture was to contribute effectively to the economy. Mark Durkan sought clarity on the innovation funds and what they would deliver, and insisted that those funds should be supplementary and provide additional outcomes.

Dawn Purvis — almost a siren voice — said that the Programme for Government was neither truly economic nor just. She was concerned that no peace dividend was forthcoming, that no tax-raising powers were available, and that it was unfair that large companies would be subsidised.

In reference to the shared future strategy, Naomi Long and Declan O'Loan made stinging criticisms of the lack of objectives and actions to address divisions in the community and to bind our divided society together. Fred Cobain noted the change in emphasis from a shared future to "a better future". Stephen Farry was unclear as to the meaning of "a better future"; he

said that the concept of good relations was nowhere to be found in the Programme for Government.

Addressing inequality, Martina Anderson said that it was crucial that those who were most in need should not be left behind, and that a rising tide did not necessarily lift all boats. Dolores Kelly urged the Executive to tackle child poverty, as did Gregory Campbell and Jim Shannon. Basil McCrea expressed a general concern about a lack of focus on those who need support, and asked for answers on improving social mobility and education. Tom Elliott reminded the House of the need for a strategic plan to help those children who are most in need. *[Interruption.]*

I realise that Members have heard their colleagues' contributions; it may be unhelpful to restate that I expected a little better attention from the House.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Iris Robinson welcomed the Programme for Government's focus on health promotion and screening targets.

Stephen Farry was concerned about the lack of focus on mental-health issues. Dr McCrea felt that greater priority should be given to agriculture and recognised the decline in the red meat and fish industries and the need to help them to increase competitiveness by reducing bureaucracy. He felt that targets were not challenging enough in some areas. However, Jim Shannon welcomed the investment in agriculture and rural development.

9.00 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, said that climate change should be given a higher profile in the draft Programme for Government. He was concerned about the impact of efficiencies on planning and the need for the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission to be well resourced. Cathal Boylan said that there should be a commitment to the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency.

Peter Weir welcomed the commitment to reduce the number of road deaths. Many Members welcomed the priority given to tackling the housing crisis and to increasing social housing, but emphasised the need for action across Government to provide that. Others were more critical and said that there was a need for additional resources for social housing and for the draft Programme for Government to be strengthened in that area.

Concerns were expressed about the legislation relating to the education and skills authority and the likelihood that efficiency savings will be delivered. Jennifer McCann felt that investing in skills was essential and that there was a need to address the attainment gap. Jimmy Spratt welcomed the targets to improve skill levels, but Basil McCrea questioned why we are not

investing more in that area. Stephen Moutray welcomed the range of actions and targets to improve the lives of children and young people. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mitchel McLaughlin, gave a commitment to ensure efficient and effective public services.

On the investment strategy, Martina Anderson and Raymond McCartney said that there was a need to tackle regional disparities and investment, and not simply to promote regional balance. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, David McNarry, was concerned about the lack of detail in the investment strategy, which hinders Committee scrutiny.

Mark Durkan welcomed the commitment to invest in technology infrastructure. Sammy Wilson had concerns about the ability of the Department of Education to deliver large infrastructure projects. Jennifer McCann was concerned about delays that may be created as a result of PFI. The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Fred Cobain, raised the need for clarity in relation to how the pillars in the investment strategy relate to the draft Programme for Government priorities. Jimmy Spratt thought that the investment strategy demonstrated that the Executive meant business by investing in education.

We moved through the lengthy but useful debate. Other Members, such as Dominic Bradley, spoke about educational issues. Nelson McCausland mentioned that it was good for resources to be invested in cultural tourism. Michelle O'Neill challenged the statement about 100% broadband and its high cost in rural areas. Trevor Lunn said that there was a lack of new actions and targets, and added that many targets were restatements of existing commitments.

Simon Hamilton highlighted the benefits of the draft investment strategy and gave the example of the proposed rapid-transport system. Mary Bradley made an impassioned plea for free personal care on behalf of older people, and she also highlighted the plight of the homeless.

I thank the First Minister for his response to the motion. I particularly welcome his comments on the contribution that Committees make; the importance placed on those contributions, and his assurance that Committees have had, and will continue to have, an important input into the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy. I also welcome the First Minister's commitment to a genuine consultation process and the public aspects of that process. I hope that account will be taken of the many useful comments and views expressed during today's debate before both the documents are finalised.

I hope that I have been able to reflect some of the main points that were raised in the debate. The points that I have missed will, of course, be contained in the Hansard report. No doubt, that report will make for essential bedtime reading tomorrow night. The purpose of the debate was to afford Members an opportunity to make the Executive aware of their views on the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, and, in that regard, I believe that it has been a success.

I am mindful of my position as Chairman of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, so it would be unwise for me to comment in detail on the amendment in the names of Mr Ford and other Alliance Party Members. It will be for Members to decide whether they will support that amendment, and I have no doubt that individual Members, and parties, will determine that for themselves. I trust that the Executive will take careful account of the views expressed today and the views of the Committees as expressed in our forthcoming report.

I thank everyone who contributed to the debate, and I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 50.

AYES

*Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley,
Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree,
Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Hanna,
Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn,
Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea,
Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis,
Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

*Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly,
Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke,
Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson,
Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann,
Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland,
Mr I McCrea, Mrs McGill, Mr McHugh,
Miss McIlveen, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan,
Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín,
Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr,
Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey,
Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt,
Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr Moutray.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The structure of the Assembly is built around a mandatory coalition that was negotiated principally by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. The Programme for Government is the basis on which any coalition Government are able to progress. Lest there be any doubt at a later stage, without an agreed Programme for Government, there cannot be government.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Adjourned at 9.22 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 27 November 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: At the start of the sitting on Tuesday 20 November, Mr Storey sought a ruling on the issue of a Deputy Speaker having voted on a motion after being in the Chair for part of the debate on that motion. I agreed to come back to the House with a ruling on that matter.

In the case to which Mr Storey referred, I have established that the Deputy Speaker was in the Chair for three minutes, or slightly less. In that time he gave advice to the House on a petition of concern and on the time that had been allocated to the debate.

The Deputy Speaker heard only a very small portion of the opening speech in the debate, and was not required to intervene during that time.

The Deputy Speaker was in the Chair for that short time through no fault of his own. He was due to leave the Chair before the debate commenced. There was an unfortunate delay in my arrival to relieve him, and the Deputy Speaker, quite rightly, continued with business when the previous item on the Order Paper had concluded.

In this instance, the Deputy Speaker's voting — or not voting — would not have altered the overall result.

Nevertheless, our convention has been that Deputy Speakers do not participate in debates during which they have occupied the Chair. That is clear from page 13 of 'The Assembly Companion' and, in my view, voting on a motion or an amendment clearly qualifies as participation in a debate. With hindsight — despite the very brief time that the Deputy Speaker spent in the Chair — I should have advised Deputy Speakers not to involve themselves in a vote at the conclusion of a debate during which they have been in the Chair.

I shall ensure that, in future, that convention is adhered to, and I thank Mr Storey for this example of what I described last week as a valid and helpful point of order.

I have made my ruling, and the matter is closed.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hear what you have said, and I draw your attention to Standing Order 25(2). I understand that not only did the Deputy Speaker preside and vote, but he had signed the petition of concern that had been presented on the motion that was being debated.

Mr Speaker: I thank Lord Morrow for that helpful point of order. I can assure him that it has been noted.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you accept that it is entirely inappropriate for a Deputy Speaker of this House to sign a petition of concern and then to sit in the Chair, albeit for a brief period, during the debate on the motion on which he has signed a petition of concern? Will you rule that that is inappropriate and should not happen in the future?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I have ruled that no Deputy Speaker who has been in the Chair during a debate should be involved in the voting on that motion. I am absolutely clear on that.

Mr Storey: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you also make a ruling on the issue of the validity of the petition of concern? If the Deputy Speaker had signed the petition of concern and had given advice regarding it when in the Chair, surely the petition of concern is brought into question and rather than having the required 30 signatures would have only 29?

Mr Speaker: My advice is absolutely clear: the petition of concern was valid — very much so.

Mr Storey: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. The Deputy Speaker to whom you refer seems to court some controversy. I ask the Speaker to rule on allegations that have been made in the House of Commons about a story in regard —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I advise him not to stray into that particular area. He should not do that.

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you advise the House on what should happen in future? Clearly, the Deputy Speaker was in a situation that was unprecedented and unintended. Following your ruling today, in future, should the Deputy Speaker suspend the sitting until someone else can take the Chair or is he to trapped in a situation that was not planned?

Mr Speaker: That situation will not arise again. I can assure the Member of that.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

North/South Ministerial Council — Tourism Sectoral Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) tourism sectoral meeting.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting in tourism sectoral format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly. The report has been endorsed by Michelle Gildernew. The meeting was held in Dublin Castle on 8 November 2007. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment along with Michelle Gildernew, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Irish Government were represented by Séamus Brennan, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism.

The Council considered a report from Ms Ann Riordan, vice-chair of Tourism Ireland and welcomed the progress that that organisation has made since the last meeting in February 2002. The Council noted the strong growth in visitor numbers and revenue, which are forecast to have grown by 2·17 million and £0·87 billion respectively during that period, including an increase of 391,000 in the number of visitors to Northern Ireland.

The Council received a presentation on the future plans of Tourism Ireland from the chief executive officer. It welcomed the broad objectives outlined in Tourism Ireland's three-year corporate plan, including the two key goals of increasing tourism to the island of Ireland as a whole and supporting Northern Ireland to realise its tourism potential. The Council welcomed the corporate plan's challenging targets and approved, in principle, the Tourism Ireland corporate plan 2008-10 and the business plan for 2008, subject to budgetary considerations.

The Council also noted Tourism Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2006. The Council agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format should take place in spring 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I thank the Minister for his statement and I thank him and his ministerial colleagues for their work at the sectoral meeting.

Some time ago, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment had the benefit of a presentation from Tourism Ireland as well as those other key interests. It is welcome to see a positive perspective on the success of Tourism Ireland Ltd in contributing to a growth in visitor numbers in the island as a whole, and in the North as well.

As Tourism Ireland takes forward that marketing responsibility, will the Minister, through the Council and his own office, take steps to ensure that Tourism Ireland is in a better position to engage with the regional tourism partnerships (RTPs) that are performing tourism functions and trying to market local areas? RTPs have been complaining to Committee members that they do not have the positive and active relationship with Tourism Ireland that would allow them to make the most of their marketing role.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Committee Chairperson for his remarks, and I assure him that as far as I am concerned the potential for tourism to contribute greatly to the economy of Northern Ireland is well recognised. We have an enormous opportunity to avail of that contribution as we move forward.

The Chairperson will be aware that the work of the various parts of the tourism industry was examined recently by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which looked at the relationships between Tourism Ireland, the RTPs, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and all of the stakeholders in promoting tourism. It is something that I am looking at very carefully.

There is a distinction in marketing responsibilities between Tourism Ireland, which is responsible for marketing in GB and elsewhere, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which is responsible for marketing in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland and for product development. It is important that the RTPs are fully and properly engaged as appropriate with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, and they can be assured of my support in that regard.

Mr Simpson: Does the Minister agree that the annual demonstrations and other events organised by the Loyal Orders offer a unique opportunity to enhance Northern Ireland's tourism potential, and will he give an indication of his plans to realise that potential?

Mr Dodds: Cultural tourism is a major part of the tourism product that most countries and regions offer. In Northern Ireland, particularly, that is something that we can exploit better as we move forward. All studies show that cultural tourism is a major motivator when it comes to travel. Sightseers and culture seekers account for 60% of visitors to the island of Ireland, and those numbers are growing.

The Member will be aware that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has engaged with some of the Loyal

Orders on the creation and promotion of Orangefest, and there is a lot of good work ongoing in relation to that. The Member will also be aware of a recent press release issued by the Orange Order in which it was very positive about its engagement with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland in this matter.

There is enormous potential for exploiting greater tourism promise in what is a unique series of events in Northern Ireland, and I will work closely with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to realise that potential.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

It is all very well to talk about increasing the number of visitors, but did any discussion take place on the accommodation infrastructure? I refer to rural accommodation, and especially to hostels and low-budget accommodation. Does the Minister agree that the farming community needs to diversify? If the matter was not discussed at the sectoral meeting, will the Minister table it for inclusion in the spring?

10.45 am

Mr Dodds: If the Member reads the corporate plans and the other documents that were tabled for discussion at the North/South Ministerial Council tourism sectoral meeting, he will realise that they covered a vast range of issues.

Northern Ireland must do more. It must offer more tourism product, make the best of the skills available in the tourism industry and improve accommodation at all levels, and that includes improving hotel and hostel accommodation. My Department is not the only one responsible for improving the tourism industry — other Departments are also involved. However, we must make progress, because if we are to market Northern Ireland better, and bring more out-of-state visitors to the Province as a result, accommodation is needed in which to put them up.

I am pleased to note that progress has been made. Several rural areas are providing high-quality accommodation, not least County Fermanagh, which has a new golf hotel. Other parts of the Province are also making improvements. I will watch carefully to ensure that the accommodation infrastructure continues to improve and that we provide our visitors with the requisite standard of accommodation and number of bed places to meet the growing demand.

Mr Cree: Has the Minister any plans to attempt to combine all the industry players' strategies when establishing the subregional tourism bodies?

Mr Dodds: I refer the Member to the answer that I gave a short time ago to the Chairman of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in which I dealt with precisely that matter. In my reply, I mentioned the

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's report, in which it considered that issue. My Department is also considering it. Greater clarity of roles and responsibilities among Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the regional tourism partnerships is necessary, and that will be addressed in the coming months as part of a wider review of departmental tourism-support organisations' roles and responsibilities.

Dr Farry: The Minister mentioned the increase in Northern Ireland's tourist numbers and tourist revenue. In order to compare tourism as a percentage share of the economy in Northern Ireland with that in the Republic of Ireland, will he indicate what those increases have been overall? There has been a significant gap between the two countries' levels of development over the years, and the House would be interested to learn whether that gap is closing or widening. Moreover, how can we take steps to rebalance tourism on the island of Ireland?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which is an important one. I refer the Member to the corporate plan for Tourism Ireland and to the accounts that contain the figures about which he enquired. As I have already said, those documents formed part of the discussions at the North/South Ministerial Council tourism sectoral meeting. He is absolutely right to point to the need to increase Northern Ireland's percentage share of tourism revenue and visitor numbers for the island of Ireland. I am keen to ensure that that happens, because it is vital that we exploit our tourism potential.

We hope to have more up-to-date figures shortly, but the Member will be interested to note that a study that was conducted in 2003 into the value of the tourism industry to the Northern Ireland economy, and from which the most up-to-date figures come, found that the total income generated by tourism in that year was worth some 3.5% of gross value added (GVA) — £782 million — to the Northern Ireland economy. That study was one of the first of its kind into tourism and its contribution to the economy to be carried out anywhere in the United Kingdom and means that tourism activity supports some 36,700 jobs. Therefore, tourism makes a significant contribution to our economy. In fact, our tourism industry contributes four fifths of what our agriculture industry does to GVA.

It is an important contribution to the economy, but the Member is absolutely right to point to the unfulfilled potential and the need to close the gap with the Irish Republic. The targets that we have set out in the Programme for Government for increases in visitor numbers and revenue are challenging and different from what has gone before. Under direct rule, we would not have had that kind of focus on the economic benefits of tourism. Those challenging figures have been put there for a reason: because they can give a major, quick return to the economy.

Mr Hamilton: Can the Minister confirm that the Tourism Ireland brand review was discussed at the sectoral meeting? Can he give us an update on the progress of that review and on what its conclusions are likely to be?

Mr Dodds: The current brand has been in place since 1995, and refinements to it have been made on two occasions. A major exercise has been under way to look at the brand and reflect the changing nature of life in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It is important that the brand image that goes out across the world is appropriate to today's circumstances. Tourism Ireland is finalising its report on the review, which will be launched to the tourism industry soon. Tourism Ireland will be launching a new marketing campaign to communicate the new brand message in 2009 and, in preparation for that, will be working with the industry in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic throughout next year to ensure full understanding of, and buy-in to, the brand and to develop industry's awareness of its critical role in developing and delivering that.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat. My colleague Mr Clarke raised the issue of the lack of accommodation and the need to provide more. One of the tourist places in the north-west that is most famous in song and story is Portstewart. One by one, the hotels there have been demolished and replaced with apartments. The place has become an ugly dormitory for the university in Coleraine. Maybe we could move along the coast and look at what is probably the most beautiful part of the north-west and maybe the most beautiful part of Ireland: the Magilligan coast from Downhill to Derry city, with all the possibilities for activity tourism on the beach and on the water. I have made representations to our Southern counterparts, and they would —

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question?

Mr Brolly: Will the Minister raise the whole issue of the north-west with his Southern counterpart when they meet again, and see what can be done to develop what is a place of great potential, for tourism and otherwise?

Mr Dodds: The Member may be reassured to know that I do not have to wait for the next meeting with my Southern counterparts to deal with that issue. We are addressing it already, and will continue to do so. He mentioned the issue of accommodation, which has also been raised previously. It is, as I have said, a matter that we are very conscious of. It will obviously involve a major contribution from the private sector. I know that some Members have a problem with that, but if we are to see the accommodation issue moving forward, the private sector will have to become more active in that whole area, in terms of both the provision of accommodation and the quality of the experience that is offered to people who stay.

The Member will be aware of the Walled City signature project in the north-west; it has received a lot of support, and has progressed very well. It is already making an impact on tourist numbers for the city of Londonderry. Major work has also been done in the Causeway Coast area as part of the signature project programme. The outlook for tourism in the north-west, and in the north of the Province generally, is extremely positive.

It is one of our major attractions, and the input of funding and resources will increase that. With regard to accommodation, anyone in the private sector who looks ahead at economic growth will realise that there are enormous opportunities in Northern Ireland, given the expected increase in visitor numbers. The Minister of the Environment, who has responsibility for planning, is present, and I have no doubt that she has heard all that has been said. I hope that cognisance will be taken of the necessary balance between investment for tourist growth and the issues raised concerning planning while preserving the heritage.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement, in which tourism was specifically mentioned. I love taking a tour of the Irish coast, along Strangford Lough, to Killynether forest, or to Mount Stewart. Will the Minister elaborate on how he sees tourism in Northern Ireland providing the potential jobs and the economic boost for us all?

Mr Dodds: Several Members have waxed lyrical about the beauty of their own areas, and that is to be commended. I well remember an excellent Adjournment debate on the beauties of Strangford: it saved the Northern Ireland Tourist Board from having to write its next brochure on that part of the world.

Mr Shannon, who is a Member for Strangford, mentioned potential. In response to Dr Farry, a Member for North Down, I spoke of the current economic contribution. At the onset of the Troubles more than 35 years ago, Northern Ireland lost 80% of its tourism overnight, and has never really recovered from that. A gap exists between those who visit the South and those who come here because of the legacy issues. When that gap is considered, there is enormous potential.

A country of Northern Ireland's size and economy warrants more than the 5% to 7% of resident holiday visitors and approximately 50% of the business visitors from Great Britain who come here. Moreover, there are enormous opportunities to increase the number of visitors not only from Great Britain, but from the Republic. Had Northern Ireland matched, since 1969, the Republic of Ireland's external-visitor trends, the income from tourism would have been worth an additional £0.25 billion. That shows the potential, and the enormous contribution that could be made to job creation in all parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I suppose that, when Members are lauding their own areas, he will agree with me about County Fermanagh and its potential. I am curious to know whether there was any discussion about plans or proposals to develop the Republic of Ireland site of the Battle of the Boyne. That would increase tourist potential in that area.

Mr Dodds: The Member is right to point to the beauties of Fermanagh. He shares a position with me on that, since I was brought up there, and my parents still live there. I take delight in agreeing with him on that point.

It does not require a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council for my Department to progress the matter of the Boyne heritage site and to be interested in discussing it. Many have pointed to its potential tourist growth and, to be fair, the Irish Government have been positive in their contribution. The Member can, therefore, be assured that on that issue — as on the beauties of Fermanagh — he and I are at one.

Mr Dallat: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. With regard to Mr Simpson's question on the role of the Orange Order, I have no doubt that, now that it has sent best wishes to the new cardinal, there will be inquisitive visitors from all over the world.

Does the Minister agree that Tourism Ireland, with a base in Coleraine, is ideally suited to ensuring that Northern Ireland gets its fair share of international tourism?

Will the Minister ensure the House that the development of the lower River Bann and the reopening of the Ulster Canal remain at the top of the agenda in promoting international tourism?

11.00 am

Mr Dodds: The Member — quite rightly — raises the matter of the Ulster Canal, part of which is in his constituency. That issue primarily falls within the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), and I am sure that that Department will note the Member's comments.

The Member is talking about a tourism product for Northern Ireland. We have an ambitious and challenging target to increase the number of visitors to Northern Ireland to 2.5 million over the period of the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) to 2011. That means investing not only in marketing — which is Tourism Ireland's job — but in product. Signature projects are important for economic growth, as is local tourism. I want to support all types of tourism product and see them grow. Northern Ireland has a natural beauty and landscape, but we must prioritise the creation of better-quality activities and the provision of more accommodation.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's briefing on the North/South Ministerial Council's tourism sectoral meeting. I wish to revisit an issue that was discussed in the House yesterday, but I am conscious of the Speaker's advice about how far the matter can be pushed. Given the crossover in membership of the events company and the Tourist Board, is the Minister confident that the Tourist Board is in safe hands?

Mr Dodds: Given that the Tourist Board falls under the remit of my Department, I can give the Member a categorical assurance that it is in safe hands; I hope that he agrees with me.

As the Member said, the Northern Ireland Events Company, which is a matter for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, was discussed in the House yesterday. In principle, it is planned, after all due diligence has been exercised, that the events company will merge with the Tourist Board as soon as possible. At this stage, I do not wish to comment any further, other than to say that I have confidence in the Tourist Board's management and in the role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI).

Mr Donaldson: I declare an interest as a member of Lisburn City Council.

Will the Minister tell the House what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the South about the reopening of the Lagan Canal in order to develop the Belfast metropolitan area's tourist potential? The Minister is a member of Belfast City Council, so he will know that Castlereagh Borough Council, Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council and Craigavon Borough Council have formed a group to progress the reopening of the Lagan Canal. The canal is an important inland waterway that links into Lough Neagh and ultimately into the lower River Bann and Ulster Canal systems.

Mr Dodds: The Member has done an excellent, and appropriate, job in advertising the benefits of that scheme, in which various councils are participating. I agree with him about the scheme's positive impact and the work that has been undertaken to date. He will be aware that that issue falls primarily within the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I will raise that point with my ministerial colleague.

My counterpart in the Irish Republic and I agree that it is absolutely vital to raise the quality and standard of the tourism product in order to increase the number of visitors and the revenue generated in the Irish Republic and in Northern Ireland. The project that the Member describes is a key element of that. I have no doubt that, when that project comes to fruition, it will be a big draw and will enhance Lisburn and Belfast.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his briefing on the tourism sectoral meeting. I welcome his comments about cultural tourism and local tourism projects.

Does he have any plans to develop local, community-based tourism projects such as Coiste, which is a republican ex-prisoner group in west Belfast? Such projects attract large numbers of visitors each year.

Mr Dodds: I refer the Member to my earlier comments about cultural tourism. It is important that the tourism product contains a mix of projects. I cannot respond in the House today about the particular project that the Member has mentioned. However, now that it has been drawn to my attention, I will look at what the project entails. It is vital that both visitors and local residents are comfortable with tourism projects, and their product, because local people who go on day trips generate a great deal of our tourism spend. Any allocation of funds to projects that receive public money to support them must be done in a fair, neutral, impartial and balanced way.

Mr Buchanan: The Minister has touched briefly on my question. Is he satisfied with the profile given to the Walled City signature project in Londonderry? Does he agree that the project has tremendous potential, particularly as we approach the four-hundredth anniversary of the plantation of Ulster?

Mr Dodds: The Walled City signature project has enormous potential. I was recently in Londonderry, where I visited some elements of the project, the progress on which was very encouraging.

The Member mentioned the four-hundredth anniversary of the plantation of Ulster. In a recent discussion with a delegation from the local council and the Dean of Londonderry, I had the opportunity to talk about the anniversary. How that event should be marked is being planned. It is an important anniversary, which includes a number of significant events, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and local stakeholders in Londonderry will want to mark it. For visitors to Northern Ireland who seek cultural tourism and attractions that are linked to our history, the plantation of Ulster rates as one of the more significant events.

Mr Spratt: Is the Minister satisfied that the amounts allocated to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland in the draft Budget will ensure that targets are met?

Mr Dodds: The Member raises an important matter. In the draft Programme for Government and the comprehensive spending review, we have put our money where our mouth is. Under direct rule, there was a great deal of talk about boosting tourism and the economy, but the resources, emphasis and centrality required to do that were not recognised. That is the difference between the draft Programme for Government and the comprehensive spending review and what went before.

Significant additions have been made to the resources and capital given to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Tourism Ireland's resource allocations have also

increased significantly. There is a long way yet to go, however. I could argue a strong case in the House for even more resources to be provided, but I will instead continue to argue that case in an appropriate manner, because I recognise that a balance must be struck on all expenditure issues. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is at my side and will have heard what I said, recognises, as do my colleagues, the importance of the economy, and the importance of tourism to the economy. I am confident that the challenging targets that have been set will be achieved. The increased resources, and the drive behind those resources, will ensure that we achieve the value for money and delivery that will produce the necessary results.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Armagh City and District Council. Being from one of the beautiful parts of the North — Armagh City, the ecclesiastical capital — I am aware that we have the cardinal coming on Thursday and that the area has huge tourism potential. How does the Minister intend to enhance that potential?

Mr Dodds: I am sure that the First Minister, who is present, will endorse the Member's comments about Armagh, as it is his birthplace.

The Member will be aware that the St Patrick/Christian Heritage signature project, which is one of the five signature projects for Northern Ireland, is primarily based in the urban centres of Armagh and Downpatrick, although, obviously, it has a resonance for all of Northern Ireland and wider afield. That project is extremely important, and the draft Budget is providing £3.5 million to take it forward. A revised action plan will be produced to: develop key sites along the trail of places associated with St Patrick; engage with the private sector; and extend the product across Northern Ireland and into the Irish Republic. The signposted St Patrick's Trail route will be ready for summer 2008.

Mr Speaker: That ends questions on the ministerial statement.

Review of Domestic Rating Reform

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement regarding the review of domestic rating reform.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I have just been made aware that there is a difficulty in that, apparently, copies of my statement are not outside the Chamber for Members. I do not know whether that will make any difference to proceedings. My statement is long, and I do not print, copy and distribute it myself, but I think Members would like to have it in their hands.

Mr O'Loan: On a point of order. It would be very difficult for Members to address themselves to the statement and ask questions without having a copy. I would like a decision on that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It might be useful if the Minister could clarify when the statement will be available to Members.

Mr P Robinson: I have an empty box at the moment for some reason, so I am unable to give you a response.

Mr Speaker: Will the Minister continue?

Mr P Robinson: I will speak slowly to allow the Department to catch up with me.

I am making an announcement today about the outcome of the Executive's review of the domestic rating system that was introduced in April under direct rule and that fulfils the commitment I made to the Assembly in June when publishing the terms of reference for the review. Today's announcement, taken together with other recent announcements on the draft Budget, will further demonstrate our commitment to making a real difference for householders in Northern Ireland.

We must remember that what really matters to people is the level of rates that they have to pay, so any changes that we make need to have that proviso. Annual rate increases must be kept to a minimum, otherwise the whole system becomes discredited.

I set about the task even before taking office by ensuring, along with others, that the link with the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) was broken in advance of restoration. That link was ill-conceived and simply created the conditions in which there was no incentive to save money, and higher rates became an end in itself. Let us not forget that the regional rate went up by 62% over the past five years under the previous Administration.

My recent announcement on the draft Budget to freeze the domestic regional rate over the comprehensive spending review period confirms my intentions in that regard. That regional rates freeze, and this further

package of reliefs, are in addition to the commitment that we have given that householders will see the benefit of the contribution that they already make to the cost of water through their rates — an average of £160 for each rates bill. Against that background I present these proposals to the Assembly today.

It is only 195 days since I commissioned the review. In that short time we have covered a lot of ground, generated much debate and consulted broadly; ultimately, we have had to make difficult choices.

11.15 am

I am confident that the package of proposals that I intend to announce today is a balanced one that will lead to a more acceptable system and a better distribution of the rating burden among householders in Northern Ireland. However, I cannot pretend that it has been an easy task, particularly given the timetable to which we were working — a timetable driven by the desire to make changes in time for next year's bills. No one expected that it would be straightforward, as will be found with any review that seeks to satisfy competing interests.

In addition, the process has confirmed that we have to be realistic and recognise that if we had been starting from square one, things might have been very different. Radical change now will only lead to a different set of winners and losers. Although I would be the first to recognise the limitations of any property tax system, I believe that, with the right checks and balances, the current system, based on capital values, can be made much fairer. Getting the right checks and balances is, therefore, what I have focused on, and is what I believe we have achieved through the package of proposals that I am presenting to the Assembly today.

Before I outline the proposals, I record my gratitude to the 119 individuals and organisations that responded during the 12-week consultation period that ended on 31 August 2007. Their informative and considered responses have undoubtedly helped to shape the outcomes of the review, and I have made it my business to ensure that the key messages conveyed through the process have been addressed.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel also made a massive contribution to the process. Its thorough and efficient approach was critical to the review timetable remaining on track, and I am particularly grateful to the Chairman and members for giving me advance sight of their report for that purpose. I am even more pleased to report that the Committee's contribution can be clearly seen in the outcome of the review, with many of our recommendations aligning.

I will turn now to the proposals. Members will recall from my earlier statements that the review was to be taken forward in two strands in line with the terms of reference. Strand one involved a thorough examination

of the options for change that could be delivered within the scope of the existing primary legislation in time for next year's rates bills. Under that strand we also looked at ways in which that legislation could be changed to further improve the system in the medium term.

Strand two concentrated on longer-term options for raising revenue through local taxation, either as alternatives or supplements to the domestic rating system. That approach has led to the preparation of a number of proposals, which are presented to the Assembly as a cohesive package. In my view, they complement one another well, providing the right balance between protecting those most affected by the previous reforms and those most in need, namely our pensioners, and also attending to wider policy objectives.

In summary, the package includes proposals for a 20% single-pensioner discount for ratepayers aged 70 and over and living alone; an increase in savings thresholds from £16,000 to £50,000 for pensioners under the existing lower-income relief scheme; measures to improve the take-up of relief; the introduction of a deferment scheme as a choice for pensioners who own their own homes; a reduction in the maximum capital value; the rating of empty homes; rebates to encourage the provision of energy-efficiency measures for homes in Northern Ireland; and further evaluation and consultation on student rate relief and possible alternatives, with a view to abolishing it. Lastly, there will be further work on the option of introducing a derelict-land tax in Northern Ireland.

The key changes for next year will be the introduction of a single-pensioner discount set at 20% for ratepayers aged 70 and over and living alone, and the proposed increase in the savings limit applied under the low-income rate-relief scheme from £16,000 to £50,000 for pensioners. Those are targeted measures, and I believe that they will have an immediate and positive impact for a relatively modest cost. That cost will be borne by the regional rate, rather than by other ratepayers. Both can also be provided for through subordinate legislation, subject, of course, to the approval of the Assembly.

The increase in the current savings limit is to ensure that pensioners who have saved for their retirement do not find themselves ineligible for rate relief. It is in line with the first-step recommendations of the Lyons Report and reflects the considerable support for such a change during the consultation process. The measure is also supported by the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

In addition to that and the extra reliefs for pensioners that were secured during the St Andrews negotiations, I want to address the difficulties facing single pensioners — in particular, those which are a result of the reforms that were introduced under direct rule. The responses that

were received during the consultation — many of which were from single pensioners — seem to support that.

Analysis that has been undertaken with the help of experts from the Department for Social Development (DSD) has highlighted as a major shortcoming the low take-up of existing reliefs among that group. That is why I am also proposing the introduction of a lone-pensioner discount from April 2008 for those who are over 70 years of age. However, I am not in favour of extending that discount to all single householders. Such a widespread discount would be difficult to justify on grounds of cost, need and vulnerability to fraud.

Last week there was much talk in the media about a single-person discount, and claims that, by not harmonising with arrangements that apply under the council-tax system in Great Britain, Northern Ireland is being unfairly treated. It is important that people fully understand that a discount given to any group — whether deserving or not — must, in the long run, be paid for through other ratepayers' paying more. The cost of a discount for single-person households would be of the order of magnitude of £30 million a year. It is difficult to argue that single-person households represent a vulnerable group that requires such a level of support. Indeed, I pose the question of whether it would be right for young families struggling with large mortgages to be required to pay a supplement in order to pay for people who are affluent but living alone.

I have two further points about the proposal for a single-pensioner discount. In its report, the Committee for Finance and Personnel supported the introduction of such a discount for people over 75 years of age. However, on the basis that it would have a much greater impact, particularly in assisting with the major issue of take-up levels, my view is that the age threshold should be 70. I will continue to review whether even lower age thresholds might be justified in the future.

Currently, the evidence shows that people who have recently retired from employment are in a better position to pay their rates bill and to avail of rate rebates or low-income relief. According to the family resources survey, the average weekly income of recently retired single pensioners is 30% higher than that of single pensioners as a whole. That survey also shows that the average income of single female pensioners — who make up the vast majority of single pensioners — aged 70 to 74 is approximately 28% lower than for those aged 60 to 64, and 15% lower than for those aged 75 to 79.

I propose that the discount level be set at 20%. That, in conjunction with the other proposed support measures such as the increased savings limit, will provide an adequate level of support. The discount will be applied after other reliefs — including transitional relief — have been awarded, in order that the target group will

effectively get, and clearly see, the benefit of a 20% reduction in their bills.

Before moving on to the proposals for April 2009 and beyond, I will deal with the important issue of the low take-up levels of reliefs in Northern Ireland. As the report of the Lyons Inquiry into local government in England shows, that issue is not unique to Northern Ireland. However, urgent action is clearly required here, particularly in the owner-occupied sector, where the take-up rate for those who are eligible for the new lower-income rate-relief scheme is estimated to be 42%. As I said, pensioners, in particular, are not taking up that relief. A review of good practice in benefit take-up levels elsewhere has highlighted a number of broad actions that might be taken in order to improve rates-relief take-up levels in Northern Ireland. The Committee has recommended that those actions should be vigorously pursued. In light of that, and as a matter of urgency, I propose to commission a study, led by the voluntary and community sector, to identify actions that might be taken to support Government awareness and take-up strategies next year.

The possibility of new legislation giving increased data-sharing powers to relevant agencies will also be examined as a matter of urgency.

That will be subject to the completion of a privacy impact assessment to protect the interests of our citizens and to ensure that the data is safeguarded.

As well as the proposals for next year, I am pleased to present several further proposals to the Assembly that will take slightly longer to implement but will provide further checks and balances to ensure that the overall system is as fair as possible.

Staying on the theme of pensioners, the first proposal is for the introduction of a voluntary deferment scheme for homeowning pensioners. Essentially, it will involve rolling up rate payments at a concessionary rate of interest until the sale of the house and then securing the debt by creating a charge on the property. Such schemes are not uncommon in other jurisdictions. Although take-up is usually very low because of inheritance considerations, such a scheme can suit better-off pensioners who are beyond the income limits of the lower income relief scheme.

Such a scheme would require subordinate legislation to be passed, which could be achieved by April 2008, subject to the Assembly's approval. However, complex administrative arrangements must be developed before it could be fully implemented, and further consultation on the detailed mechanisms would be desirable. Therefore, April 2009 has been set as the earliest date for the introduction of a deferment scheme.

Looking more widely, another successful outcome of the St Andrews negotiations last year was the introduction of a maximum cap set on properties with

a capital value of £500,000 or more. It is clear that that move has helped to allay some of the public's fear about the excessive impact of the new system. However, is the cap set at the right level? My view is that it is not, and I am attracted to the idea of setting it at the lower level of £400,000. Although the number of households that would directly benefit from such a move would be fairly low — about 5,000 in total — it would bring the highest bills under the rating system here into line with the average bills in the highest band of the council-tax system. That is a fairer comparator than the absolute highest council tax bill, which provided the rationale behind the initial cap level.

I shall consult further on the issue, as I am keen to take account of developments on water charging and, in particular, what cap, if any, will be proposed there. Bearing that in mind, I propose to reduce the cap in April 2009, with final confirmation of its level to be made following consultation.

So far, I have dealt with some of the necessary checks that the rating system must have if it is to be fair, but what about the balances?

A popular measure during the consultation exercise, and with the Committee for Finance and Personnel, was the rating of vacant domestic property — not least because of the potential net revenue gain it could yield. Taking account of exemptions, and assuming that the DFP agency responsible for rate collection — Land and Property Services — is fully equipped and resourced to implement the policy, the revenue gain could be in the region of £15 million to £20 million per annum.

However, the policy is more than a device for raising revenue; it could assist with wider policy objectives, such as housing affordability. That was the subject of the recent Semple Report, which is being taken forward by the Department for Social Development. Given its clear benefits, I propose to introduce the rating of vacant domestic property at a rate of 100% at the earliest possible opportunity, which will most likely be April 2009.

That date will give us time to consider the outcomes of the work being undertaken by the University of Ulster, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and the Department for Social Development's working group on housing affordability. It will also allow us to further assess and consult on the issue before taking decisions on items such as exemptions or exempt periods that might need to be applied.

The review of domestic rating reform also looked at the longer term and considered options as alternatives or supplements to the current rating system. One option that should be carefully considered is the taxing of derelict or vacant land. That would be a complementary measure to the taxing of vacant houses. The idea proved popular during the consultation exercise, and the

Committee for Finance and Personnel has recommended that it be given serious consideration.

Although the measure could bring in much-needed additional revenue to help fund public services, it could also help to satisfy other wider policy considerations, such as ensuring that there is sufficient supply of development land available. Thus it would assist two policy aims: that of providing affordable housing and that of stimulating economic growth.

11.30 am

In announcing our intention to examine that in greater detail, I emphasise that today is merely a first step. We need to consider carefully the positive and negative effects that such a taxation measure could have. A delicate balance has to be struck to ensure that it frees up land for development by providing a disincentive to holding it back, but at the same time does not cause such an imposition on developers that it affects the viability of urban development.

Before we can make any decisions about including the measure in legislation, we will have to examine the matter in greater detail and consult with those likely to be affected by such a measure. Therefore, in proceeding with the proposal, I will be working closely with other Departments, particularly the Department for Social Development and, given its role in planning, the Department of the Environment. Depending on the outcome of those considerations, the introduction of a tax on derelict land may simply be an extension of the existing non-domestic rating system, or it may be a new local tax, in which case, it may require changes to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Some of the responses to the consultation considered that local taxation should be used in a positive way by serving as an incentive to act in a more environmentally responsible manner. That aligns with my Department's wider commitment to promote sustainable development. Therefore, I wholeheartedly support that aspiration, provided, of course, that it can be delivered in a cost-effective way.

Having considered the matter in light of the consultation responses and the Committee's report, I intend to proceed with the option of providing rate rebates that offer the potential to improve the energy efficiency of our housing stock. I am proposing two measures.

First, I want to provide a rate rebate to existing homes that make energy-efficiency improvements, such as cavity-wall and loft insulation. Similar schemes already operate in some local authorities in England, part-funded by schemes set up and supported by the energy generators there. That proposal was submitted during the consultation by the World Wide Fund for Nature, and my officials, along with DETI and other stakeholders, are examining it in some detail.

Secondly, I am proposing an initial rate exemption for the first purchase of new homes that are zero-carbon-rated. However, there are some issues of definition, funding and alignment with other initiatives that have to be worked through regarding those matters. Therefore, I intend to ask my Department, working with the Committee for Finance and Personnel, other Departments such as DETI, and stakeholders such as Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE), to draw up detailed proposals with a view to introducing new primary legislation to be implemented in April 2009.

The review also critically examined some of the new relief schemes that were introduced in April this year. One of those was the rate-relief scheme for people in full-time education and training. That scheme attracted much criticism during the consultation process. Many of the respondents thought that the benefit of the relief was going into the pockets of landlords rather than students. Others questioned the effectiveness of the relief, and a number questioned whether that particular group should be a priority for the provision of rate relief.

The review also considered the number of applications that have been received so far this year for that relief, which is fewer than 500. That, in itself, draws into question the effectiveness of the policy. Therefore, I am minded to revoke the scheme, providing we can reasonably protect those who have already applied. However, before doing so, an evaluation of the policy and consultation with key stakeholders on the outcome of that evaluation are necessary.

So far, I have described what I want to do, provided I get the consent of the Assembly. I will now outline some of the longer-term options that I propose not to pursue, including banding. Although the system of individual capital values has the merit of being easier to understand than banding, I can see advantages to Northern Ireland's having a system such as the council tax. It is restrained in that those at the top end pay no more than three times as much as those at the bottom end. That makes it more like a charge for services than the rates.

Notwithstanding the increasing sensitivities regarding council tax in GB — which I believe has more to do with overloading the system — we could design our own version. However, I recognise that we are not starting from square one. Another fundamental change in the way that local revenues are distributed among householders in Northern Ireland would not only cause more confusion and upheaval, but create a new set of winners and losers.

Winners tend to stay quiet; losers do the opposite. The political consequences of changing the order of things again should not be underestimated. That in itself is not a reason to show a faint heart — those who know me cannot accuse me of that. However, I cannot ignore

the fact that no significant support for banding emerged from the consultation exercise, witnesses to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, or Committee members themselves. I will not, therefore, take that option forward, but I have agreed to provide the Committee with an update of the analysis of banding that was undertaken when direct rule Ministers decided to proceed with individual capital values.

Another major matter that I propose not to take forward is that of a local income tax. That was favoured by many ratepayers who responded to the consultation, although the majority of organisations were against it. It has attractions, in that it offers the prospect of aligning liability more closely with ability to pay. The public perception is understandable, therefore, and it mirrors — and is mirrored — in England, where, during the Lyons Review, the overwhelming majority of those who were surveyed thought that they would be much better off if subject to a local income tax, rather than the existing council tax.

However, the reality is somewhat different. It is estimated that a local income tax would cost income-tax payers in Northern Ireland a further 7p in the pound, if we were to raise the same amount of money as is accrued through domestic rates. That is also a tax on work, and therefore it is not in keeping with the Executive's priority of economic growth. There are serious concerns about the ability and willingness of HM Revenue and Customs to support the introduction and administration of such a scheme.

That said, I do not think that we must close the door on it entirely: we can learn lessons from elsewhere, and particularly from Scotland. The Scottish Government have recently decided to abolish council tax and replace it with a local income tax. I understand that that is to be the subject of a public consultation in the coming months. As Scotland proceeds at pace with a local income tax, it is my view, shared by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, that it may be best to maintain a watching brief on developments there for the time being, rather than commission further work of our own on that matter.

Another issue that was examined during the review was that of circuit-breakers, which is the curious title given to relief schemes found in some parts of North America, whereby a limit is placed on the percentage of income that defined groups — pensioners, or ex-service personnel, etc — are required to pay in property tax. At first sight, that seems an attractive option. However, several factors effectively rule it out as a realistic option for consideration in the Northern Ireland context. Research shows that, where circuit-breakers exist, there tends not to be the safety nets of other reliefs for the poorest households, such as those that exist in Northern Ireland through the UK-funded housing benefit system.

Introducing circuit-breakers here would, therefore, cause major complications in working alongside housing benefit and, potentially, could shift the funding of the support of vulnerable groups from annually managed expenditure to the departmental expenditure limit. Introducing a circuit-breaker system would also be administratively complex, given the need to gather detailed information on the income of all ratepaying households. It will also be vulnerable to fraud. I, therefore, propose not to pursue that option further.

I shall now say more about the developments, on which I touched earlier, in respect of water charges. On 15 May 2007, I told the Assembly that I agreed with the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that it is important that rating reform be viewed in the context of how the Executive intend to address the funding of water in Northern Ireland.

Since then, the Independent Water Review Panel has published its first report. The panel recommended that a single bill be issued to households, with rates and water charges separately identified. The Executive have agreed that that proposal should be examined by both the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel, working together to determine whether and how that might be done. That is now happening. At this stage, there are no conclusions to report to the Assembly.

However, I am anxious that the rating reforms that I have announced today are not jeopardised either by the substantial work on IT systems or possible legislative changes that may be required to provide a single bill for water and rates. Many difficult issues must be addressed, not least the fact that the panel is still working on recommendations for a new affordability tariff scheme, the outcome of which could have a major bearing on the ease with which a single bill can be delivered.

As I said earlier, I have signalled that people will not be asked to pay twice for water and that there will be an off-setting arrangement with the domestic rates; work on that is proceeding. I will provide the Assembly with further information on that proposal as soon as possible, after the Minister for Regional Development and I report to the ministerial subgroup and the Executive in the new year.

Next steps include the publication of a paper later this week that will set out the findings of the rating review in detail, including the options that were considered and those that were not recommended. Some immediate actions must be progressed over the coming months in order to implement the proposals: first, in order to advance the recommendations on single-pensioner discount, I will need to engage in a targeted consultation exercise that takes on board the views of all interested parties before introducing

subordinate legislation for April 2008. At the same time, I will progress subordinate legislation to raise the savings limit for pensioners to £50,000 from April 2008. After that, I will begin work on pre-legislative tasks such as the integrated impact assessments and the consultation that is required to introduce the proposals for the rating of vacant domestic property, the proposed deferment scheme for pensioners, an agreed revision to the maximum capital value, and any legislation that is required on rate relief for those in full-time education and training.

At the same time, I will engage in preparatory work associated with the primary legislation required to introduce the new rate rebate for energy efficiency and zero-carbon housing. Work will also be required on the legislative implications of the longer-term changes such as derelict land taxation and improved data sharing to facilitate relief take-up. That will require considerable research and discussion with some of my ministerial colleagues.

I have outlined cohesive measures to improve the rating system in Northern Ireland to help those most adversely affected or most in need and also to assist in fulfilling broader policy aims.

I have learnt through the review that reform of the rating system does not operate in isolation. Every new concession has a cost, either to other ratepayers or to the public purse. This is devolved taxation, and shortfalls are not made up from Government subventions. We must, therefore, adopt a measured and proportionate approach to changing the system through targeting support where it is required.

I shall, therefore, keep those measures under review. Raising more money from rating empty homes and derelict land could allow us to enhance some reliefs further, for instance, extending the scope of the single-pensioner discount.

No matter what we do, reform cannot possibly satisfy everyone, and we should not try to do that by over-engineering the system — that could have unforeseen consequences.

It should be remembered that the rating system's influence can be wide in other important policy areas such as housing affordability, sustainable development and water reform.

As I said at the outset, what really matters is what people are asked to pay. Today's proposals will benefit many ratepayers and, taken together with the Budget proposals, will offer many households much needed relief.

Much remains to be done to see the process through to its conclusion, but in making the changes, we are returning the faith that people demonstrated by sending us here. I commend the measures to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I remind Members of the nature of the statement: Members must question the Minister on the statement, not make further statements.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): That sounded very pointed, a Cheann Comhairle.

I welcome the initial tranche of domestic rating reforms that the Minister has announced and the fact that so many of them align closely with many of the Committee's recommendation. I agree that the reforms improve the domestic rating system. A good beginning is half the work, as the Irish saying goes.

Will the Minister clarify how the single-pensioner discount of 20% for over 70s will work in practice? Will it apply, for example, in a situation where two unmarried members of the same family live in the same household? Will the Minister state whether he is prepared to consider widening the scope of the discount? Will the Minister outline what the revenue outcomes are likely to be as a result of the reforms that have been announced today?

11.45 am

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the assistance that his Committee gave to me and my Department during the Budget process. I have said, in my statement, that it is important that — in many ways — the reliefs can pay for themselves. The steps that we have taken, in looking at issues such as the rating of vacant properties and derelict land, will release further funds and will, therefore, allow us to consider further reliefs.

I was attracted to a lower level of assistance for senior citizens. If, and when, we can afford to do so, I will return to that issue. I have spoken to the Committee's Chairman about that matter. At present, we are concerned with those aged 70 years and over who live alone. We will consult on that issue. There are some occasions when, for example, there is a medical requirement that a carer should live with someone. Should a person's bad health disqualify them from having that benefit? Therefore, we will look at particular cases during the consultation process, and I am happy to work with the Committee in resolving those matters.

Effectively, the reliefs will not be a charge on other ratepayers — it is important that we make that point at this stage. If we can release further resources by increasing the rate income, we will return to the relief levels and age groups.

Mr Beggs: I welcome several aspects of the Minister's statement, in particular his decision to introduce a tax on vacant properties. The Ulster Unionist Party is a prudent party that encourages positive forms of taxation.

Although I welcome the single-pensioner discount, I note that it is limited to single pensioners and those aged 70 and over. Will the Minister explain why he has not taken up the suggestion, made by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, to introduce a universal pension for all those who are aged 75 and over?

Mr P Robinson: The Member, who is on the Committee for Finance and Personnel, should take another look at that Committee's report. The Finance and Personnel Committee proposed a discount for those who are aged 75 and over and who live alone. I have gone a step further by reducing the eligibility age for the single-pensioner discount to 70. I shall look again at the issue to see whether we can do something more in rate relief when we release further resources. My preference, particularly if I take into account the issue of take-up, is to have some form of automaticity about the process so that people are not required to apply for the relief. However, there will be a time lag on that. Therefore, for the first bills, payment will have to be by application.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I, too, thank the Minister for his statement and for the good practice that his Department has engaged in when dealing with the Committee on the review. The Committee looks forward to further work on potential long-term reforms.

The decision to increase the savings limit for pensioners, which applies under the existing lower-income rate-relief scheme, from £16,000 to £50,000 is in line with the Committee's recommendation. Will the Minister comment on the extent to which that is likely to boost the uptake of reliefs? Moreover, will he comment on the measures that can be taken to ensure that Northern Ireland does not lose out by funding that uplift locally, were the UK Government to follow suit by raising savings levels as part of a wider reform of housing benefit?

Mr P Robinson: I did not bring my crystal ball with me, so my answer cannot be too exact. With regard to the latter point, we might reverse our decisions fairly quickly so that the burden would be on annually managed expenditure, rather than on the departmental expenditure limits.

There would be no need for us to carry that burden if the Treasury were going to carry it. We would re-examine the situation in those circumstances. The expectation is that the cost will be reasonably modest, but it can be calculated only after the system has been in use for a period of time.

Mr O'Loan: I congratulate the Minister on the review and on the timely fashion in which it has been presented. I accept the Minister's contention that a property tax with checks and balances is probably as good as it gets

at present. The broad thrust of the Minister's proposals improves those checks and balances.

The proposed reduction of the rates cap would be revenue-neutral. Therefore, it would transfer the burden from relatively well-off households to relatively worse-off households. Does the Minister not accept that that would be a regressive policy? How does the Minister square his rejection of the circuit-breaker concept, given the affordability tariff on water? The strand 1 report of the independent water review panel led by Professor Paddy Hillyard has stated that proposals will be made on a water-charge affordability tariff in strand 2 of that review. If it is possible to proceed with that action on one hand, why does the Minister reject it on the other?

Mr P Robinson: The reduction of the rates cap will go out to consultation, and further work will be carried out to determine whether that would simply be regarded as lost revenue or reapplied within the rates burden. The Department will make some assessment for the Committee of the extent of any loss of rate revenue if that change were to be made.

There is a balance to be struck on whether that is a tax, or a payment for a service. At some point, we must decide whether people have overpaid for that service. Rather than go to the highest band in GB, the Department's position is that we should take the mid-point of the highest band in GB, which we believe is fair. That is why we are looking at a limit of £400,000. I will provide such statistics as I can to the Member's Committee.

To some extent, Ministers cannot win. If there are ideas that Members like, they wonder why we do not press ahead with them, but when there is no support for those ideas in the consultation process, we are asked whether we should go ahead with them. Those are the issues that must be taken into account. Overall, I have produced what I believe to be a balanced set of proposals and measures. I hope that they are sufficient to attract the support of the Assembly.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his statement. There are many aspects to be welcomed, such as the single-pensioner discount, the rating of vacant property, and the energy-efficiency measures. However, does the Minister not recognise that a local income tax would be simpler than bringing an effectively property-based system with checks and balances more into line with the ability to pay through a complex system of reliefs?

What consideration did the Minister give to replacing only the regional rate with a local income tax, rather than both the regional rate and the district rate? Will the Minister give the House some idea of his wider approach to green taxes such as pay-as-you-throw schemes, reliefs for people who recycle, congestion charges, or road tolls?

Mr P Robinson: Whatever a change from the rating system to an income-tax-based system might be, it certainly would not be simpler. We all know of the upheaval that has been caused over the years by the change in the system. Any change, even if it is for the better, will have considerable consequences for the body politic. Everyone knows that, no matter what system we change to, we will simply create a new group of winners and a new group of losers.

The real difficulty with introducing a local income tax system is the fact that economic growth is the priority for Northern Ireland. A tax on work or, more accurately, a tax on workers is not the best way in which to encourage that growth. We have an opportunity to stand back, observe the Scottish model and learn lessons from it. If there are mistakes to be made, let the Scottish Government make them, and we will learn from their experience. We are not ruling out completely the idea of introducing a local income tax, but we can look and learn from the Scottish model over the next few years.

We have made the right decision. It is better to remove the sharp edges from the existing system, make it fairer and address the issue of people's ability to pay, rather than change the system and go into the unknown, as the Member for North Down would like us to do.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his thorough statement and in particular for his measures to set the qualifying age for lone pensioner discount to 70. That will enable more pensioners to qualify than if the age had been set at 75.

First, does the Minister agree with the expert opinion given to the Committee that there are no examples in the world of circuit-breakers having been introduced effectively in a domestic rating situation? Secondly, will there be an initial exemption period for the introduction of rates for vacant domestic properties?

Mr P Robinson: There was a second element to the question from the Member for North Down Dr Farry. He raised issues about green taxes and whether there was scope for further reform. I am happy to discuss the matter with him and his colleagues to consider whether there is such scope. A consultation process will be carried out on the exercise, and we will attempt to make some progress on those issues.

My honourable friend Mr Weir asked whether I accepted the expert opinion on circuit-breakers. I am loath to go against expert opinion on anything, and I have reached a similar conclusion to the experts. Therefore, I am happy to accept their views.

There will be a consultation process, and that will allow us to consider the introduction of rates for vacant properties. There may be cases where some properties shall be exempt entirely, and I am sure that some people will want to put forward such proposals. There may be cases for exemption periods, such as the time

between a property being vacated — the interregnum — and being sold or re-let. There are issues relating to blighted properties or those that have been purchased for demolition that we must consider. Therefore, it is difficult to establish the exemptions that we will finally agree to. The Committee and the House will want to examine those issues during the consultation process.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly with regard to pensioners. The Committee recommended that the availability of automatic rate relief to people of pensionable age should be given further consideration. What is the Minister's thinking on that?

Mr P Robinson: It is an important issue. I agree entirely with the Member and with the Committee. However, it is difficult to consider the matter at this stage. I would like to involve Age Concern, Help the Aged and other organisations so that we can have evidence as to why there has not been a higher take-up in rate relief. During Question Time yesterday, I mentioned that the uptake had been approximately 40% for those in owner-occupied properties, between 60% and 70% for those in privately rented properties and over 90% for those in public-sector rented properties.

That shows that there is a need for considerable movement, particularly on the owner-occupied sector. If an automatic system can be established whereby people do not have to apply for rate relief, we will be able to improve the situation.

12.00 noon

If we consider the sectors that are most affected by this matter, it is clear that, to some extent, there is a stigma attached to claiming rate relief. People do not want to apply for what they consider to be handouts; we must change the culture and make it clear that rate relief is an entitlement rather than a handout. I suspect that if those people went into a clothes shop in Belfast, they would be among the first to look for a 10% or 15% discount, and that they would have no difficulty with doing that. Indeed, they would feel that they were entitled to ask for such a discount, and, if it were offered, to take it. Rate relief should be no different; it is an entitlement not a handout, and people should apply for it.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his very detailed statement.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel examined the issue of enhanced discount for farmers, and it decided that the option would be considered in the context of decisions on other reforms. If a farmer has a property with an agricultural occupancy clause, it will be worth much less than similar properties, yet it seems unfair that the householder should have to pay rates to that effect. I understand from my discussions with estate

agents that the value of such a property is probably 40% — perhaps even 50% — less than it should be.

In his statement, the Minister outlines proposals for vacant properties and the moneys that such proposals could raise. I think that it was suggested that £10 million could be raised by 2009. Will the Minister also consider reviewing the enhancement discount for farmers?

Mr P Robinson: I admire my colleague's ability to put forward the case for the farming community at all times, and he is right to do so.

As I understand it, a benefit has been built in for the farming community, in that farms are reduced in valuation because they are farms, and in recognition of the fact that they can be sold only in a limited market. I am happy to consider whether there should be any distinction between farms per se and those agriculturally tied properties that, in many cases, were given planning permission only because of their farming connection and that cannot be used for any purpose other than for farming. I am always willing to consider and review matters, but, on this occasion, it was felt that the discount that has already been built in to the system for farmers was suitable and appropriate.

Mr Cree: I too thank the Minister for his timely statement.

Can the Minister provide an assurance that derelict land taxation will not be used to encourage "garden-grabbing" or to impose further taxation on the beleaguered farming community? Can he further assure the House that the proposed taxation will apply to developers who hold land banks and brownfield sites for future development so that such development can be encouraged?

Mr P Robinson: I assure the Member that I do not propose to tax his garden. The idea behind derelict land taxation is that it would particularly apply to sites that have been zoned for housing but that are being held back for commercial reasons and for profit. It would ensure that there is a flow of land into the property market, rather than encourage land-banking. It would therefore help the housing Minister to work towards her goal of ensuring that more affordable housing is made available.

Obviously, I am not talking about agricultural land. Let me kill off that idea just in case anyone should think that that is the route that is being taken — I do not want to be lynched by the farmers. The proposal will involve derelict land that has been identified for housing but that is not being used for that purpose.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I appreciate that his focus has been on ensuring that change is deliverable next year and the year after, and I recognise too that some of the more radical options

that have been suggested probably could not have been delivered in that time frame.

Will the Minister clarify whether circuit-breakers will be applied specifically to pensioner households — not just to single-pensioner households, but to couples as well? It has been argued that if circuit-breakers were applied more widely, they would be open to abuse. However, if one were focused on pensioner households, as was the intention under direct rule when there was a circuit-breaking affordability tariff in respect of water charges as recommended by the Consumer Council, would that not work?

Other areas of Government are, rightly, encouraging pensioners to take up pension credit, which is based on a minimum-income guarantee and is their entitlement. In such circumstances, could there not be a cross-reference in the rating system guaranteeing that pensioners will not have rating liabilities that will, in effect, bring them below the minimum-income guarantee for pension credit? That cross-linking could serve to encourage the take-up of pension credit as well as the take-up of rate relief measures.

Mr P Robinson: On the latter point, there is an awful lot that could be done if there were greater crossover of data in Government. However, that has other implications about which we must be satisfied. Some of the data relating to the rating system is held in places other than in my Department. Therefore, data sharing would be required. Those matters could not have been resolved in the short term. However, all changes can be considered: they can come at any time if they have merit.

As far as circuit-breakers are concerned, during the consultation process there was not the kind of support for pensioner households that the Member believes there was. However, that is not the only reason why it was discarded. The view held by officials is that it did not sit easily and could be disruptive to some of the benefit systems. The Department will do further work to determine whether there are ways around those difficulties and whether there are benefits in introducing some kind of circuit-breaking system.

Mr F McCann: Like other Members, I welcome much of what the Minister has delivered to the House. However, will he expand his explanation of the benefits that the measures on vacant properties will have on the hard-pressed housing sector?

Mr P Robinson: A number of advantages will flow from those measures. Clearly, there will be the advantage of providing further rating income. As far as benefits to affordable housing are concerned, if people know that they cannot leave their houses empty in the hope that rent levels or sale values will increase, they will know that there is a cost attached. If they are leaving property vacant for financial reasons, there will be an

encouragement, or incentive, for them to put their houses back on the market either for sale or to let. Essentially, the measures are a disincentive for people to leave property empty for profit and will allow a lot of property to come back on the market.

It is estimated that there is a large number of vacant properties in Northern Ireland: clearly, that must be dealt with. As property values have risen so extensively in recent years, there was a view that if people held off selling their houses, their properties would become more valuable. Therefore, they did not put those properties back on the market, and that has denied other people houses and has made properties less affordable.

The measures fit in with the policy objectives of the Department for Social Development and should assist, as a policy lever, to make more properties available on the market.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome how much it mirrors the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report on the review of domestic rating. In fact, in many instances, it enhances the report's proposals.

I particularly welcome the increase in the savings limit. Does the Minister have any plans to abolish the savings threshold as proposed in the Lyons Report with regard to council tax?

Mr P Robinson: On the Member's first point, I can only say that great minds think alike. We have reached the same destination and taken the same journey.
[Laughter.]

I can hear what other Members think about that. The savings threshold has been increased from £16,000 to £50,000, which, in all circumstances, is reasonable. In respect of the removal of the threshold, the Lyons Report asked us to sit back and watch, and that is exactly what we shall do. We will look at how the £50,000 impacts on the householders and whether there is a cause for further revision and removal. I had considered increasing the savings threshold even further, and one of the big issues that will impact on that is increases in the property market, so we will regularly examine our threshold levels to ensure that they are kept in line with the property market.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Considering that such a small percentage of people avail of rates relief, I am grateful that the Minister has commissioned a study, led by the voluntary and community sector, to promote awareness of the take-up strategies. Does the Minister have any plans to go further and finance and resource the voluntary and community sector so that the campaign is bedded in the community, thus making it more effective in its delivery?

Mr P Robinson: I want to hear what the voluntary and community sector has to say and what it believes will make a difference in take-up levels. If representatives of that sector have specific proposals that need to be funded, I will examine them. I am considering the pursuance of one possible reason for the low take-up — the amount of form filling that is involved. The form filling may appear complicated to some people, particularly senior citizens, and assistance may be required to complete the forms. Therefore, there may be value in representatives from Help the Aged or Age Concern travelling around areas and offering advice and assistance on form filling. That is the type of area that I am prepared to examine if the voluntary and community sector confirms that the complication of form filling is one of the reasons for the poor take-up of reliefs. The introduction of some automaticity into the process so that people will not have to apply for some of those reliefs will also help.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement on what can only be good news for the people of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister state why he is proposing to reduce the level of the cap?

Mr P Robinson: I have already said that I chose the reduced level because it brings us into the average of the highest band in Great Britain, which is fair and, therefore, a fairly good comparator. That takes some of the pain out of the rate-paying process if a substantial part of the regional rate is regarded as being payment for services, but there must be some linkage with the services that people are receiving, and there must be an upper limit to that. If the GB level is on the top banding — set as it is — our circumstances are such that the midpoint of that top banding is the appropriate place to pitch, and that is why I pitched the cap at £400,000.

However, a consultation process is under way, and it would be advantageous to link our cap level to whatever limit is proposed for water charging — if possible. I hope that the Minister for Regional Development will consider the introduction of an upper limit for water charging and that we will be able to co-ordinate the two payments.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the Minister's intention to reward households that make energy-efficiency improvements. Will that reward apply equally to homes that have been modernised? What percentage of the initial rate will be rebated to owners of new homes that are zero-carbon rated?

12.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: I have not set the percentage, or level, of the rate rebate, because my Department is first required to carry out a consultation process. I am happy to hear suggestions from Mr Armstrong — or any other Member — on where that level should be pitched. If I have understood him correctly, the Member asked

whether the rebate would be retrospective for homes that already have such efficiency measures installed. That too is an issue for the consultation process. My view is that any homes with those efficiency measures should receive the full advantage of the rebate, irrespective of when they were installed.

Mr Ross: The Minister referred to rising house prices. Given the soaring prices across Northern Ireland in the past 18 months, with which everyone is familiar, will the Minister advise the House on what impact that will have on rate bills at the next revaluation?

Mr P Robinson: I could go on and on about that, because there is a misconception, if not a deliberate attempt by some members of the press to mislead the public, on that subject. If the price of everyone's house were to rise by the same percentage, there would be no change in the quantum of their rate bills. A change takes place only when the value of someone's property increases at a higher rate from that of others, in which case they will pay a higher amount of the overall total. The overall amount of revenue collected does not change; only the distribution within it. If someone's property decreases in value relative to the overall average in Northern Ireland, their rate bill will decrease; if the value of their property goes up vis-à-vis the overall value of properties in Northern Ireland, their rate bill will go up. It is not the case that everyone's rate bills will increase simply because of an increase in the overall value of property in Northern Ireland.

Ms Lo: Although some pensioners in my South Belfast constituency will benefit from the proposal, many others will continue to pay high rates because of the value of their property. Many pensioners argue that a rate bill still based on property value is unfair, whereas a local income tax would not penalise working people. They have worked all their lives and, on retirement, want to look forward to life without having to worry about high rate bills. What is the Minister's view on that?

Mr P Robinson: Every pensioner who lives alone in South Belfast, and elsewhere in the Province, will benefit from the package that I have announced today. Indeed, the rise in the savings limit for pensioners from £16,000 to £50,000 will probably be of particular benefit to those living in South Belfast. Except where I expressly indicated otherwise in my statement, all existing reliefs remain in place. The reliefs that I have announced today are additional reliefs and, therefore, the package as a whole improves the position for everyone.

I cannot agree with the Member's point about income tax. The Assembly's priority is to achieve economic growth in Northern Ireland, and it would be a retrograde step to tax working people. It would be a considerable setback in our drive to stimulate the economy. However, the Scottish Executive intend to move in that direction, and I have indicated that my

Department will watch their experience to see whether any lessons can be learned.

Mr Buchanan: Although the Minister touched on the answer to my question in his response to a previous one, the answer must be clarified for some Members of the House. The Minister will be aware that, in the past few weeks, a member of the SDLP who is also a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee has been scaremongering, saying that the Department was considering the introduction of rating for agricultural land.

That led to real concerns in the rural communities that I represent. I am not sure whether that Member was misinformed or misled. For the benefit of Mr O'Loan, I ask the Minister to once more clarify the Department's position. Is the rating of agricultural land under consideration?

Mr P Robinson: There is no question of the Department rating agricultural land.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr P Robinson: The Department has been clear about that matter and has released a public statement so that there is no doubt about the issue. The only reference to land in my statement is in respect of derelict areas. In response to Mr Cree's question, I outlined the type of circumstances that will apply to derelict land, and I do not believe that any farmers would define agricultural land as derelict.

Mr Wells: Most people would accept that the Minister has achieved a fine balance and a level of consensus on this matter. That will be broadly welcomed by the whole House. We particularly strongly support the incentives for energy-conservation measures and the capital valuation limit of £400,000.

I particularly welcome the decision to rate vacant properties, but why is that measure not proposed to be introduced until April 2009?

Mr P Robinson: I set out some of those reasons in my statement. I am disappointed — I thought that the DUP's green Member would have concentrated his question on green issues and on the incentives that I announced in my statement. However, he has decided to address another matter.

The timescale is simply a matter of administrative details that must be resolved so that the Department is capable of dealing with those matters. That also allows further time for consultation. It is an administrative matter, and it is proper that we get that right so that the Department is able to deal with these matters, rather than going ahead unprepared and having real difficulties in administering the system thereafter.

Mr B Wilson: I too thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the rebates for zero-carbon housing and energy efficiency. I welcome the

fact that there will be further consultation on other green taxes — that is important.

However, I was disappointed to hear that the main source of local taxation will remain property values, which are regressive and not based on ability to pay. In a motion that the House debated, I suggested that we consider a land-value tax that would tax developers who are retaining land banks and would release more land for housing. Did the Minister consider a land-value tax, and what were his conclusions?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome the Member's encouragement in respect of the matters on which I had expected him to ask questions. He did not let me down.

Mr Wells: Unlike me. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Robinson: I am a little confused about Mr Wilson's latter remarks. If he does not consider that I have addressed the issue of land taxation in dealing with derelict land, he can only be suggesting that I should have included agricultural land. He had better have a conversation with the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan about that. My statement deals with the vacant land that needs to be dealt with, and we will do further work on that.

I would be happy to speak to the Member about green issues, if he wishes, over the period of the consultation.

Mr O'Dowd: A Cheann Comhairle, the Minister has stated how he intends to engage with the community sector in respect of rate relief. Will he also clarify how he intends to engage with those who, for their own — or for family — purposes, have had to make disability adaptations to their homes? Many people do not claim the rate relief that is available for that. Will the Minister outline how he intends to engage with that sector?

Mr P Robinson: By and large, when adaptations are carried out, there should be good records in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Housing Executive, or some other body. I will certainly look at that matter. There is recognition under the existing system that many adaptations increase the value of a property and that people should not be punished on account of their disability. I am happy to consider finding a way to test the level of uptake from people in those circumstances and whether a special initiative is required to address that issue.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet today as soon as the House suspends for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.25 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is the Executive Committee's legislative consent motion relating to the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill [HL].

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

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill relating to the distribution in Northern Ireland of sums released from dormant bank and building society accounts should be considered by the UK Parliament.

I have tabled the motion to seek the Assembly's agreement to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the provisions of a Westminster Bill that aims to release millions of pounds from inactive bank and building society accounts and reinvest them in local communities. Alongside that, the rights of customers to reclaim their money, at any time, will be preserved.

The scheme was first announced formally in the Chancellor's 2005 pre-Budget report. Since then, discussions have taken place with the banking industry, followed by two UK-wide public consultations. That has culminated in the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill [HL], which was introduced in the House of Lords on 7 November 2007.

Banking and financial services is a reserved matter, and therefore the Assembly could not legislate on this issue. However, in keeping with the spirit of devolution, provision has been made in the Bill for the three devolved Administrations to set the priorities for distribution in their respective jurisdictions.

As the Bill proposes to give the Department of Finance and Personnel new executive functions and the power to make an Order setting the spending priorities for distribution in Northern Ireland, the consent of the Assembly is required.

The Bill defines dormant accounts as those that have had no customer-initiated activity for a period of 15 years. It is anticipated that dormant accounts could initially amount to more than £500 million across the UK, with tens of millions of pounds recurring annually thereafter. Northern Ireland will benefit alongside the

other UK Administrations, on a population basis. Initially, additional resources have been estimated at between £10 million and £20 million, with hundreds of thousands of pounds each year thereafter.

In preparation for the commencement of the scheme, financial institutions have already begun a comprehensive exercise to make every effort to reunite customers with their assets. Members may have already noticed advertisements in the local press to that effect. The assets identified in dormant accounts will be transferred by banks and building societies to a reclaim fund. That fund will be independent of the Government and the banking industry, and will be regulated by the Financial Services Authority.

It will be the duty of the reclaim fund to retain and invest a prudent portion of the assets in order to meet any future repayment claims from customers. That is a key point, and it will ensure that customers will be able to reclaim funds transferred to the scheme at any time. Assets not needed to meet the reclaim risk, or reasonable running costs, will be released for distribution.

In light of its UK-wide infrastructure, its experience in distribution and the efficiency benefits that that brings, the legislation names the Big Lottery Fund as the vehicle for distributing funds throughout the UK. I recognise the valid concerns that many in our community will have about that approach, and I have made strong representations to the Treasury on that basis. In response, the Treasury has assured me that all scheme resources represent a separate and distinct funding stream from lottery funding. Distinct branding will be used for all projects funded through the scheme. That approach will ensure that all projects funded from the scheme will have no links with the proceeds of gambling.

I emphasise that the funds will not form part of public spending. The only influence that the Executive will have on the scheme, following the passing of enabling legislation, will be in setting the local priorities for spend and in issuing directions to the distribution body.

As this money belongs to customers — albeit unclaimed by them — it sits within the banking sector. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for Government to seize it and spend it directly.

As for the priorities to benefit from these assets, the Bill provides a general definition of “social or environmental purposes” on which unclaimed assets may be spent. It is within that overarching theme that the Assembly will be able to set its own spending priorities in Northern Ireland, and those priorities will be reflected in the directions given to the Big Lottery Fund for distribution here.

If Members agree the legislative consent motion before them today, I will undertake a consultation in early 2008 on the Northern Ireland spending priorities.

I will then bring proposals to the Executive and Assembly for agreement.

The dormant accounts scheme has the potential to deliver real benefits to communities across Northern Ireland by freeing up resources that are lying idle in dormant accounts and reinvesting them in needy communities. Should the Assembly give its consent to the Bill’s provisions, it will have an excellent opportunity to set the priorities for spending Northern Ireland’s share of the proceeds. The Executive approved the legislation at a meeting on 8 November, and I now invite Members to do the same.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): As the Minister has already explained, the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill [HL] is going through Westminster, and Northern Ireland is included in the legislation. The Bill deals with the reserved matter of financial services, and it is the Committee’s understanding that, in the spirit of devolution, the UK Government decided to make provision in the Bill for the devolved Administrations to set spending priorities and to have some input into the distribution of moneys in their jurisdictions.

The Assembly’s consent is required in order for Northern Ireland to be included in the legislation, in so far as the Bill contains provisions that confer new executive functions on the Department of Finance and Personnel. As the Minister has explained, the Department will have the power to make Orders that identify the spending areas in which the Big Lottery Fund may distribute funds from the unclaimed assets of dormant bank and building society accounts that are apportioned to Northern Ireland.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel held two separate evidence sessions on the Bill with DFP officials, including the principal legal officer in the Departmental Solicitor’s Office. Those meetings were recorded by Hansard, and the Committee decided to publish the minutes of evidence on the Assembly website to ensure that the details of its deliberations were available to the wider body of MLAs and other stakeholders. The Department also provided Committee members with copies of the draft Bill.

During the first evidence session on 24 October, Committee members raised a range of issues. These included: the consequences should the Assembly not give its legislative consent; how the alternative scheme for smaller banks and building societies would operate; the risk of reclaim, and the process involved; ethical concerns over the use of the Big Lottery Fund as the distribution vehicle and as a barrier to applications for funding; measures to ensure that spend goes to worthwhile projects; and the reasons why dormant

accounts could not be allocated directly to devolved Administrations for distribution.

The Committee raised those issues formally with the Department and received a substantive written reply. A further evidence session was held with DFP officials on 7 November, after which the Committee was content that the Department had adequately addressed its specific concerns.

On the key question of what the consequences would be were the Assembly not to give its legislative consent to the legislation, the Department advised the Committee that it was likely that the UK Government would still proceed with it as planned, given that financial services is a reserved matter. The Bill would be amended, removing the provisions that confer on DFP the functions of setting the Northern Ireland priorities for spend and giving directions to the Northern Ireland committee of the Big Lottery Fund.

Therefore, while the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament would have the power to set out particular spending areas for the money apportioned to them, the Northern Ireland Assembly would not. We would be missing an opportunity to influence the spending priorities for Northern Ireland and to give directions to the Big Lottery Fund. In addition, the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland would be unable to feed its views into the local consultation process.

In general terms, therefore, while the Committee has reservations about the Bill, including the bureaucracy associated with some of its provisions, Members agreed that a pragmatic approach is required so that Northern Ireland does not lose out significantly. Consequently, the Committee agreed unanimously on 7 November to support the Department of Finance and Personnel in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill to Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee has fully set out the Committee's deliberations; I am speaking in a personal capacity as a member of Sinn Féin.

I support the motion. The Bill is a pragmatic response to the issue of funds that are lying dormant in the reserves of the banking institutions in this state. Its provisions will empower the application of those dormant funds to very important projects that the Executive and, indeed, this Assembly would wish to see addressed. The fact that these funds are benefiting no-one in any particular way is an issue that has been unaddressed for a considerable period of time. There is some comparative experience in the measures that have been adopted South of the border, and it has been

seen that, particularly in regard to the social agenda, these funds can be applied where funding might not otherwise be available.

It is important to acknowledge the small number of financial institutions that trade solely in this state. They will have the power under this legislation, having taken the proper steps to identify the funding as being in dormant accounts to which there is no immediate claim, to apply it in the areas in which they trade. One or two examples of institutions that trade solely in particular locations have been made known in the background research. In Derry city, for example, where I live, there is one such institution. Funds that are released by this mechanism can and will be applied by that institution in its immediate location. Again, that is to the good.

All in all, the concerns that people have about the procedural difficulties can be legally proofed. We can revisit the arrangements if they prove to be inadequate. At this stage, no one can quantify the sums of money involved. They might be considerable, or they might not. However, the question will at least have been answered, and a mechanism devised by which they can be applied to the greater good, rather than lying dormant and obsolete. I strongly endorse the motion and commend it to the House.

Dr Farry: I support the motion. This is an advantage to the public purse. Good can be done through these resources being made available. It also works for the banks by removing liabilities from their books. I have little to add to the comments of the last two Members, but I do have a couple of points.

First of all, this type of procedure is fairly common internationally. Mr McLaughlin referred to the experience of the Republic of Ireland, and there are many other international examples. This is not something new or sinister that is being put forward by the Government.

2.15 pm

Secondly, one small concern is that resources are to be redistributed to the devolved regions of the UK on the basis of population, as opposed to need and — as we are all aware — resources from the block grant are allocated by need, rather than by population. Although I appreciate that the sums involved may be relatively small in comparison with our overall block grant, it is important that that point be made to the Treasury, and that we preserve a needs-based approach to financing. There may be some financial implications for Northern Ireland as a consequence of the change in approach to that formula.

A further important point is that the money in dormant accounts belongs to people. The account holder may, sadly, have passed away. Equally, however, the bank may not be able to contact them because they have changed address. It is important that the process for

someone who wishes to reclaim his or her funds be as simple as possible, and no more complicated than withdrawing money from any account, albeit that the money will have been transferred to a central fund.

Those points notwithstanding, I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I support the motion, although I am not overly enamoured or enthusiastic about some of the principles underlying the Bill. Some of my Finance and Personnel Committee colleagues and I have expressed our unease at the idea of the Treasury emptying anyone's bank or building society account. It seems that the raiding bank accounts has taken a different tack to the one that Northern Ireland has until now, from time to time, experienced.

I appreciate that there is a reclaim fund and that, although the money may have been taken and spent, people can still get their money back. The principle that people's money remains their own is important, regardless of whether activity was last initiated 15 years previously.

On balance, it is best that Northern Ireland be included in the provisions of the Bill as it progresses through its various stages at Westminster. It is important that Northern Ireland and the Executive have the opportunity to influence what types of social and environmental purposes are funded. We must set those priorities for ourselves and in our own interests, rather than have a direct-rule-style diktat to tell us what is best for us.

I wish to reiterate concerns that I have raised in Committee, and which have been expressed by the Minister, about the body that it is envisaged will distribute any funds that are raised. Members will be well aware of the genuine and deeply held concerns of many individuals, as well as of some Church and community organisations, about dealing with the Big Lottery Fund. I know that the purpose of the Big Lottery Fund is only to manage money; however, impressions are important.

I encourage the Minister to continue his discussions with the Treasury to ensure that the branding of the distribution fund is distinct, and that it is made clear that it is not lottery money, thus making it easier for those who are concerned about using the proceeds of gambling to apply for the money.

It is important to take a realistic, pragmatic approach. I ask the Minister, in his summation, to elaborate on the possible consequences for Northern Ireland if the legislative consent motion were not passed, and if we were not included in the provisions of the Westminster Bill.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin, I support the motion, which provides a legal framework to allow assets from accounts that have lain dormant

for at least 15 years to be distributed to community causes through the Big Lottery Fund.

Many bank and building society accounts lie dormant and unclaimed, often because the account holder has died, or because surviving relatives have expressed no claim. Several countries operate similar schemes whereby moneys from such accounts are reinvested in the community.

The Bill has already become law in England, Scotland and Wales, and there is similar legislation in the South of Ireland. Although social and environmental themes are the main priorities, individual regions can decide for themselves to what causes assets will be distributed. The Bill will allow for money in dormant accounts to be transferred to a reclaim fund. That means that any individual, or any individual's relatives who are still living, can — should they wish to do so — make a claim from that fund for the return of that money.

An alternative scheme is available for smaller banks and building societies allowing them to transfer an agreed proportion of a dormant account into a reclaim fund and to distribute the remainder to charities that benefit the local community.

I want to reiterate Members' concerns about certain aspects of the legislation, which I share. These moneys should be additional to lottery funding and should not affect lottery distribution. They must also be separate from departmental funding. A number of safeguards must be implemented so that an individual or a living relative can reclaim the moneys at any time and that banks do not simply wait for owners to come to them but are proactive in seeking the whereabouts of those owners.

In order for accounts' assets to be distributed equally and fairly, and in a way that is accessible to all community and voluntary organisations, safeguards should be put in place so that local priorities can dictate where the money goes. It is important that the community and voluntary sector is involved in any consultation on how that distribution of assets is progressed.

As other Members have said, the moneys would be much better put to use in the community than lying dormant in bank accounts. Therefore, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: Like other Members, I support the motion.

When this issue was first brought to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, other members and I had certain reservations, to which I will refer. However, those reservations have now been dealt with, thanks to the Department and the Minister's assurances.

I found the concept of the Government's raiding private individuals' bank accounts somewhat distasteful; it seemed to be a typical Treasury wheeze to extract additional money. Nevertheless, there are counter-

arguments that point to these measures being necessary. From a philosophical viewpoint, the legislation resembles a latter-day updated version of the parable of the talents, in which an owner who has buried, or neglected, money is punished by having that money used for the common good. Similarly, moneys realised via legislation governing dormant accounts will be distributed in a way that benefits good causes.

Had Northern Ireland decided to exempt itself from this legislation, it is clear that, in a best-case scenario, the resulting procedures might not have suited us. If the Assembly negatives the motion, the worst-case scenario would be that we run the risk of simply being excluded completely. The amounts of money that will flow into Northern Ireland will be relatively limited, but they will benefit us overall. Therefore, from a practical point of view, Northern Ireland must be included in the scheme.

I was concerned that the intention was to operate the scheme through the National Lottery in the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore, I am glad that the Minister has assured Members that the scheme will be administered in Northern Ireland separately from the National Lottery. When the Minister makes his winding-up speech, it might be worthwhile if he would outline how the scheme would be administered here if Northern Ireland were to be excluded from the legislation, or if, for some reason, the Assembly were to negative the motion. Christian and charitable organisations have problems with National Lottery funding that would preclude them from benefiting from the dormant accounts scheme, so I would welcome the Minister's assurances today that the scheme will be marketed and administered differently in Northern Ireland.

I had concerns about people being deprived of their hard-earned savings, albeit savings that had lain dormant for quite some time. Members have been assured that there will be a consolidated fund, so that if claims are made at any stage, they will be honoured and people will get their money back.

On the basis of those assurances, and from a practical viewpoint, Northern Ireland will benefit as a result of the measure. Therefore, I support the proposal.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion. Dormant accounts are an interesting phenomenon, which many of us will never come across. Nevertheless, accounts can lie dormant in building societies for many years and for various reasons — perhaps when an individual dies his or her family may not be aware of additional accounts, or perhaps people have stashed unauthorised funds in accounts. If the accounts remain dormant for a significant period — that is, many years — the one group that benefits is the banks. Why should banks benefit from money in accounts of which the owners have passed

on or cannot be identified? Therefore, I understand the reasoning behind the proposal in the motion.

It is important that there is sufficient protection for those who, at a late stage, are identified as account owners. I am content that there will be a totally independent fund, which will be able to secure payment in that case. The proposal makes sense; it is better that local people, instead of politicians in London, have an input in setting local priorities.

At the Committee, I raised the view that there should be a separation between this fund and any other funds in the Big Lottery, and that it should be identified as separate from gambling. Other Members supported that view, and I hope that that will help the Minister's attempts to achieve that goal. I have come across many worthy groups in the community — such as the YMCA, which does good work, particularly with young people — that have been unable to apply for Big Lottery funding, which they would have been successful in obtaining, because of their beliefs. Any measure that increases the opportunity for such organisations to gain funding and improve their work in the community must be supported. I urge the Minister to ensure that — as far as possible — a separate fund exists, and that it is clearly identified as such. The many groups that have not felt able to apply for funding will then be able to do so in the future.

Mr O'Loan: I state my wholehearted support for the motion.

Mr P Robinson: I am pleased that Members have had a useful — albeit short — debate on the issue that the provisions in the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill [HL] relating to Northern Ireland should be considered by the UK Parliament. A number of important points were raised and I will do my best to mention as many of them as possible.

I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and his colleague, that the fund must be used in the community and must not be seen as a way for the Government to replace its funding. There were problems with additionality in Europe, and we will not go down that road. This is, genuinely, money to help our communities under the broad heading of social and environmental purposes. If the motion is passed, it will be up to the Executive to be more precise about the direction of the fund.

Several Members mentioned the ethical issues involved. When I was first contacted by HM Treasury on the matter, I wrote back and prompted a stream of correspondence on the issue. I was pleased that — when the Bill was in its final state of preparation — the Treasury made it clear in its response that unclaimed assets would be kept separate from lottery resources, with their own distinct branding and financial management arrangements.

HM Treasury saw that as a key principle.

2.30 pm

Like many Members, I have faced circumstances in which communities were in great need but for ethical reasons I was not prepared to draw on lottery funds to ease that need. The dormant accounts scheme will allow those communities to benefit from our being able to give directions to the Big Lottery Fund, and I hope that many of them will do so. However, there will be no plaque on the wall to the Big Lottery Fund should people avail themselves of the scheme.

I was also asked about the consequences were the Assembly not to agree to the legislative consent motion. I do not get the impression from the Members to whom I have spoken that that will be the case, but, lest Members be teetering between decisions, I must inform them that the Treasury would still give the money to Northern Ireland, but it would be likely that the Big Lottery Fund would determine the funding priorities rather than their being set by the Executive and the Assembly. Therefore, those of us who want to see less of a role for the Big Lottery Fund will want to ensure that we proceed positively.

Dr Farry made a point about the risk of reclaim — he has gone. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: He is away to change his bank accounts.

Mr P Robinson: They will all have gone dormant.

As some of my colleagues did, he referred to the risk involved for those people who, for whatever reason, have dormant bank accounts. They might have changed address or might not have needed the money for 15 years. Those people will be able to go as normal to their bank, where a fund will have been set up to ensure that they do not lose their assets.

The issue of a population-based share as opposed to a needs-based share was also raised. The Scottish and Northern Ireland Executives and the Welsh Assembly Government all took the same view — that a different formula should be used. However, financial services is a reserved matter, and the Treasury has not accepted that view. Some of our colleagues in the House of Lords and the House of Commons may attempt to table an amendment to the Bill. Nevertheless, any amendment would be Barnett formula-based, missing out some of our community's needs.

I say to my ever-sceptical friend, Mr Hamilton, that this is not a case of the Treasury's emptying bank accounts; the Treasury will not be emptying anyone's bank account. The banks will operate the dormant accounts scheme voluntarily, so the Treasury will not get its hands on the money at all. The scheme will be operated independently, and the only Government role will be that that the devolved Administrations and central Government play in setting the spending

priorities that are to be given to the Big Lottery Fund to allow it to distribute the funds.

Those are the issues that were raised during the debate, and I hope that I have not left anything out. I thank Members for their constructive contributions. It has been an interesting debate that will inform the setting of the scheme's spending priorities in Northern Ireland and the direction that will eventually be issued to the fund distributor.

The dormant accounts scheme provides the mechanism to remove dormant accounts from the balance sheets of banks and building societies, and to reinvest them back into our local communities. If the House gives its consent to the motion today, that will open the door to an excellent opportunity for the Assembly to set priorities for distribution and to ensure spend goes to worthwhile projects across Northern Ireland. If that consent is not given, it will be a missed opportunity to set the spending priorities for our jurisdiction. Therefore, I encourage Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill relating to the distribution in Northern Ireland of sums released from dormant bank and building society accounts should be considered by the UK Parliament.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr O'Dowd): I beg to move

That this Assembly orders that any report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, which has been prepared under Article 8 of the Audit (NI) Order 1987 for presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with Article 11 of that Order, be printed and published under the authority of the Assembly.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The motion addresses the issue of privilege of the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports. Until devolution, all his publications were ordered to be published by the Westminster Parliament and were, therefore, privileged. That clearly represents good practice in public-sector audit, as it allows the Comptroller and Auditor General to give a full and complete report of his findings to the legislature.

To date, most of the main reports, which the Public Accounts Committee has taken evidence on and reported, have been fully covered by privilege, as they were published by order of the Westminster Parliament. It would have been difficult to bring several of those reports to the Committee without that status. Indeed, there are a number of Northern Ireland Audit Office reports that deal with potentially controversial issues, and it is important that those should be published with the authority of the Assembly.

In light of that, I am sure that Members will agree that it is important that we ensure that the arrangements for audit and accountability under the Assembly are at least as robust as those that existed under direct rule.

In due course, consideration will be given to reflecting the arrangement in Standing Orders or, if an opportunity arises, in legislation. However, until such times, this motion will provide the Comptroller and Auditor General with the necessary privilege — subject to the Assembly's resolution today — to publish all future reports and, through that process, to ensure that we receive the quality of information from the auditors that is necessary to carry out our work.

I, therefore, commend the motion to the House.

Mr Beggs: If the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee are to be able to carry out their work, this motion will be an essential part of the process. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise. I should have called Mr Robin Newton first.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton): As Chairperson of the Audit Committee, I support the motion. Members will understand that

there has been some concern in the Audit Committee on the matter. The Committee discussed the issue in some detail at its meeting on 7 November 2007. The Committee is also of the opinion that absolute privilege is an essential requirement so that the Northern Ireland Audit Office can carry out its functions completely.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Audit Committee members expressed their concern at the meeting on 7 November that the Comptroller and Auditor General does not have the same powers as his counterparts in Westminster and Wales. The Committee believes that it is fundamental to the practice of public audit that the Assembly's auditor should be able to present all significant and relevant findings to the Assembly without the threat of legal challenge from third parties involved in the report issues.

It is also characteristic of good custom and practice that all facts are reported and are freely available to the legislature and the general public. This motion will permit the Assembly to order that the reports of the Northern Ireland Audit Office are printed and published, therefore extending absolute privilege to the Comptroller and Auditor General. I, therefore, commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Trevor Lunn. I call Mr Simon Hamilton.

Mr Hamilton: That was the shortest speech on record — I hope that mine is not the longest.

I support the motion. The Public Accounts Committee is essential to the Assembly, if it is not always welcomed by those who come before it from time to time. The Committee has been extremely active in the past; and its work plan until the end of the year and for next year confirms that. The Committee is starting to set its own agenda and to look at its own issues, such as the situation in the Northern Ireland Events Company, which is currently in the news. The Committee will examine that matter in time, and it is essential that that good work is not hampered by loss of privilege.

Not having the ability to publish reports under the authority of the Assembly would seriously impede the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and, by extension, the work of the Public Accounts Committee.

The Public Accounts Committee having that privilege rightly keeps the Assembly in line with its counterparts in England and Wales and, in the long term, I hope that such situations might be addressed by legislation or Standing Orders. However, in the interim, I fully support the motion as it stands.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly orders that any report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, which has been prepared under Article (8) of the Audit (NI) Order 1987 for presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with Article 11 of that Order, be printed and published under the authority of the Assembly.

Draft Budget

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 20 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The Minister will have 45 minutes to respond, and all other Members who are called to speak will have 10 minutes.

I advise Members that although two amendments have been published on the Marshalled List, after taking advice, and taking account of practice elsewhere, and guidance in Erskine May, I have reconsidered and, at my request, the two amendments have been withdrawn under Standing Order 15(5). I am grateful to the Members concerned for their agreement to withdraw those amendments.

Moreover, my ruling is that, in future, I shall not select amendments to any take-note motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I beg to move.

That this Assembly takes note of the draft Budget, announced on 25 October 2007 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I welcome the debate because it provides Members with the opportunity — both as representatives of Statutory Committees, and individually — to set out what they perceive to be the significant budgetary issues that face each Department in relation to the maintenance, improvement and delivery of front line public services. The themes that emerge from the debate will be beneficial in informing the Committee's forthcoming co-ordinated report on the draft Budget, which will, in turn, allow the Assembly to influence the Executive as they finalise the Budget.

On 25 October 2007, the Minister of Finance and Personnel presented the Executive's first draft Budget. In his speech, the Finance Minister emphasised that the primary focus of the draft Budget is on economic growth, and that that clearly indicates the Executive's long-term commitment to building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. That focus aligns with the priorities that are identified in the Executive's draft Programme for Government, which are to grow a dynamic, innovative economy; to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being; to invest to build in infrastructure; to deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services; and to protect and enhance our environment and natural resources.

In presenting the draft Budget, the Minister also highlighted increased public expectations of public services and the need not just to spend more, but to achieve value for money for every pound we spend. Therefore, the Budget period from 2008 to 2011 presents a challenge for the Executive — and, indeed,

every Member of the Assembly — to prove that devolution can make a real difference to people's lives.

We must recognise the context in which that challenge must be met. The outcome of the 2007 comprehensive spending review means that, in the UK, public expenditure is set to grow at the slowest rate since that mechanism was introduced in 1998. The Chancellor's comprehensive spending review announcement indicated that the Northern Ireland departmental expenditure limit would increase, in real terms, by an average of 1.7% per annum over the next three years. However, in his statement on 25 October, the Minister explained that, following necessary adjustments, a more accurate figure for real-terms growth in Northern Ireland expenditure over the next three years would be an average of 1.2% per annum.

2.45 pm

The reduced rate of growth in public expenditure across the UK means that there is a greater emphasis on efficiency and value for money. The Executive's draft Budget contains a target for Departments to deliver cash-releasing efficiency savings of £793 million by 2010-11. The efficiency drive and future progress by Departments in achieving the targets will exercise the departmental scrutiny Committees and Assembly Members in general.

In commissioning the views of the other Statutory Committees, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has suggested themes and issues, which, though neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, aim to assist the Committees in gathering evidence from their respective Departments and in scrutinising their submissions. The responses will include each Committee's views on its Department's spending priorities in the context of the draft Budget allocation. Other suggested issues include any evidence-based arguments for additions to the allocations in the Department's draft Budget; any risks from existing efficiency plans; and any scope for achieving additional cash-releasing efficiencies or future disposals of excess assets to support front line services and strategic spending priorities.

My Committee is due to receive the responses from the other Committees shortly, and they will be included in our report, which will inform the Executive's deliberations on the draft Budget in preparation for a substantive Assembly debate on the revised Budget in January 2008.

In addition to setting out the positions of each Statutory Committee, the report will examine a range of strategic and cross-cutting issues. I have already mentioned efficiency savings, but other issues will require consideration and monitoring. Not least of those is the financial management agenda, which the Department of Finance and Personnel will pursue aggressively over the Budget period, including the

related issues of overcommitment, underspend and financial forecasting and monitoring by Departments.

The approach of planned overcommitment — whereby more money is allocated to spending programmes before the start of the year than is actually available — helps to reduce underspend by anticipating average levels of reduced requirements and adjusting the total level of resources allocated to programmes accordingly. However, it has been recognised that that approach reduces in-year flexibility and the capacity to respond to in-year unforeseen pressures. Accordingly, the Minister announced the planned year-on-year reduction in overcommitment, from the present figure of £153 million to £100 million in 2008-09, £80 million in 2009-10 and £60 million in 2010-11.

The move to reduce overcommitment must, however, be accompanied by an improvement in the level of financial management in the Northern Ireland Civil Service to ensure that we eradicate the culture of underspend. The Committee has noted that, in the period from 2003-04 to 2005-06, approximately 1% to 2% of revenue budgets across the Northern Ireland block remained unused at the year end. That represented between £113 million and £150 million per annum. In the same period, between 15% and 20% of capital budgets remained unused, amounting to between £170 million and £230 million.

The Committee acknowledges that the Department is taking steps to develop financial-management skills and to improve financial processes across the Civil Service. As part of that initiative, the Department of Finance and Personnel commissioned an external review of forecasting and monitoring from PKF consultants, a report on which was published in June 2007. The overriding finding from the report was that insufficient priority was afforded to forecasting and monitoring. It also highlighted the fact that the average figures for underspend failed to reflect the variance across Departments.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel will monitor the implementation of the recommendations from that review. More generally, all the Statutory Committees will have an important role to play in scrutinising their Departments' in-year spend by examining each quarterly monitoring round to minimise underspend.

A further cross-cutting theme in the draft Budget is the reform agenda, which DFP will have a key role in co-ordinating. The Civil Service reform projects and programmes are expected to realise a range of benefits and value-for-money savings across the 11 Departments. Those benefits will be measured using a series of key performance indicators, which will be integrated with departmental business planning. Again, there will be an important role for each Statutory Committee in

monitoring the progress of the various reform projects in the respective Departments.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has already produced a report on Workplace 2010, and will continue to scrutinise the future progress and direction of that major accommodation project, which will affect all Departments and is expected to generate approximately £175 million in capital receipts during the Budget period. Other key reform projects for which DFP has lead responsibility include NI Direct, which will ultimately provide a single telephone point of contact for public services, and the various shared service centres, including HR Connect, Account NI and Records NI.

Other cross-cutting developments that require consideration include the creation of a performance and efficiency delivery unit and a capital realisation task force. The performance and efficiency delivery unit will be tasked with identifying the scope for generating additional cash-releasing efficiencies and improving delivery and performance within Departments and across the wider public sector. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will be examining the role and functions of that unit, including the targets and reporting mechanisms that will be implemented to measure its performance.

The capital realisation task force is to make recommendations that remove barriers to a more efficient and economically effective use of the asset base, and realising additional resources through the disposal of surplus or underutilised assets. A report is due from the task force in early December, and will inform the final Budget and investment strategy. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will focus on the work of the task force as it affects the capital allocations in the three financial years covered in the Budget period.

A further strategic issue for consideration is the budgetary impact of the rating reforms, including the domestic rating reforms that were announced today by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the decision regarding industrial derating. Other cross-cutting issues include the role of PFI and borrowing during the budget period; anticipated savings on procurement spend by Departments; the potential costs and efficiencies from the review of public administration; and the strategic debate around the Barnett formula and needs assessment.

The Committee will also be interested in the outcome of the wider public consultation on the draft Budget. The Department has advised that four public meetings will be held — one each in Belfast, Enniskillen, Londonderry and Armagh. In addition, regarding the voluntary and community sector, the Northern Ireland

Council for Voluntary Action will be holding a separate event that DFP officials will attend to facilitate the debate.

The Department will also be holding a range of other meetings with social and economic partners, including the Confederation of British Industry and the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions. I expect that all Members will be keen for the Executive to take account of the views of key stakeholder groups and of the general public before finalising the Budget.

I shall now turn briefly to the Department of Finance and Personnel's own draft budget allocations. Regarding current expenditure, the draft Budget 2008-11 prescribes a significant reduction in the share of departmental expenditure limit funds allocated to DFP. The Department has suffered a large cut — the current year's allocation is 17.1% lower than that for 2006-07, and that trend will continue in subsequent years.

The Committee has focused in particular on the Department's proposed capital expenditure in the draft Budget. DFP bid for approximately £94.2 million over the three financial years 2008-11 and was allocated £68.7 million. The Committee has queried the potential impact that that reduced allocation may have on delivery, and how DFP plans to manage with an allocation significantly below the amount sought.

In particular, the Committee is concerned about whether the capital allocations for Land and Property Services will be sufficient to allow the organisation to alleviate difficulties with its IT system, especially with regard to rate relief. In addition, the decision announced by the Minister earlier today to introduce rating on vacant domestic property will place a heavy burden on Land and Property Services, which will have to develop the necessary databases. The Committee will pursue the issue with the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that any future funding requirements arising from rating reform can be met in any revised allocations.

I now return to the wider, strategic context. The draft Budget is clearly connected to, and driven by, the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy, which the Assembly debated yesterday. In addition, however, there are a number of underlying themes and assumptions on which the Budget allocations are based. I have highlighted, in particular, the entire financial management agenda, together with a drive to reform the public sector in order to deliver the value-for-money and efficiency targets that will enable improvements to be made to front line services, which the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Those areas will require ongoing monitoring and scrutiny by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, together with the other Statutory Committees and the

Assembly, over the next three financial years of the Budget period.

I look forward to hearing Members' contributions, and I welcome the opportunity for an extended debate on the draft Budget.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. Yesterday, I congratulated the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the draft Programme for Government and spoke about how ISNI 2 had the potential to deliver on the programme's priorities of addressing inequality through targeting marginalised sectors.

Today, the House considers the draft Budget, which constitutes the nuts and bolts of how those targets will be achieved. That task faces us all, and the challenge is huge. The facts speak for themselves. Tackling inequality and lifting the vulnerable means that at least some of the following facts must be addressed: 31% of 16- to 60-year-olds lack paid work; 22% of the workforce is low paid; nearly 25% of households are unable to afford adequate home heating; nearly 100,000 children and 50,000 pensioners are living in income poverty; and there are 3,000 premature deaths each year because of disadvantage and poverty. Those facts are shocking.

The solution is simple: reality — that is, current economic patterns — has to change. It is the task of all MLAs to ensure that that is done. Today, every Member should be asking how that will be achieved. This is, after all, a legacy Budget, and in that context we need to see ministerial leadership and initiative.

I will take the example of fuel poverty. The Assembly has had two debates on that subject and a guarantee that Government will work to eradicate fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and in households that are not considered vulnerable by 2016. Yesterday, however, we were faced with the headline that the Minister for Social Development intends to cut £10 million — 50% of the current allocation — from the warm homes schemes.

Within the confines of the block Budget from Westminster, the Minister for Social Development, like all Ministers, has to make choices. The question must be asked whether she has made the right choice. Has she the political will and skill to prevent that cut? For instance, has she considered the land banks in her Department's estate? She has to pay for them annually, but if they were utilised more effectively, they could fund social and affordable housing and contribute to combating fuel poverty.

3.00 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle Gildernew, was required to do that to deal with inescapable pressures. Stand Up for Derry is

seeking more social and affordable housing to address the historical neglect of our city and, indeed, of the entire north-west region.

Tá mé ag iarraidh tuilleadh infheistíochta i nDoire. I want more housing and investment for Derry, and I acknowledge the political will and skill shown by the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, in respect of the railway decision for Derry and the north-west. I call on the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, to emulate that type of leadership. It is time for wider ministerial leadership, imagination and initiative.

In order to address fuel poverty, the workers at the coalface, all the relevant Departments, and community workers on the ground must be engaged and involved in tackling the issue. Places such as Derry, and elsewhere, have dedicated community workers who know that those who live in fuel poverty experience what that means in reality, and know how best to eliminate it.

I wonder whether Ministers engage with stakeholders and residents of local communities before deciding on the choices that they face.

It is the job of local officials and administrators to contact people who are living in fuel poverty and ensure that they be helped out of it quickly. The market will not do that; it must be done by supporting groups that work in those areas. By drilling down and adopting a bottom-up approach, we can work at a community level, and the task will be manageable. The numbers to be dealt with are in the tens or hundreds, perhaps, but not 250,000. That is what is known as the principle of subsidiarity, in EU jargon. That is what good governance and monitoring is all about: bringing all the stakeholders and networks in the community together so that they can work to meet targets, and truly monitor achievements. They are the people at the coalface; they deal daily with those who are disadvantaged, and know exactly what it is like to suffer cold persistently without sufficient money to pay for heating.

Monitoring and measuring our performance is a key part of delivering our objectives, as is ensuring that equality impact assessments are fully complied with across the nine categories of the disabled, the elderly, etc. That is not only the correct thing to do, but represents an intelligent modernising agenda, which is necessary to show that the North has the political skill and will to tackle disadvantage and participate in the global economy. The fact that the Executive are beginning to equality-impact assess their spending, and how they are spending limited finances, is a good-news story to be welcomed at home and abroad.

Moreover, buying into social justice, through social requirements and tendering contracts, is a smart decision that the Executive have taken, as reflected in the Budget. Joined-up governance will be cemented as the Minister

of Finance and Personnel applies tendering criteria to procurement agreements, resulting in contractors employing, training and teaching skills to people who have been registered as long-term unemployed. That represents the use of public money to buy social justice, which is brilliant.

Yesterday's agenda, which left out huge parts of the North, and large groups of people, is not only out of date, but economically counterproductive and unstable, and I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel would agree. It has been only six months since the transfer of powers, and it will take time to throw off the shackles of direct rule. Of course, Sinn Féin wants to throw those shackles off entirely.

The world economic order is now discussing a sustainable model of economic development that integrates social, economic and environmental requirements, rather than regarding them as burdensome add-ons to a narrow, ineffective economic model that has produced stagnation and exclusion in our society.

The limitations of this draft Budget, restricted because we in the North are controlled by a British Administration that does not care about anyone here, regardless of one's political opinion, or none, would be assisted greatly by advancing the intelligent processes that are inherent in the full equality impact assessment procedure.

The comprehensive spending review results in Ministers making difficult budgetary choices; they must stand over those choices. They must also use political tactics and skills — if they have them — to achieve deliverables and actually build prosperity and tackle disadvantage using the Government and governing opportunities that exist in the current political arrangements by linking up with our counterparts in the Twenty-Six Counties. The economic and financial future of this part of the island will not be resolved in the context of the Six Counties.

The limitation of the draft Budget should not limit thinking. Joined-up Government should exist beyond the Assembly, especially, when it is economically and politically advantageous for all of the people who reside across the island to have decisions taken that benefit all of us. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: Sadly, we are faced with difficult choices today, as we discuss the draft Budget and as we approach the final Budget Bill. Those choices would have been considerably easier to make if the £1 billion package, which was promised prior to devolution, had been delivered. However, it was not delivered. Shortly after that, media focus was switched from the £1 billion package to the Varney Review and the corporation tax benefits that could flow from that. We still await them. Where are they, and when will the review be published? The people of Northern Ireland are entitled to know the outcome. Will we receive financial benefits from

the Varney Review? Having quashed hopes of a major economic package, with sleight of hand, the focus was switched elsewhere.

Time has moved on. Now, when we are discussing the draft Budget, problems arise again regarding difficult funding choices. I cannot help noticing that the lower rate of corporation tax has not been mentioned by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in recent months — I can only assume that good news is not expected on that subject. A lower rate of corporation tax would have had a major impact on improving our economic standing and in achieving the objectives set out in the draft Programme for Government.

As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I take an interest in financial matters, generally, and not just in those of the Department of Finance and Personnel. I would like to know where the departmental bids have gone. I have tried to get underneath the spin of the headline figures and the glossy draft Budget with which we were presented. I have raised the matter with departmental officials and have asked questions in the Assembly. However, I have not yet received a copy of the bids that were made by each Department and the outcome of those bids. I am slowly gathering them from the Committees. However, it is right and proper that Assembly Members should have that information.

Last week in Committee, I asked departmental officials, jokingly, whether I had to issue a request under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain the information. Why is that information not available? Why is it not published and easily accessible for everyone to view? Surely, if the public is really being consulted about the draft Budget, it should be made aware of the bids. They should be put into the public domain, either through the 'Belfast Telegraph' or the Internet.

People should be made aware of what was contained in each of the bids and the difficult choices that have to be made. This is not just about saying that the winning projects are wonderful; it is about difficult choices; getting the best value for money, and benefiting our community. I have tabled an Assembly question on that matter, which is due to be answered today, and I look forward to receiving that answer. I hope that I do not have to resort to the Freedom of Information Act: that would be absolutely ridiculous.

We are discussing a draft Budget: is this a real consultation or not? If it is, let us have the information. That will motivate many people to respond, and the final version of the Budget will be better for it. I hope that that opportunity is taken. It is important that people respond to that consultation, but there must be transparency.

I have concerns about several issues in the draft Budget: first, I will touch briefly on housing. My constituency work has made me aware of the difficulties faced by those who, although they are accepted as

being homeless, spend a great deal of time on the housing waiting list and are not afforded the opportunity to remove themselves from the list. Additional resources are required for housing; if the Programme for Government's objectives are to be achieved, additional moneys will have to be found between now and the finalised Budget, particularly from the ongoing capital assets review. Therein lies the potential to release additional funds in the form of unused public assets to enable the building of more social housing. I hope that that will be progressed speedily.

Fuel poverty affects a wide range of people, social tenants and homeowners alike. I recently received correspondence from a natural gas provider, Firmus Energy, expressing concern about the possible reduction in funding for the heating replacement programme next year. A constituent contacted me some time ago about an open fire in his upstairs flat. That source of heating was operating at only 28% efficiency, aside from being a health and fire hazard. It is important that energy-efficiency projects such as the heating replacement programme and the warm homes scheme, which is also under threat, are allowed to continue. Fuel poverty must be addressed, and we must also reduce our carbon emissions.

I will turn briefly to the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner, whose office published a detailed report in July 2007 in conjunction with OFMDFM and the Department of Finance and Personnel called 'An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland', in which it stated that children's services in Northern Ireland were 30% underfunded compared to similar services in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Children's Commissioner recently commented that the recommendations of the organisation's report had not been reflected in the draft Budget; in other words, ensuring that that disparity in funding would continue.

Many other issues, such as speech and language therapy, statementing processes, after-schools clubs, early intervention, and the effects on young people at risk that were highlighted in the Bamford Review, are not being adequately addressed in the draft Budget.

I am very passionate about early-years funding. I recently attended a lecture in Belfast by Professor James Heckman, a Nobel laureate economist who works with early-years organisations. He had a simple message — we must invest in the young. That makes economic sense, but I am not sure that that is what we are doing. There is a great emphasis on structures, but we must invest in people, especially the very young.

Through my involvement in the Assembly's all-party children's committee, I have been advised that long-term funding for the Home Start programme has yet to be secured. Home Start trains and co-ordinates volunteers and assists families who need help. Without

Home Start, many children would have a poorer start in life, and some might even have ended up in care. Why can funding not be found for that programme? Mention was made earlier of the need to stand over choices. We must examine the draft Budget carefully to ensure that decisions can be justified, because many issues are not currently being addressed.

I will turn briefly to the draft Budget allocation for OFMDFM. I compared the figures for 2006-07 and 2010-11 and discovered some interesting statistics. Health receives an 18·8% increase over that period, and OFMDFM receives a 51·6% increase.

3.15 pm

Why has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister received an additional allocation of £28·7 million since 2006? Is that a good use of our money? In 2001-02, some £2,081,000 was allocated for central administration. However, in the draft Budget, its allocation amounts to £40 million a year. What is going on? Is that a good use of our money? There has also been a huge increase in capital investment. In 2006-07, some £1·5 million was allocated to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the three-year period. That figure has now risen to £52·9 million.

That money could be better spent in my constituency on new health centres and health schemes that have been put on hold. Moyle Hospital closed in 1994 and Carrickfergus Hospital closed some decades earlier, yet there have been no replacement state-of-the-art facilities. There has been no significant capital infrastructure to put right those wrongs, yet funding is being directed to other areas that have lost acute services.

We need equality. We must ensure that facilities such as Carrickfergus day centre, which closed due to a leaking roof and electrical faults, are replaced. We must ensure that we provide good value for our money. Why is so much money being spent by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Mr O'Loan: At the outset, it may be necessary to claim the right to speak at all. Yesterday, during a point of order that was not actually a point of order, the Minister of Finance and Personnel talked of the need for a Programme for Government and Budget to be agreed by the Assembly. He seemed to think that any word of dissent at this stage was not appropriate.

Perhaps we should reduce the heat a little on this matter. This is a draft Budget — it is out for consultation to Committees of the Assembly and the public. Therefore, let all concerns that are real be expressed. I am sure that the Minister will assure us that it is a genuine consultation process and that he will be willing to make adjustments where the case is good. There are many variables still in the hands of the Minister, including the timing, and many uncertainties, including Workplace 2010, the

Varney Review and asset sales. Therefore, there should be no suggestion that any adjustment to this Budget is like the removal of a keystone that will cause the whole edifice to collapse.

The context for this draft Budget is clear. Northern Ireland has an infrastructure, much of which is obsolete. It has a private sector economy that is relatively small and fairly weak. Our main source of income is the block grant from the Treasury. Northern Ireland does not pay its way. It needs a subvention of several billion pounds per annum, perhaps up to half of the £16 billion of public spending annually. The block grant is determined by the Barnett formula, and those who know tell us that we do not get a bad deal from that mechanism. There was a threat yesterday that we would hear a great deal more about the Barnett formula, so perhaps we should listen to that advice.

The dramatic increases in public spending over recent years are now over. Over the next three years of the comprehensive spending review, public spending here will rise in real terms by just 1·2% per annum. That is not a large increase, but we should not dismiss it as nothing.

Our other main source of income is the regional rate, which yields about £500 million per annum, or 6% of what we spend. The scope for deriving more income from the regional rate is constrained, as a result of the proposal to include a charge for water and sewerage alongside the rates bill, which most parties seem inclined to go along with as the least bad solution to a real problem.

The Minister has proposed to freeze the domestic regional rate in absolute terms and the business regional rate in real terms for three years. Given the pressure on households, in particular, to pay for water, there will not be much dissent from those proposals. Almost half of the block grant is already spoken for in the annually managed expenditure that is allocated for social security benefits and the like.

We are now debating how to carve up the remaining money among the Departments. The Minister told us in the speech that introduced the draft Budget that the annual amounts will run from £8·3 billion to £8·9 billion over the Budget period. There is also ISNI money — I must tell Nelson McCausland that that ISNI isnae Ulster Scots. *[Laughter.]*

That money ranges from £1·6 billion to £1·8 billion over the period for investment in basic infrastructure. Those are large sums, and they will enable substantial improvements to be made to the quality of life of all our people.

There are major pressures on the Budget. Every Department has a list of necessary projects, but not all of those demands can be satisfied. I must express concerns about particular spending programmes. The

first relates to the provision for social and affordable housing. The draft Budget document states of DSD:

“The Department’s aims are to make a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society through providing access to decent affordable and energy efficient housing.”

Those are exactly the right aims, and I am sure that every Member will support them. Other Members of my party will expand on those concerns about that aspect of the draft Budget.

Another matter that relates to housing is the funding for improving the energy efficiency and insulation standards of homes, which is to be drastically cut. It astonishes me that that programme is to be cut back, rather than increased. Again, other SDLP Members will say more on that matter, but I note Martina Anderson’s comments, and I welcome the indications that her party will support an increase to the DSD’s budget to allow it to address that matter.

Efficiency savings have been given a significant place in the Minister’s plans. The 3% and 5% cumulative year-on-year targets are central to his ability to deliver. Nearly half of the:

“increase in health departmental spending power” —

— will come from those savings in the third year. We must note the language that is used in some of the DFP information. There is much use of the interesting phrase, “spending power”, but it is not, to a significant degree, real money. Built into that spending power are savings that are yet to be realised. There has been very little scrutiny of efficiency targets, and I intend to ask the Committee for Finance and Personnel to examine those more closely. Are such savings in the health sector really available in the short term in a service that is so dependent on front line staff? There is no doubt that we need a better Health Service, and that that will mean great structural change, but it will not happen overnight.

Similarly, much has been made of the potential of the performance and efficiency delivery unit. I heard the Minister offering its services to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety recently, and that made me wonder how it would really work. Evidently, it has an opt-in or voluntary nature. Again, the Committee must examine that mechanism extremely closely and, indeed, all Committees should reflect on how it will affect them and their work.

I wish to raise a few issues that affect my own constituency of North Antrim, the first of which caused real alarm recently. The new health and care centre that was promised for Ballymena within two or three years, and which would have revolutionised healthcare in the community right up to the north coast, has been written out of the script. That is shocking and totally unexpected news. Representatives for North Antrim from all political parties in the House are aghast, and will be

lobbying the Assembly to reinstate the centre. I cannot understand why that has happened, and I hope that I will have the support of all Members for North Antrim in addressing that matter — some of them are in rather influential positions and must have missed that part of the draft Budget.

I shall mention other North Antrim concerns only briefly. I welcome recent steps towards a development for Rathlin Island, and I want to see provisions for the outcomes of that in the Budget. The railway relay from Coleraine to Derry has been announced in the press. I assume that there is some substance behind that announcement, but it is missing from the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget. Can we have clarification on when that will happen?

I hope that money has been put in reserve for a contribution to the proposal from the National Trust and Moyle District Council for a visitors’ centre at the Giant’s Causeway. We may, at last, get a resolution to that situation, which has become an embarrassment for several Ministers.

I hope that our rural roads, which are a disgrace, will finally get some real money spent on them.

Finally, I want to mention one agricultural issue. The proposals for the reduction of brucellosis and TB in cattle will not work, and that money would be better spent on a full eradication programme, which will be cheaper in the long run.

Dr Farry: I congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the presentation of his first draft Budget. Although my party does not agree with every aspect of it, I recognise that it is a substantial piece of work. It puts to rest the notion that six months is too short a time for the Executive to produce anything meaningful.

One matter requires clarification. At the outset of the debate, Martina Anderson referred to the draft Budget being a legacy. However, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel presented the draft Budget, he was keen to point out that it represents a major break from direct rule Ministers’ Budgets. The draft Budget cannot be both those things: it must be one or the other. There is an interesting split of opinion in the Executive.

I thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for tabling the motion. Although the Alliance Party had tabled an amendment, it is content to accept the advice and guidance of the Speaker on the matter and withdraw the amendment accordingly. My party respects the Speaker’s rulings, unlike some Members that I could mention.

The fact that there is no amendment on which some notes of concern can coalesce should not, nevertheless, leave the Executive in any doubt that there are major concerns about the content of the draft Budget, not only from my party but from other quarters in the House. There will be many future opportunities to test those

matters formally through Divisions. Like many other Members, Alliance Party Members welcome the draft Budget's economic focus. However, it is important not to allow the economic delivery claims that have been made to go without challenge and proper scrutiny.

During the past decade, there has been a peace dividend. However, despite economic growth and investment during recent years, major structural problems remain. There must be an overarching imperative to rebalance the economy between the public and private sectors. Public finances are hugely dependent on financial subvention from the Treasury — some £7 billion each year — which funds almost half of the local services. That is clearly unsustainable. The Minister is on record as saying that the problem in Northern Ireland is not that the public sector is too large but that the private sector is too small. However, that stance seems to have changed somewhat, with an open challenge being posed to the public sector.

Unemployment now stands at under 4%. However, beneath that percentage lies the societal indictment that 27% of the working-age population are economically inactive. That is a huge wasted resource for the entire community and its shared prosperity.

Much of the recent investment and rapid employment growth has occurred in the relatively lower-added-value sectors of the economy. The overarching economic imperative must now be to close the productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK average, which is measured by gross value added (GVA). In order to shift that, more high-value-added investment, promotion of exports and more high-paid jobs are required. The figure has been stuck at around 80% of UK average employment figures for quite some time, and the problem lies with UK regional policy. Despite the platitudes from successive Governments on the need to develop the regions, nothing is allowed to challenge the dominant position of London and the south-east of England as the main drivers of the UK economy. Financial dependency is tolerated rather than the regions being given the means to become more sustainable.

I note that the Executive have shifted the target for GVA to halving the gap with the UK average minus the greater south-east of England. Although, in one respect, it might be nice to remove the distorting influence of the south-east, moving the goalposts in that manner does not do Northern Ireland any favours. Overall consideration must be given to the balance in the UK economy as a whole. There is little point in comparing Northern Ireland with the other dependent regions and fighting over the scraps, and not effectively challenging the overall centralisation of the UK economy.

The draft Budget's rhetoric and aspirations for the economy are lofty and ambitious. However, they pose two fundamental questions: first, does Northern Ireland

have the necessary tools to make a step change to the economy? In the absence of tax-varying powers or other fiscal incentives, it is difficult to see how that step change can be realised. The one fiscal tool at the Executive's disposal — industrial derating — is essentially anachronistic. If anything, it is geared to subsidising a low-value-added economy rather than attracting high-value-added jobs. It deals with the status quo rather than the type of economy that Members want for Northern Ireland. I appreciate the fact that there are few alternatives and that, therefore, we must support it regardless. However, it is important that the limitations of that approach are recognised.

The Varney Review's indications are not encouraging. What is left is incremental change rather than a step change.

The jury is out on whether we are using to their full effect the existing tools and instruments that are at our disposal, and there are grounds to be sceptical.

3.30 pm

The four remaining main economic drivers are skills, enterprise, innovation and infrastructure. Of those drivers, the most critical area of emphasis is skills. The targets for PhDs in the draft Budget and draft Programme for Government may prove to be too conservative, especially if the brain drain continues. Moreover, stronger incentives for students to study the STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — are needed. By the same token, at the other end of the spectrum, the core issues of numeracy and literacy are being neglected. Without addressing numeracy and literacy, it is doubtful whether we will have a critical mass of workers who are able to play their role in the global economy.

I am concerned that more effort has not been put into improving the public-transport infrastructure. Figures in the draft investment strategy suggest that 60% of funds will be invested in roads in the first three years, and that that will rise to 80% over 10 years. That is almost a mirror image of the situation in the rest of the United Kingdom. Although we must catch up on the infrastructure backlog, there are environmental concerns to consider. If we are to have a modern, twenty-first century infrastructure, especially in Belfast, we must invest more heavily in public transport from the overall transport budget.

I am surprised that greater emphasis has not been placed on the potential of the green economy and, in particular, on the new economic opportunities that will arise from tackling climate change. Questions also arise about the resources earmarked to assist the economy, and about whether those resources are being used to full effect. More and more resources are to be poured into the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

and Invest NI. However, whether there is to be any fundamental change in their approach is far from clear.

At the risk of angering farmers, I note that £45 million has been set aside for modernising the agriculture industry. That sector represents only 2% of the economy, and I cannot help wondering whether that money would be better used in another sector, in which there is higher growth potential. This morning we heard about the tourism industry, for example. It also represents approximately 2% of the economy, but it is an area in which there exists a great deal more room for expansion. Perhaps the resources set aside for agriculture could be better deployed in assisting with rural transition and more general development.

We must also be conscious of the impact on the economy, especially on small businesses, of the scaling-back of investment in public services. I include the building of social housing in that. Members must be aware that the deep divisions in Northern Ireland have an impact on the economy. Economic change and creating a shared future go hand in hand. Therefore, the scarcity of the resources that have been made available to invest in providing shared and mixed facilities and to promote good relations is a major flaw.

I intend to make a few overarching comments on the more general resource allocations rather than delve into too much detail. That said, I have major concerns over the health and housing budgets, and I am sure that other Members will address those concerns. A tight UK comprehensive spending review has been made even tighter by decisions to freeze the regional rate, to reintroduce water charges within the ambit of the regional rate and to reduce the level of planned overcommitment. Much now depends on the 3% efficiency savings to be found across Departments. All Whitehall Departments are attempting to achieve the same targets, so Northern Ireland is not unique in that respect. Those savings are achievable, and, in fact, annual cost savings in the private sector are routinely achieved at the beginning of a Budget process. However, our problem is that there is an almost singular focus on achieving savings from internal running costs and procedures rather than through taking a hard look at how public services are delivered.

The process of CSR bids by Departments here, and the subsequent questions about which of them have been addressed and which have not, means that the focus inevitably falls on the additional extra 2% or 3%. Little attention is paid beyond and below the baseline. At the other end of the debate, it is arguable that our Departments' bids were overly conservative and that major investments have both been lost and not been offered. Even with that conservative mindset, only about half of the CSR bids are to be funded through the Budget. There is a transparency issue, and the Alliance Party has had to table several questions in order to get to the heart of some of the issues.

For some time, the Alliance Party has highlighted the vast amount of resources that are tied up in Northern Ireland to maintain a divided society. Huge opportunity costs are involved in investing in quality public services for the entire community. We have estimated them at around about £1 billion a year, but a report by Deloitte goes a step further and says that the figure is as high as £1.5 billion each year. Sadly, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has binned that report. Those costs are clearly embedded in the system through duplication in the provision of goods, facilities and services, and it will take many years to unlock them. However, we must start now by investing those additional resources. That could have been the subject of any peace dividend. There is a real economic and financial imperative to creating a shared future, and, although the Minister of Finance and Personnel alluded to the Deloitte report in his draft Budget statement, there is little evidence that he has considered its contents in his actual proposals, and in the details of the actual bids and efficiency savings. Education is one area in which a great deal more work must be done.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. Although you have ruled on and rejected the amendments, Mr Speaker, I note that those who tabled them still took the opportunity to level the criticisms that they contained. Some of the strange claims that have been made in the Chamber today reflect the contents of those amendments. The House was almost subjected, for a third time, to an Alliance Party amendment criticising the supposed lack of innovative thinking in the draft forms of the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget. The failure of Alliance Party Members to come up with anything new demonstrates that the real lack of innovative thinking lies with them.

The first claim that must be refuted is that the draft Budget is somehow unable to deliver economic growth in Northern Ireland. Given the comments made after the publication of the draft Budget — which has been branded the most economy-focused and business-friendly ever — that is a particularly peculiar claim. In some quarters, the draft Budget has even been branded Thatcherite and right wing.

It is worth recalling some comments that were made in the aftermath of the draft Budget's publication, both in evidence to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and to the press. The Federation of Small Businesses offered an enthusiastic response to the proposals. The Confederation of British Industry in Northern Ireland said that it strongly supported the focus on productivity, strongly welcomed the increased commitment to Invest Northern Ireland and welcomed the increased resources being allocated to tourism. The Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry

welcomed the fact that the Executive regard the development of the economy as their top priority. Declan Billington of the Institute of Directors stated that the draft Budget would build confidence across the business community in Northern Ireland to join with Government in investing in our future. Finally, Michael Wightman of the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group said:

“The NIFMG is both relieved and delighted that ... the Stormont Executive has listened to us ... today’s draft Budget has given manufacturing a real boost.”

That view is consistent among Northern Ireland’s business leaders. I am sure that I will be forgiven for accepting the view of the local business community, as opposed to that of the Alliance Party, on the draft Budget’s ability to stimulate economic growth.

The second claim, which is trotted out ad infinitum by the Alliance Party, is that the draft Budget will not tackle the issue of resources being directed away from a divided society. I will not allow the hypocrisy of the Alliance Party to go unchallenged. Only a matter of weeks ago, on Tuesday 13 November, the Alliance Party voted for a club bank to assist the Irish-medium schools sector. That is a more divisive and costly example of a divided society. The Alliance Party cannot criticise the draft Budget and, at the same time, demand money to create more division. In yesterday’s debate, my colleague Peter Weir commented on how the Alliance Party’s cost-of-division dogma is becoming tiresome and compared its credibility to that of the promise of its sister party, the Liberal Democrats, to put 1p on income tax.

The draft Budget will be broadly welcomed across Northern Ireland. The cap on industrial rating at 30% demonstrates the Executive’s commitment to development and their consideration of the many costs that businesses face. People will be particularly pleased by the Minister of Finance and Personnel’s announcement of a three-year freeze in the regional rate. It is funny that, although some parties complain about the allocation to one Department or another, I hear few moaning about that freeze.

The Ulster Unionist Party claims that a financial package did not materialise, and it is worth elaborating on some of Mr Roy Beggs’s earlier comments. He talked about the lack of a “£1 billion financial package”. However, if the matter is to be discussed, it is worth basing it on fact. Ulster Unionist Party Members participated fully in negotiations when they trotted off to Downing Street with the rest of the political parties. Several core elements were negotiated, including guaranteed flat real growth, an additional £100 million each year over the CSR period, access to additional spending under end-year flexibility of £320 million and the retention of asset sales of £500 million.

In negotiations on the CSR, the Minister of Finance and Personnel achieved £443 million over and above the previous CSR guarantee, access to additional end-year funding of almost £300 million and access to over £100 million of borrowing on reinvestment and reform initiatives.

Perhaps my mathematics are better than those of the Member for East Antrim Roy Beggs, but I am sure that that adds up to well in excess of £1 billion.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, so that the Member can apologise for his error.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member tell the House what is the amount of new money, instead of talking about recycled money from selling off our assets? It is normal practice that one can reinvest assets in other capital projects. Moreover, end-year flexibility is normally provided, once applied for. I accept that £100 million has been provided, but where is the £1 billion of new money, rather than recycled money?

Mr Hamilton: The Member might be confusing the rules of assets sales with those that he has experienced at local council level, and perhaps he is not aware of the Treasury’s rules. Perhaps the Member does not want poorly utilised assets to be sold on, and the money to be reclaimed.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree with his leader, Ian Paisley, who, after the Chancellor’s announcement about the supposed extra £1 billion — over four years, mark you — said:

“Progress has been made in some areas, but I do not believe there is anything in the present proposals of the Chancellor which will lead to the step change in the economy that is needed”?

No package; no £1 billion — that is why we are scrabbling for money.

Mr Hamilton: The Member might find it useful to listen to the sums of money that has been outlined.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I wonder whether, as he looks at quotes from various people over the years, Basil McCrea is aware of the gestation period that applied to the financial package. Prior to devolution, a Programme for Government Committee met in the Assembly, of which the various parties were members. I asked the other parties to hold back from going into Government until we secured a satisfactory package, but none of them supported that. Indeed, Mr McNarry publicly attacked the DUP for its position of holding out to get more money from the Chancellor.

Mr Hamilton: We all recall how the Ulster Unionist Party was itching to jump into Government at the last election, irrespective of a financial package or the actions of the republican movement. The Ulster

Unionists were dying to get into Government, although now it seems that some of them are dying to get out. It is unreal that the Ulster Unionist Party levels any criticism at the DUP Benches, given its total failure to even raise the issue of a financial package —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No; I have given way enough.

The DUP remembers that the Ulster Unionists were too busy trying to feather their own nests by seeking knighthoods to ask for capital investment or money for the people of Northern Ireland.

The final — and outrageous — claim that must be tackled is that the health budget has been poorly funded. I am staggered and astonished that anyone could consider an allocation that represents 51.5% of all additional money, and 48% of Northern Ireland's total Budget, as a bad deal. Expenditure on health and social care in Northern Ireland is over 10% higher than in England, which is a trend that the Budget will continue. Spending on health has more than doubled since 2001, yet no one would argue that the NHS is performing twice as well. That proves Appleby's point that the key is not the amount of resources, but how they are utilised.

Instead of adopting Oliver Twist's begging-bowl approach, the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety should address the serious inefficiencies in the NHS in Northern Ireland: staff productivity; consultant productivity; hospital throughput; average length of stay in hospital; and prescription charges; are all worse than in England. I sense that the Minister has not got the stomach for the challenge, but in the spirit of generosity — and for the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland — I extend a helping hand to him. If the Minister has not got the bottle to do it, there are Members who will help. The Members who made those claims must state from which Departments they would take resources for jobs, schools or planning.

Mr Beggs: OFMDFM.

3.45 pm

Mr Hamilton: I hear OFMDFM being suggested as the place where the money should be taken from, as if taking money away from there would be a positive thing. I am sure that the Member will revisit his comments when he considers that responsibility for the innocent victims of terrorist violence is included within OFMDFM.

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

Mr Hamilton: Thank you very much.

Would the UUP pay for it by trebling the rates bill?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Hamilton: I commend the Budget to the House.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat, and I remind Members to address their comments through the Chair.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Just as I dared to doze, things started to liven up. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. *[Interruption.]* Say nothing.

After yesterday's debate on the draft Programme for Government it is clear that there are tensions and difficulties in trying to reconcile the vision that is set out in it with the investment strategy. There are clearly difficulties in trying to reconcile the differences between departmental bids and the aspirations set out in the departmental budget statements.

There is also concern in the community about the impact of the draft Budget, particularly on funding for community projects, which will undoubtedly be covered in the consultations between now and the new year. I wish to mention some of the issues that have been brought to my attention, both as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson and as one of the six MLAs for North Belfast.

We need to decide on an approach to healthy living, as opposed to solely tackling ill health. Our approach to health provision and social care is deficient, and the challenge for the Assembly is in how we tackle that. Members will expect me to say this, but I do want to see the implementation of Bairbre de Brún's Investing for Health strategy.

Prevention should be at the heart of our approach to the inequalities in health and how they can be addressed. Forty-eight per cent of the overall Budget is dedicated to health and social care, yet there is still massive under-resourcing and difficulty in the Health Service. The public has huge interest in proper investment in the Health Service, particularly in mental health, and yet there is a shortfall in the bid for mental health and the implementation of the Bamford Review, which has caused a lot of concern. I appeal to the Department of Health and the Minister to find a resolution.

There must be a reconciliation of the 2013 Bamford target in the draft Programme for Government and the two Bamford bids. That is crucial to meeting the aspirations of those working in mental health and restoring public confidence. Anything less will ensure that the mental-health service will remain the Cinderella service.

Ill health reduces economic activity, and the evidence shows that mental illness reduces economic output, so greater investment in health is a strategic measure for improving economic performance. There are clearly gaps between the funds that are available for service development and the totals required.

The Department for Social Development also causes concern in the community. Although DSD received an additional £27 million a few weeks ago in the last monitoring round, there has been a proposal to cut the warm homes scheme by 50%, as well as an inability to deliver social and affordable homes in the new-build programme. DSD has more assets, land and properties than any other Department. The draft Programme for Government states that:

“Inequalities exist, and we must strive to eliminate all forms of inequality.”

However, in the area-at-risk programme, £3 million of funding was skewed towards loyalist areas. There is grave concern about that, about the blatant disregard for objective need as a criterion and about how equality for all plays out in communities.

The voluntary and community sectors, most of which provide excellent and invaluable support for all the people, require services that need to be supported on a long-term basis instead of the piecemeal approach that has drawn complaints recently. The overarching responsibility of the Executive is to proactively change the existing patterns of social disadvantage, not to replicate them.

The Department for Social Development’s Minister is a member of the Executive — sometimes — and has responsibility for that commitment. How will the circle be squared? How will we explain that to the people who are on the housing waiting list in north Belfast? Anything from 76% to 85% of nationalists are waiting for a home, and a right to a home is enshrined in human rights legislation.

Everyone agrees that there is not enough money in the draft Budget. We must examine the legacy of underfunding, and deprivation in infrastructure and social services. Every Department faces tough decisions. There is a need to show creativity and imagination — and no need for scaremongering. We need leadership, and not emotional blackmail. The unofficial opposition must tell us what they intend to do, instead of what they do not.

I support the take-note debate on the draft Budget.

Mr McQuillan: The draft Budget and draft Programme for Government have been set against a backdrop of tight financial settlements. When we consider all that the documents contain, it is obvious that a mid- to long-term view has been taken in producing the draft. However, it is such a pity that some in the Assembly are so short-sighted that they cannot see that the aim is a sustainable development, growth and expansion of Northern Ireland’s economy. Perhaps after today’s debate they will clearly see the true scope and vision of the proposals.

Although it must be remembered that Northern Ireland’s public money does not come from a bottomless

pit, the variety and scope of the draft programme is truly great. It includes the expansion of the infrastructure needed to satisfy modern investment; deferring water rates — indeed reducing them; increasing the educational attainment of our young people; reducing levels of poverty; increasing the levels of economic activity; protecting our environment; reducing the number of deaths on our roads; reducing treatment times and increasing the survival rate of bowel cancer and strokes. All that has come from an Assembly in which there are still critics.

If the draft Budget lacks vision, I fail to see how and where. Improvements are envisaged in every Department — something that cannot be said about direct-rule policies. Most of all, Northern Ireland’s own elected representatives have devised and agreed the draft Budget to fund the draft Programme for Government. That is an achievement that some Members fail to recognise. Perhaps they do not have seats at the Executive table and, therefore, have decided instead to be negative.

I am proud to be a Member of an Assembly that has such a vision for Northern Ireland. It has identified the very real needs that exist in the Province, has the courage to develop unique policies that can begin to address those needs and is delivering the government for which it was democratically elected by the people of Northern Ireland.

As the First Minister said on 8 May 2007, we are only at the beginning of the process of developing Northern Ireland to ensure a stable economy, respect and equality for all, increased opportunity, a rise in the level of economic activity, the provision of good healthcare and a pleasant environment to live in. That begins with this draft Budget.

I support the draft Budget and the motion.

Mr McGimpsey: The debate provides me with a further opportunity to highlight the real difficulties that the draft Budget creates for the Health Service. Furthermore, it allows me to respond to some of the naïve comments that were made in the Chamber yesterday. As the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, it is my duty to set out the perspective as I find it on the ground.

As an Executive, we have a shared objective to ensure that people have access to the best health and social care services possible within the resources available. We need an informed debate based on the real world. I do not ask for the sun, the moon and the seven stars. I have reduced my bids to levels that could be met without catastrophe either for the ratepayer or for any other area of public services. I am as committed as anyone to securing reform, efficiency and productivity.

I know that there are limits on what is possible, and that we all face difficult choices. Who knows what the position could have been if economic packages had been delivered as promised by some?

There is a cross-party consensus at Westminster, supported by independent experts, that the National Health Service model requires significant investment. Moreover, it is agreed that radical action is needed to promote prevention and reform to make the system better for patients. I am committed to doing just that.

The outcome of the comprehensive spending review has reflected that, with a 3·7% real-terms increase in England over the next three years. In Northern Ireland, where the need is greater, the increase is only 1%.

I believe passionately in the principles of the National Health Service: that it must be free at the point of use, and provide services from the cradle to the grave. If we fail to adequately fund the Health Service in Northern Ireland, those principles will be at risk, and we would be undermining the service for those who depend on it the most. Frankly, that is not acceptable.

Health is not about politics; it is about saving lives. That there has been so much debate about funding proves how important this issue is. I have no problem working with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Health Committee, and others, and, indeed, I welcome their assistance in attempting to reach a solution.

There have been comments to the effect that, despite high levels of funding, the Health Service has not improved. People have complained that the service is over-bureaucratic, inefficient and ineffective. Let us remember the dire situation that we faced five years ago: horrendous trolley waits, growing waiting lists, and a service that was not performing. Things have changed for the better, and the facts prove that. For example, in March 2006, there were 74,000 people waiting for more than six months for a first outpatient appointment. By March this year, that total had fallen to only 32. Trolley waits are being eradicated, there will be a maximum of a four-hour wait in accident and emergency by March 2008, and delayed discharges are being eliminated. Of course, I could go on, but the point is that this is not all about money.

Tackling inefficiencies is essential. About £115 million of savings have already been achieved. I am committed to delivering a further £343 million of savings over the next three years, including in administration costs. Approximately £500 million of savings will be found and pumped back into essential front line services. That will not be easy. Difficult decisions must be made. However, I will make them. If I am able to achieve more efficiencies, I will do so. However, my priority is to safeguard the quality of patient care — not simply to make cuts.

Much has also been said about needs, and there has been a dispute about the level of need. There should not be a dispute. Professor John Appleby's report, 'Independent Review of Health and Social Care Services in Northern Ireland', highlighted a greater need in Northern Ireland. Officials in my Department and in the Department of Finance and Personnel considered the need identified by the Appleby steering group, and agreed that the best available estimate is of a 14% to 15% greater need in Northern Ireland.

Compared to England, no one can dispute the fact that our Health Service is underfunded by £300 million. Neither is there any disagreement that, in just three years time, the draft Budget will leave the Health Service with a massive £600 million funding gap. However, I do not wish to get sidetracked by numbers. This is not about figures, it is about need, and no one should be in any doubt about that. The growing gap between services here and in the rest of the UK is not acceptable. Our people deserve better. They pay taxes and National Insurance like everyone else in the UK — why should they be penalised?

Let us compare health services in Northern Ireland and England. It is simply unacceptable that, if we had the same rate of deaths from heart disease as the rest of the UK, 300 fewer people would die each year in Northern Ireland. If we had the same adoption rates as England, another 50 to 60 children in care would be adopted each year. It is not acceptable that waiting times for all services are much longer in Northern Ireland. Death rates from bowel cancer are 16% higher than the UK average. When adjusted for need, funding for mental-health and learning-disability services is approximately 34% lower than in England. The gap in children's services is similar.

I intend to make the best use of all the resources at my disposal. Additional resources that have been added to my budget amount to £455 million by year 3. That is not even enough to meet the inescapable pressures of pay, price, demography and existing commitments. I must use the major part of my efficiency savings to cover inescapable costs, which leaves only £16 million in year 1 to introduce and improve services. The draft Programme for Government sets out the improvements that I wish to make to a range of services, such as mental health, learning disability, community, stroke and cancer services —

4.00 pm

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Let me finish.

Most of those improvements will not be in place until 2011. With only £16 million available next year, this is effectively a stand-still Budget for the next two years in respect of health.

Let me be clear also about some of the things that I cannot do. I will not be able to improve hospital waiting times.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Speaker, I am not giving way.

People with mental-health and learning-disability problems will remain in hospitals. The introduction of free prescriptions, free eye examinations and free personal care are all unaffordable. Measures to reduce death rates from cancer and heart disease cannot be implemented. Additional, specialist, salaried foster-carers to support children on the edge of care will not be provided. The breast-cancer screening programme cannot be extended to include women aged between 65 and 70. Access to new, life-changing drugs will be deferred or delayed, and at least 3,000 people with chronic illnesses will have unnecessary hospital admissions.

That list is unacceptable to Members and to the public. This Budget is only a draft, and it is a basis for consultation with the Assembly and the general public. That fact was confirmed by the Executive at last Thursday's meeting. Resources can be changed through consultation, not through scaremongering or through talk about tripling the rates, but by re-examining our priorities.

I will play my part in delivering exceptionally challenging efficiency savings and improving productivity in the National Health Service in Northern Ireland. However, if the draft Budget is approved as it stands, a conscious decision will have been taken to ignore the advice of independent and highly regarded experts, such as Wanless and Appleby. Those experts have told us consistently that higher levels of resources are needed to deal with demographic trends and the cost of new technologies.

I would be failing in my role as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if I did not continue to fight for a better Health Service. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better; they deserve a Health Service of which we can all be proud. If the draft Budget is approved as it stands, everyone will lose. Health is the one issue that touches everyone in society. My priorities are putting patients first and delivering a world-class Health Service.

Frankly, this draft Budget fails to deliver for the Health Service and for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I wish to make some remarks as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I will make others as an SDLP Member for Foyle.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has benefited from hearing the views of several stake-

holders, and more briefing sessions have been promised. The Committee welcomes the fact that growing the economy is a top priority in the Programme for Government and that that is reflected in the Budget.

The draft Budget proposals for the Department provide resource and capital allocations that broadly align with what the Committee generally considers to be the Department's key spending priorities in contributing to growing a dynamic, innovative economy. The Committee notes that the funding for INI is more securely based than it was under the previous concordat. However, we recognise that some of the spirit of the concordat remains in the industrial development guarantee, which provides that no worthwhile proposal for eligible support to investment in industry or tradable services will be lost, even if that means diverting other resources.

The Committee wants to ensure that, if the need to resort to that industrial development guarantee should arise — possibly as a result of great success following the US/NI investment conference — it would not be used at the expense of some of the other budget commitments relating to cross-cutting efforts on skills, wider economic development, research and development, training and innovation. Those matters are integral to growing the innovative economy.

The Committee has noted with some concern that no specific identifiable resources have been allocated so far to local enterprise and the social economy. We will be examining that area in the hope that that will be changed.

Yesterday, in the debate on the draft Programme for Government, I recorded concern about innovation funding. In a high-profile announcement, the former Chancellor allocated money for innovation, and further moneys were allocated in support of innovation from the Irish Government. Additional money has been provided for innovation, but there is no visible additional innovation funding in the Budget. The Committee wants to be assured that the new innovation funding is not being used to cover pre-existing innovation funds. The Committee hopes that work on that issue will be more visible and positive by the time of the revised Budget.

There are resource and capital allocations that will enable the Tourist Board to improve its role. The Committee is disappointed that so far there has been no indication of any bids that were made to support the regional tourism partnerships, and it is not clear what allocations they will receive. The Tourist Board has an important job, as does Tourism Ireland, but the regional tourism partnerships also have an important role to play, both locally and in making sure that there is good meshing between Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board.

The Committee wants money to go specifically to tourism product development. I noted what the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said about that this morning in his statement. Therefore, the Committee looks forward to positive engagement on that issue.

We recognise that moneys are being provided for the five signature projects. I champion the importance of the Walled City signature tourism project in my constituency, which has made good progress compared to other projects. However, that does not mean that it is not in need of more funding and more backing. Obviously, there are issues about the funding gap for the Titanic Quarter. We will also wait with interest to find out what is happening regarding the allocation that is provided for the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre. Money that we were told was earmarked for the public-sector project is still there, so Members will be interested to find out what happens to that.

The Committee welcomes the fact that Safe Start NI will receive funding in year 2 of the cycle; however, we would have preferred that that take place in the first year of this spending round.

The Committee is concerned about unmet bids from the Department regarding EU structural funds. The Department will have a managing and certifying role for the competitiveness programme, yet there are no new resources to meet that new role. Similarly, there was a high discretionary administration bid regarding obligations under the energy end-use efficiency and energy services directive, and that has not been met either. Those are both important areas.

Regarding EU funding, the Committee recognises that DETI is benefiting considerably from the Peace III programme. We also recognise that different parties and other sectors might have different views of that. Those views might be reflected by other Departments during the course of the draft Budget. If there is any revisiting of the share of the Peace III funding that has been envisaged for DETI, and if that is to go to some other Department's budget lines, my Committee will want that transfer made good in the DETI budget lines so that the purposes and priorities of the Programme for Government are properly reflected.

Suggestions were made last night and elsewhere that Members are not allowed to have the view that there can be any improvement or any material revision of either the draft Budget or the draft Programme for Government. Clearly, improvement and revision are required. It is the Assembly's job to contribute to such consultation and such reconsideration. Parties cannot say that it is their way and their say only, and that no other Members are allowed to have an alternative view.

When the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government were being presented, the Ministers went

out of their way to misrepresent the record of the previous Executive and, in particular, to attack other parties. They cannot then insist that those other parties do not have the right to outline their views of the draft Budget.

Mr Speaker, we recognise your ruling regarding amendments, and I fully understand and accept the reason for that ruling.

Some of us have been at pains to highlight the inadequacy, as we see it, of the allocations for health and housing. In this, the SDLP is consistent with the position it adopted and agreed with other parties in the Committee on the Preparation for Government and the Committee on the Programme for Government. In those Committees, we expressed our views on how negotiations with the Treasury might best be conducted and how input from the Irish Government should be maximised. Other parties disagreed. Perhaps, had our preferred tactics been adopted, there might have been a better outcome. Nevertheless, although different views on tactics were held, we did nothing to interfere with the negotiating stance taken by those who had to take the lead in the Northern Ireland interest.

We were not out to create problems or difficulties. The same is true of the submissions to the Varney Review. On the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I ensured that nothing was done to queer the pitch for the Executive and their negotiating position on behalf of the broad regional interest.

It is with that record of responsibility on those issues that the SDLP insists that it has the absolute right to interrogate the details of the draft Budget. If we did not do so, we would not be doing our job. In looking at the draft Budget, we have the right to say that more money is needed up front for housing. I also ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether money emerging from the work of the capital realisation task force could go into the housing budget. Will he indicate whether there is a golden rule in relation to the capital realisation task force whereby moneys so realised should be spent only as capital and not on programmes?

Also, there is no mention in the Programme for Government or draft Budget about what will happen with respect to replacing the 11-plus — it is obvious that that will have consequences for the Budget. The draft Budget also includes allocations that presume significant efficiency savings in a number of Departments; however, we are not sure whether all those efficiency savings will be made. If they are not made, there will be a hole in the Budget. Therefore, at whose expense will that be? At one level, I hope that it will not be at the expense of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

In circumstances in which Committees have not been fully informed about the full implications of

those efficiency savings, Members would be wrong to nod through this draft Budget, on the blind, without asking any further questions.

In this House, Members have the right to raise issues, not just to praise Ministers.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. To set the context, I must repeat some of the comments that I made yesterday during the debate on the draft Programme for Government.

The Committee is now well into the process of responding to the draft Budget; however, as I said yesterday, that work will not be complete until tomorrow when the Committee will have an opportunity to discuss final matters with the Minister.

Following on from what Mark Durkan has said; this is a take-note debate on a draft Budget that has been published for consultation. It is important that our concerns as individual Members, Committee members, or Chairpersons should be raised as part of the consultation process.

When the Committee for Employment and Learning took evidence from departmental representatives on the draft Budget, the representatives expressed the view that they had achieved a mid-ranking result as regards CSR bid outcomes. They believe that they won on a number of issues, but that there were others in which they could have achieved better outcomes. The Committee's overarching sense is that the allocation, while strong in places, will not be sufficient to meet the goals and targets in the draft Programme for Government for economic development.

In particular, although the Committee welcomes the emphasis on an issue that was to be delivered by the Department, there is concern that the moneys allocated to delivering the skills requirement could fall short of achieving the synergy that is necessary between business growth and skills development.

The Committee is concerned that unless the skills base exists to pre-empt, or meet, opportunities, investors could be frustrated and opportunities could be missed. A number of specific issues illustrate that concern. Yesterday, during the debate on the draft Programme for Government, I mentioned the discrepancy between the programme's goals relating to R&D and innovation, and the apparent lack of resources — or at least, the lack of clarity on resources. The moneys available for innovation appear to be inadequate to advance the cutting-edge research in universities and in the private sector that the Executive tell us is required to bring about the transformation of our traditional economy into a knowledge-based one.

4.15 pm

The Committee is aware that there are opportunities available, for example, via the Science Foundation Ireland, but they are narrow. The Committee urges the Executive to be creative in ensuring that investment in research and development is prioritised in the short and medium term to secure longer-term economic gains.

The commitment to PhDs in the Programme for Government is an unfunded bid. The Committee has heard that a proportion of the funding for innovation will be utilised to meet that goal, but we are concerned that that would spread an already thin amount of money even more thinly. The Department said that there is a small amount of unallocated money from bids that could be used for PhDs, and the Committee would welcome any movement in that direction.

Since devolution, much has been made of the need to re-skill the workforce. The recent Leitch Review sets the context and establishes challenging targets. However, a comprehensive spending review bid from the Department for foreign direct investment for the employer support programme for further education has not been funded. The Committee is concerned that we could be facing a serious gap in adult training and apprenticeships generally.

In addition, the critical sector initiatives, which is a programme designed specifically to pre-empt and prepare for foreign direct investment, has received only £9 million over three years and nothing in the first year. The Department's original bid was for £24 million over three years, so less than 40% of the bid has been achieved. *[Interruption.]*

That was Sir Reg Empey thanking me for fighting his corner.

A major part of the Leitch Review focuses on essential skills. As I said yesterday, the Committee has grave concerns on the Budget allocation to deliver on this vital component. The Department has said that, to an extent, it speculated and overbid — which the Finance Minister will appreciate — which, looking closely at the numbers, may be the case. Nevertheless, the Department said that it believes that it has sufficient funding for essential skills. I will ensure that the Committee keeps this issue live on our work programme to assess whether that is indeed the case.

The Committee fully supports the Department's bid to include information and communications technologies as a third essential skill. However, only £5 million of an £11.4 million bid has been received, which is approximately 40% over the next three years. The most worrying aspect is that there is not even a baseline budget dedicated to that issue and nothing has been secured for the first year. The Committee is concerned that the Department will struggle to deliver on that important programme.

In addition to those broad economic and skills-related themes, there are other draft Budget issues that I would like to raise.

Issues arose at Committee meetings relating to further and higher education organisations that the Department says are autonomous. Although the Committee accepts that universities and colleges should be commercially autonomous, it is concerned that the Department could be losing control of significant social goals. That may be an issue for the further education sector rather than the universities. For example, concession rates offered by colleges are an important way of facilitating training for particular groups, such as people on benefits, yet there is no consistency in applying concession rates. The Committee has a general concern that budgetary autonomy may not always work to deliver important goals related to social cohesion. The Committee wishes to see clear incentives for further and higher education institutions to tackle social inequalities, and we would like to see those evidenced soon.

Turning to issues in higher education, the Committee has concerns that potential changes and the widening of the upper and lower income thresholds would require an additional £18 million over the next three years. The Committee has been informed that bids to meet this need are unfunded. The Committee does not wish to see any detriment to local students' maintenance arrangements and would ask that this situation be urgently addressed.

Mr S Wilson: At least today's debate has been a bit more measured than yesterday's debate on the draft Programme for Government. I do not doubt that that is partly due to the fact that some of those who thought, yesterday, that they could be in Government and in opposition at the same time, now begin to realise the consequences of that ludicrous and contradictory stance. Perhaps that will enable us to have a more measured debate on the draft Budget.

I agree with the leader of the SDLP that the Assembly's job in when looking at the draft Budget is not simply to rubber-stamp it and to say, "Yes, that is great, everything is OK." The job is to interrogate the draft Budget. It is a draft Budget. There are opportunities to see whether some priorities should be dropped and other measures brought forward as new priorities; to see whether there are ways in which money could be better allocated; and to ask some pertinent questions that, undoubtedly, will be answered later by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

However, some of the Members who have spoken today are still living off the old, tired arguments. They really think that today's debate is an opportunity to simply hold out their hands and say that they want more, because they are afraid to take any hard decisions. There are those who still hark back to something for

which they have been programmed. When I talk about someone who has been programmed, the first person whom I think of is the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs, who shares my constituency. He was programmed a long time ago when someone mentioned an "economic package" to him. Ever since then, he has had a fixation with that economic package. On each occasion when the Minister of Finance and Personnel has been present in the Chamber — whether he has been talking about the draft Budget or not — Mr Beggs has mentioned the economic package. I suspect that he may even talk about it in his sleep; I do not know. *[Interruption.]*

I can assure Members that I do not know whether he speaks about it in his sleep. *[Laughter.]* I am saying that just in case rumours start.

There are two ways of judging whether the current package is better, and is an advance on what we had previously. The first way is to compare it with that which was received by previous Administrations. A number of Ulster Unionist Party Assembly Members have talked about the importance of the economic package. Let us consider the economic package that they delivered to the people of Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

I am going to talk about the other way in a moment.

In order to be able to use the assets that Mr Beggs and Mr Basil McCrea have said should be ours of right, they had to agree, under the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI), to put up the rates at three times the rate of inflation. That is the type of economic package that the members of the Ulster Unionist Party negotiated at a time — *[Interruption.]*

Just let me finish this first. *[Interruption.]*

For goodness' sake, let me finish. The Treasury was flush with money, and spending across all the regions of the United Kingdom was going up at twice or three times the rate of inflation. That was the time when one would have thought that they could have squeezed the most out of the Government at Westminster. Yet, that did not happen. Nevertheless, during that period, before devolution was set up — and it has already been set out and, therefore, I am not going to go through it again — the end-year flexibility; the £100 million addition to the CSR moneys coming through; the release of asset sales; the access to end-year flexibility; and, on top of that, in the current CSR negotiations, the additional moneys that came through —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I will give way in a minute, when I have finished this.

On top of that, there are the additional moneys that came through the CSR period, the asset sales and the money under RRI.

All those things have added to the package. Is it as much as we wanted? It would never be as much as we would want. Is it more than the Ulster Unionist Party got? Yes — of course it is more than the Ulster Unionist Party got. That is how it should be judged.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that the borrowing that is proposed will avail of the same interest rates that were negotiated by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP? Those were essentially Bank of England base rates, meaning that we would pay the same amount for the money that was borrowed from the Treasury.

Secondly, the other money that has been included in this Budget is the cashback from the sale of Civil Service properties under Workplace 2010. We do not yet know how much we will have to pay above the base rate for that money. Does the Member not accept that the people of Northern Ireland will pay more for that additional money than they would previously have paid?

Mr S Wilson: Are we getting more money or are we not getting more money? The fact is that more resources are coming through. Furthermore, we will not have to impose additional taxation on people in Northern Ireland for the right to access that money.

Mr P Robinson: Just in case anyone ever watches what goes on in the Assembly and, if they do, is so demented that they believe the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs, let us make it clear that under Workplace 2010, the £200 million will come directly to us. It is not being borrowed. It is going directly into the accounts of Northern Ireland plc to be used by us. It is money in our pockets that does not have to be paid back.

Mr S Wilson: I appreciate the Minister of Finance and Personnel keeping me right on the matter; I did not know that.

Secondly, we are hearing a refinement on the argument about the size of the public sector. Yesterday, the Member for East Belfast Ms Purvis made an economically illiterate speech in which she seemed to say that government in Northern Ireland is not big enough and that she wanted bigger government. She should join the Khmer Rouge — “Pol Pot Purvis” might be a more appropriate name for her.

Dr Farry spoke the same language today. He tells us that it is not that the public sector is too big, but that the private sector is too small. He does not realise that in all economics such choices must be made. He should have attended my economics classes when I was teaching production possibility curves. I could have explained it to him in diagrammatic form.

The truth of the matter is that in order to redirect resources from one activity to another, there are choices to make. Those choices have to be made in this Budget. That is where the Member for South Belfast, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public

Safety, who intervened as a Back Bencher today, got it all wrong. He said that resources can be redirected, but he did not tell us how. He is right: we can move from one resource allocation to another, but he did not tell us who he wants to take the money from. He said only that the people of Northern Ireland deserve better.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than a Minister who is getting 51% of the increase of all the money coming into Northern Ireland over the next three years but who says that he cannot manage. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than a Minister who, having been presented with a report saying that £400 million in savings can be made in his Department immediately, will not look for those savings.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve far better than a Minister whose Department absorbs the biggest part of the Northern Ireland Budget, yet who still holds out the begging bowl. They deserve far better than a Minister who wants to pillage everyone else's budgets without dealing with his own. Perhaps the best thing that he could do to give the people of Northern Ireland a better deal is to resign and let the Member for North Down who wanted the Department in the first place take over.

4.30 pm

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. People have placed enormous faith in Members. They have elected us to bring an end to the nightmare years of direct rule, when Ministers with no interest in this place flew in, made decisions that changed our lives and flew out again. Those decisions were usually bad ones that left a legacy of neglect and underinvestment. Those Ministers also showed arrogance when dealing with locally elected politicians.

To put right the legacy with which we have been left will require our adopting an imaginative approach. Although there are many issues that can be considered absolute priorities, we will inevitably have to take responsibility for dealing with the burden with which we have been left.

When we examine the Assembly's list of priorities, we all shout for our own corner. We have our own priorities, and we hope that the Minister will look favourably on our particular issue.

I argued in the House yesterday that the promises contained in the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy did not contain the resources necessary to deal with the housing crisis in the immediate or long term. I said that, over the next 15 years, a well-funded, well-resourced and well-thought-out strategy was required to allow us to plan the type of communities in which we want to live. It is not simply about building houses in isolation but about building communities, including mixed-tenure housing, with the infrastructure to develop and prosper. That requires

a commitment from the Executive to plan, finance and develop the communities of the future. From the draft Budget to the final Budget, we will sow the seeds of the future. There is an expectation that we will deliver what is necessary to help the hard-pressed first-time buyers on to the property ladder through creating an effective affordability sector.

We must fulfil our promises of delivering for the social-housing sector, which has been decimated over the years. Some parts of the North have had no new social housing in many years. It is essential that at least 2,500 new homes be built every year for the foreseeable future in order to deal with the legacy of neglect. In 1971, the Housing Executive built 9,500 houses, yet the Minister for Social Development told us that no new social housing may be built next year.

Rather than blame everyone else, the Minister for Social Development must trawl her own budget to ensure that she maximises her resources. She must ensure that there is no wastage in her Department. She is the Minister; she must show the leadership that comes with her title rather than place the blame elsewhere for the problems that fall within her remit. That is what leadership is about.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel mentioned yesterday that additional resources that the Minister for Social Development has at hand would allow her to deal with some of the issues facing her Department. Will Minister of Finance and Personnel comment further on that?

I deal with people who have been in hostels for years. They have little prospect of being housed, because they happen to live in areas of high demand. The housing selection scheme cannot help them, because they need 180 points or more to compete with another 10 people for the same two-bedroom house. Do we tell those people that we are sorry, but we do not have the money to build them a home? What about elderly people who live in a flat or house that is totally unsuited to their needs, or people with disabilities who need their homes specially adapted? The social-development budget has been slashed due to lack of funding. Do we tell those people that we are sorry, but we cannot help them? Real people are being affected by the decisions that we make. That is the harsh reality of setting budgets. The Housing Executive has told us —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: Go ahead.

Mr S Wilson: Cash and land is being made available to the Minister for Social Development, but she has not even looked at the cash assets of many housing associations. She has given me 15 reasons why she cannot touch them but not one reason why she can. If she added all those sources of money together, the housing programme could be delivered.

Mr F McCann: That is one of the difficulties that we face. The Minister for Social Development has been blaming everyone else, instead of trying to deal with the situation.

Sammy, it is a fact of life that, as well as that money, at least another £300 million a year would be needed to start to deal with the severe housing crisis. A mixture of both is required. Obviously, assets exist, but a new injection of resources and finance is needed to deal with the situation.

We have been told by the Housing Executive and the Minister for Social Development that the adaptations programme is another programme that will be impacted on because there is no new money to support it. Could the Minister of Finance and Personnel please comment on that?

The community sector has always been the victim of cuts at Budget time. Given that that sector provides a much-needed service in the community and shows huge commitment and dedication to the most deprived areas of the North, it is shameful that, when money becomes scarce, the community sector is the first to suffer as a result of departmental cuts. Such cuts have a knock-on effect on the community that the sector serves. As ever, it is the weakest in the community who ultimately pay the price.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the community sector; it runs the youth clubs, the crèches, the community houses, the outreach programmes, services for the old and the young, to name but a few. We should ensure that funding for such projects continues rather than allow them to become the victims of cutbacks.

Mrs I Robinson: I am not sure whether Mr McGimpsey spoke as an ordinary MLA or as a Minister when he delivered his speech on health, but I regret that I missed it. I had a meeting with a group of women from the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre in Belfast. That group of ladies require immediate funding if their organisation is to survive; it is in crisis. It provides a unique service to all women, and, indeed men, across Northern Ireland who experience rape, abuse or sexual violence in their lifetime.

Each year, the centre deals with approximately 6,000 calls — to and from clients — about sexual violence and abuse. Some 55% of the centre's clients have experienced child sexual abuse. Each year, nearly 2,000 new clients contact the centre, and nearly half of them will visit the centre at least once. The centre requires mainstream funding, and it is essential that the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre be allowed to continue its important work of providing care for those who are in deep crisis. That work cuts across many departments and areas, including health, education and social development, and I appeal for that money to be found in the various Departments, if at all possible.

As party spokesperson on health, the bulk of my remarks will refer to the health sector. Although I welcome the strong economic focus in the draft Programme for Government and draft Budget, I am also encouraged that health has obtained such a large slice of the overall resource cake. I am keen to see the maximum amount of resources directed towards health, and no doubt we could always make use of more. However, it is clear from the proportion of the Budget that has been allocated to health and social services — about half of the resources available — that a strong emphasis has been placed on health.

I hear the calls for greater allocations for social housing and other worthy causes. I recognise the merit of those calls, but I hope that that will not lead to the draft Budget's percentage of spend on health being reduced in the final Budget.

I want to see a better Health Service, not an increasingly expensive one. Improving productivity is the key and will ensure that the public get the maximum out of the service for the money going into it.

Mr F McCann: I appreciate and understand everything that the Member has said. However, does she not also agree that housing is a cross-cutting issue? If people do not have a house, it impacts on their health, education and employment possibilities. A holistic approach is needed to deal with this matter.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I could not agree more that health is not simply a stand-alone issue. It is a cross-sectoral issue, which involves other Departments and impacts on recreation and leisure, and so on. I will come to that point if I am allowed to move on.

Transformation, which would increase productivity, cannot be put off indefinitely. Radical reform is essential. There must be innovation and incentives. The resignation of David Sissling, chief executive designate of the new health authority, is exactly the sort of development of which I have been fearful. It was a coup for Northern Ireland to have attracted someone of David Sissling's calibre to the local Health Service. However, it was inevitable that he would not hang around forever while the Minister delayed his getting on with his work. I fear that unless there is swift progress on health reform, others could follow Mr Sissling. General practitioners and other health professionals who are involved in local commissioning groups are also being denied the opportunity to get on with their work.

I have a strong interest in mental-health issues, as do other members of the Health Committee. The Committee is determined to see the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability implemented quickly. The Committee was somewhat surprised to learn that the Minister made one upfront bid for mental health to DFP, for £12

million, and then mental health did not feature again until his seventeenth bid. Even more surprisingly, some of the plans contained in the two bids, referred to as "Bamford 1" and "Bamford 2", appear to have little to do with the vision and thrust of the Bamford Review. The Bamford Review was about redirecting resources from the acute sector into the community. However, the bids included the building of new facilities and autism issues, despite the fact that the autism lobby has argued strongly that autism should be considered separate and distinct from mental health and learning disability.

Incidentally, it has proved difficult for Committee members to obtain information on figures. Details of the figures have been slow to come — emerging in just a trickle. In response to the gentleman from East Antrim, the Committee has not been able to obtain comparable figures or historic evidence of how bids have been pitched, or of the basis on which that was done. Perhaps he will take the time to seek that information from his colleague, who is the Minister at fault, instead of sniping at other Department's Ministers.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No, I will not give way. The Member has spoken enough.

It is essential that mental health feature prominently in new service development. The many millions that have already been devoted to mental health in the draft Budget, when added to the extra funding, must be channelled towards the redirection of services.

Another concern is mental-health provision for the Province's prisoners. The Assembly deserves answers on how that is to be funded, now that funding has been transferred from the Northern Ireland Office to the Health Department. There is already a huge need for mental-health resources without prison services having to be funded from the same pot.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since the Chairman of the Health Committee got up to speak, the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry has been sitting having a conversation with his back to the Chamber. Clearly, he wants to show his disrespect for the Member who is speaking. That should not be allowed in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I remind all Members to have respect for one another in the Chamber, whether they are speaking or sitting.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you agree that it is appropriate that Members should speak through the Chair, rather than directly to other Members?

Mr Speaker: I have already made that point. The Member did speak through the Chair.

I ask Mrs Robinson to continue.

Mrs I Robinson: I must say that the Assembly becomes more and more like a pantomime, Mr Speaker. However, what can one expect?

I want to know whether additional money has been resourced — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. Let us have some respect. *[Interruption.]*

I have called for order. The Member may continue.

Mrs I Robinson: For the third time, Mr Speaker, I want to ascertain whether the Northern Ireland Office will be providing the Health Department with the additional money that is necessary for the well-being and mental health of prisoners as part of the holistic approach to mental health.

Mental health must be considered holistically, and responsibility for it lies with other Departments as well as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Department of Education can play a role, particularly in relation to the promotion of good mental health and the delivery of aspects of the Bamford Review recommendations on child and adolescent mental health. Many other sectors can play a role in improving the overall well-being of the community. I welcome the investment from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to promote leisure and exercise. That shows the potential that can be gained from having more co-ordinated government.

4.45 pm

Over the weekend, I was surprised to hear the Health Minister seek to blame the draft Budget for the delay in building the new women's and children's hospital in Belfast. It was only last week at a draft Budget briefing that his departmental officials informed the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety that their Department had done well in respect of the capital allocations that it had received in the draft Budget. Who does one believe? With regard to the children's and women's hospital, it remains to be seen how far up the Minister's priority list that is, and whether there are other projects that he would like to see completed first. Given that the Jubilee Maternity Hospital on the Belfast City Hospital site was forced to close, it is essential that the new regional centre be delivered promptly.

Mr Speaker, will I be allowed extra time because of the interference during my contribution?

Mr Speaker: No.

Mrs I Robinson: The Health Committee was also interested to learn that the departmental officials were going to reassess some of the bids that were made to the Department of Finance and Personnel, which were originally referred to as inescapable or unavoidable. We have been informed by the Department of Health

that some of their inescapables may not have been inescapable. Strange though that may appear, it will at least allow more funding to be made available for new service development than had been indicated, and that will be welcomed by everyone. It would be welcome if that funding could be utilised for mental health.

Mr McNarry: I shall speak in a personal capacity, before moving on to business relating to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. This is a debate; it is what Members do in the Chamber. Yesterday, we had a debate — opinions were offered, and most were respectfully listened to. The Assembly reached a decision by a democratic vote, but the Finance Minister then rode in with a spurious points of order, which was not a point of order. The Robinsons are not having much success with point of order lately. Last night's point of order was used to issue a warning or a veiled threat. The timing and the intention of that have not been lost on the Ulster Unionist Party.

Yesterday, almost every Department was criticised over the draft Programme for Government — and if you think differently, read Hansard. However, following the debate, there was no recognition of what was said during it; instead, we received a Darth Vader impression, warning that the Executive will fall without a Programme for Government. Now try that on, and it would be a signal to the Committees and to the House to pack up and go back to our constituency offices because remote control has returned, and all decision making will begin and end with the Executive — even draft consultative issues are not to be discussed in case anyone responds with constructive opposition.

Last night's intervention came from a Member who, only a while ago, was not even going to enter an Executive, let alone an Executive with terrorists. However, only a short time ago, after claiming the credit for first mooted the idea of the need for a financial package in Dublin, the Member said that an adequate financial package was a necessary precondition for any restoration of devolution. That view was backed to the hilt by the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr McLaughlin, who said that the Government should put their money where their mouth is and give us the chance to deliver a Programme for Government, and not destroy our work before we start.

In February of this year, the 'News Letter' quoted a DUP source as saying that the financial package was a "deal breaker", and that if the money for devolution was not right, there would be no Government. The source also stated that there was no point in setting up a Government to fall, and that if problems with water rates, hospitals, education, and roads were to be truly addressed, that could only be done properly with the appropriate financial package.

I have a litany of DUP and Sinn Féin statements and promises, but I cannot find evidence that either party has lived up to any of them. Are Members here to consult, through positive debate, on the draft Budget, or is this a sitting that is likely to decide the future of the Executive?

Of course it is not, because it is a draft Budget, and control freakery and ministerial codes cannot be used to restrict any Member from voicing his or her opinion in the Assembly. Ulster Unionists are not in a coalition: we are in an Executive as of right. Yesterday —

Mr Donaldson: The Ulster Unionists are part of a mandatory coalition.

Mr McNarry: Mandatory coalitions: now someone is trying to — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McNarry: Yesterday, the First Minister told the House that the draft Programme for Government will be subjected to lengthy and full consultation. In contrast to other members of his party, he did not address the debate — amid the voices of argued opposition — from a position that the draft Programme for Government was not a draft at all.

Is the Minister of Finance and Personnel now stating that the full import of opposing views will not be considered as part of the consultation process? The First Minister's approach to the debate was fair and balanced. He told Members of his vision, and he performed with the dignity that one associates with his high office. I suspect that, in marked contrast, the Minister of Finance and Personnel may be unable to match yesterday's performance by the First Minister, which would be regrettable.

However, no one who spoke in today's debate wanted to end up on the receiving end of personal abuse. The point is that the Ulster Unionist Party wants to analyse the draft Budget. We are striving to help by improving the draft Budget and making it more acceptable. I understand and appreciate the attitude of the DUP/Sinn Féin coalition that Departments must make do with what they have been allocated. However, the DUP and Sinn Féin have ownership of that comment, not the UUP. It will be up to them to explain why they did not tell the electorate that they would have to make do with much less than the minimum that people would have expected or are likely to tolerate. Let us see how it all works out.

From this point on, I am speaking on behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Committee carefully considered the allocations to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the draft Budget, and it has several serious concerns, because it has received no information on how the allocations to arts, sports, and so forth, will be spent. It is particularly difficult for

the Committee to comment constructively on the draft Budget when it does not know which projects will be funded and which will not.

Overall, the draft Budget's allocation to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is small and inadequate. DCAL suffers from the legacy that Government have consistently undervalued the contribution that culture, arts and leisure makes to all sectors of society. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: The Committee calls for an increase across the board in the Department's budget.

The Committee is disappointed that the draft Budget does not bridge the gap in arts funding with the rest of the United Kingdom. I reiterate that I am speaking on behalf of the Committee, whose report I have been asked to deliver to the House. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members, please.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the past two minutes of the debate, there have been four utterances from Mr Donaldson, three from Mr Sammy Wilson, three from Mr Robinson — *[Interruption.]*

I have the Floor, because I am making a point of order. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: In the past two minutes, there have been utterances from four DUP Members on 10 different occasions —

Mr S Wilson: He only mentioned three of us.

Mr Attwood: On 10 different occasions —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Mr Speaker, on one occasion when you sat down after asking for order, Sammy Wilson immediately uttered more comments in the direction of the Member who was speaking. Given the catalogue of outbursts, mutterings and various other comments, I suggest that some Members need to learn the standards of the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have continually said that debates will, on occasions, raise issues. That is understandable, as this is a debating Chamber. However, I remind Members to have respect for one another. That is vital.

Mr McNarry: The Committee is disappointed that the draft Budget does not bridge the gap in per capita funding for the arts with the rest of the United Kingdom — Northern Ireland receives substantially less, per head of the population, than other United Kingdom regions. The Committee believes that that will make life very difficult for the Arts Council in its

distribution of limited funding. The Arts Council has raised a concern that the draft Budget settlement for the arts will put as many as 200 full-time and part-time jobs at risk. Over 25,000 participants from across Northern Ireland may be denied access to outreach activities and engagements with the arts. That must be looked at.

The Committee is also concerned about the effect that the loss of the children's and young people's fund will have on the creative learning centres in Londonderry and Belfast. The children's fund currently provides those centres with 50% of their funding. The centres are involved in huge projects that make a difference in their communities. Are we going to tell those groups to forget about it, make all their staff redundant and start afresh? Surely we cannot allow that to happen.

The Committee is concerned that the Department will not be able to deliver on its targets for increasing the participation of young people in sport. Although it is at a local level that young people participate in sport, there is no provision for a capital spend on community-based infrastructure. Therefore, the Committee is more than disappointed that there has not been more emphasis put on community sport and assistance for local sports clubs in the ongoing work that they do with young people.

The Minister has allocated capital funding to elite facilities, such as the 50m swimming pool and the multi-sports stadium, with the intention that they will be used in connection with the 2012 Olympics. However, the Committee has deep concerns about the lasting legacy that the Olympic Games will give Northern Ireland. What does "a lasting legacy" mean? The Committee asks the Sports Minister and the Finance Minister whether Northern Ireland will have a multi-sports stadium by 2012.

Just over half of the DCAL budget will be spent on libraries and museums — almost twice the amount that will be spent on sport and the arts. The Minister has previously explained that arts and sports are lucky as they can rely on large numbers of volunteers, whereas libraries and museums require paid staff. The Committee does not accept that as an argument for underfunding in sport and the arts. Volunteers should not be treated as poor relations or taken for granted.

The Committee welcomes the £21 million that is to be allocated to the building of a new home for the Public Record Office (PRONI). Given its location in the Titanic Quarter, there is significant tourism potential from people who come to Northern Ireland to investigate their roots. That spend will contribute to the wider economy. However, the Committee recommends that there be additional funding to enhance the visitor experience at PRONI.

Mr Poots: I have listened to what the Member has said, and I am encouraged. Given that one of his colleagues has asked for an extra £600 million, can the Member identify where we can get additional funds? I think that if money were taken from the Health budget and put towards recreation, for example, further savings could be made in health. Will the Member support that?

Mr McNarry: I am sure that if the Minister had been in the House yesterday — maybe he was, but did not hear me — he would know that I referred to that very succinctly, in that it is a wish of the Committee, and he should know that from the Committee —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am presenting the response of the Environment Committee to the draft Budget 2008-11. The Committee notes that the draft Budget sets out the proposed spending plans of the Executive for that period, and I will specifically refer to what the Budget addresses as the relevant key issues. In regard to road safety, these are road casualty reductions, road transport compliance and enforcement, and reduction of vehicle-related crime and carbon emissions.

5.00 pm

Secondly, the key issues for the Environment and Heritage Service are: enhanced environmental protection and improvement through better regulation; the establishment of a dedicated environmental crime team to combat the illegal dumping of waste; the establishment of a new strategic development and delivery support team to co-ordinate cross-cutting regulation activities; and implementation of air-quality management.

Thirdly, the programme delivery support unit's key area will be the support of district councils and the three waste-management groups in implementing major waste procurement plans.

Fourthly, the Department will be able to develop, in part, an agreed programme for the modernisation and structure reform of local government.

Finally, the proposed capital allocations will provide funding to district councils to cover a percentage of the overall costs associated with compliance with the EU landfill directive targets.

Under the reform programme, the draft Budget states that the Department intends to take forward further reform of the Planning Service and that the allocation will also enable the review of environmental governance to be progressed. That will address the structure, management and resourcing of the publicly funded elements of the environmental governance system in central Government and local government, and implement proposals for the future environmental governance arrangements

in relation to environmental protection, and natural and built heritage.

Mr O'Loan: Is it the case that there is no provision made in the draft Budget for the creation of an environmental protection agency?

Mr McGlone: I can confirm to the Member that that question was asked of officials during the Committee's deliberations on the draft Budget, and they confirmed that there was no provision. That is a matter for concern to those of us who support that project and wish to see it implemented as soon as possible.

The Committee notes that the allocations received in the draft Budget largely meet the following spending proposals and bids: road safety services — £4.55 million required for other resources and £3.3 million for administration over the priorities and Budget period; enforcement and better regulation of EHS — £1.53 million required for other resources and £3.4 million for administration over the priorities and Budget period; programme delivery support unit (PDSU) — £2 million required over the priorities and Budget period.

The Committee notes, however, that the following spending proposals and bids were not met: planning reform — £0.55 million required for other resources and £2.5 million for administration over the priorities and Budget period; review of public administration covering the costs incurred by the Planning Service and the local government reform unit (LGRU) in taking forward the RPA agenda — £13.55 million required for other resources and £4.55 million for administration over the priorities and Budget period; LGRU — £13 million required for other resources and £1.7 million for administration over the priorities and Budget period; local government division — £2.4 million required for other resources over the priorities and Budget period; waste and contamination land — £3.7 million required for other resources and £0.83 million for administration over the priorities and Budget period. The Committee has particular concerns about the shortfalls in the spending proposals regarding the costs associated with implementing the RPA recommendations.

The Committee for the Environment welcomes the additional funding of £3.8 million over the three-year Budget period for enhanced roadside enforcement and of £4.1 million for enforcement and better regulation of environmental protection.

However, the Committee recommends that extra resources should be used to benefit one, or more, aspects of the ASSI programme. That could include an increase in the number of ASSI declarations made each year in order to complete the priority designations before 2016, and a quicker response rate on consent applications. That would lead, in turn, to greater progress in achieving favourable conditions for features in designated sites,

and more robust protection and enforcement measures, particularly with regard to Natura 2000 sites.

In relation to the Budget efficiencies, the Committee is concerned that in order to deliver the administration savings in the final year, 2010-11, the Department of the Environment may have to suppress up to 300 posts, even after a board decision to reduce non-salary running costs by 15%.

In that regard, we are particularly concerned that there will be a detrimental impact on service delivery, particularly in certain low-priority areas of the Environment and Heritage Service. Committee members are concerned about the proposed cutbacks to the EHS budget, and the impact that those cuts will have on training, resources and investment, which, of themselves, are important in providing for enforcement and investigation in respect of illegal dumping.

Committee members expressed widespread concern at the proposed efficiency savings of £1.1 million in relation to the Planning Service, and how that could equate with — and be incorporated into — any meaningful reform of the service. Although the Committee is aware of the intention of the Minister to reform the planning process, it acknowledges that the Planning Service is facing very significant structural reform arising from the review of public administration. Concerns have already been expressed about those budgetary allocations.

The Department's additional funding of £4.4 million in the 2008-09 financial year includes £2.2 million for the Planning Service, which, in the main, will go towards staff costs. However, the Committee recommends that similar amounts be allocated to the Department in the final two Budget years, 2009-10 and 2010-11. That is particularly relevant, given that that is the anticipated transition time for the review of public administration.

Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank you for calling me and for giving me the opportunity to engage in the process and debate this matter with colleagues.

Mr Dallat: In respect of planning, does the Member agree that one of the most serious deficiencies is the forward planning of bypasses around towns? I refer particularly to Dungiven, which now has the distinction of being the most polluted town in these islands. Does the Member agree that waiting until 2015 for a bypass for Dungiven is unacceptable, and is only one year short of the predicted united Ireland that we have been told about?

Mr McGlone: That certainly represents the green agenda. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the Member for his intervention. Invariably, although that matter strays a wee bit into the remit of the Department for Regional Development — and the

bypass is clearly an issue for that Minister — there may well be environmental concerns that relate to the remit of the Committee for the Environment. I will welcome any further comments and details from the Member in due course, and they will certainly be investigated.

Lord Morrow: After listening to Mr McNarry, I wonder what type of a debate I am taking part in. I know that he will not leave, now that I have mentioned him. I was interested in what he had to say, but I could not figure out whether he was talking about the Budget or something else.

Mr McNarry said that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety did not have enough money. It is interesting to note that one of those Departments is currently run by his party's Minister, and the other Department was once run by the same individual. I do not know what that says about that individual, or what Mr McNarry is trying to tell us. However, if I heard the Minister of Finance and Personnel correctly yesterday, he said that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has as much money as all the other Departments put together — but still we are told that there is not enough to do the job.

That begs the question: what would it take to satisfy the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has as much as all the other 10 Departments put together and finds that that is still not enough? He has over 48% of the Budget, and he has been given an increase of over 51%. How much money will it take?

I listened to Mr McGimpsey earlier, and I thought that it was ironic that —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: I will give way in a moment or two. I thought it ironic that the Minister looked like a man who was just about to throw in the towel and walk away, instead of saying that he wanted to do the job and wanted to get on with it. The Ulster Unionists must learn the lesson that when you are in something, you are in it — you cannot just be in it when there is good news. They tell us that this Government is a Sinn Féin/DUP carve up. However, they never seem to realise that their Ministers are also in the Government alongside one from the SDLP.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree with Mrs Robinson that:

“Costs cannot be the driving force for our emergency services. We must all support the amendment if we are to send a clear message to Government that less is bad.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 21, p113, col 2]*.

Lord Morrow: I am not sure what amendment the Member is referring to. Perhaps, he might clarify quickly.

Mr B McCrea: Mrs Robinson was criticising cuts in the Fire Service, which, as the Member knows, come

under the health budget and which she thought were not a good idea. There is no mention of that in the forthcoming Budget. Is less bad?

Lord Morrow: I think you are missing the point, Mr McCrea. The Health Minister's budget is not being cut — he is getting more. I do not know whether that fact has dawned on you. Perhaps you should take time to consider the figures to ascertain where you are coming from. Frankly, you have lost the rest of us. We do not know where you are, and I suspect that you have lost yourself. If you still wish to contribute to the debate, I suspect that it will be worth listening to — or, on second thoughts, maybe not.

Returning to what I wanted to say, the Minister of Finance and Personnel touched the right note in the foreword to the draft Budget:

“We need to use our public resources wisely to deliver high quality public services, especially to the young, the old and other vulnerable members of our community.”

I want to direct most of my comments towards two of those groups — the young and the elderly. I believe that a society that does not look after both of those categories of people will be found to have been neglectful and will be judged accordingly.

In our community, there individuals who, for one reason or another, are in a vulnerable position, which can be due to their being young, elderly, infirm, disabled or disadvantaged. Of those groups, I wish to focus specifically on two — the young who, as tomorrow's adults, start their lives requiring nurturing, protection and guidance, and the elderly, who find that they are that bit weaker or infirm.

During their early, tender, formative years, children are entirely reliant upon adults. Parents or guardians provide them with a safe environment, and schools guide them in education and all-important life skills while they are growing.

A child develops its own mind and begins to formulate opinions — albeit in a fairly simplistic sense — during the years up to the age of six. That is when they take in information that will assist them in the future. Not surprisingly, that part of a child's life is known as the formative years. Therefore, it is crucial that that relatively short time span is afforded the highest level of dedicated care and education in order to ensure that all potential is well on the way to being realised.

On Tuesday 26 June 2007, I tabled a motion to consider making available a transformation fund, similar to that which is available in England, Scotland and Wales, in order to support the professional development of the childcare and early education workforces in Northern Ireland. That would be of tremendous benefit to Northern Ireland's future generation, and has the scope to improve children's later-childhood outcomes and their adult lives.

Currently, in Northern Ireland, staff who work in community or voluntary pre-schools must pay for their ongoing training and professional development, and there is a significant disparity between their pay levels and those of people in the statutory sector.

I am deeply concerned that there is no training or development strategy whatsoever for people who work with young children. The Assembly must take cognisance of that issue.

5.15 pm

It is essential that we appropriately equip the childcare and early-years education workforce for the delivery of positive children's services to ensure better outcomes and reduce inequalities for children, young people, families and communities.

I turn to matters affecting elderly people in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way, and for his interest in issues involving young people. However, does he agree that it is inconceivable that the children's fund has been done away with? The result of that is that many of the Home Start schemes throughout the country, which are largely staffed by volunteers, will be under threat from 30 March 2008. Does the Member agree that the Executive should consider that matter and ensure that Home Start provision continues?

Lord Morrow: I listened carefully to what the Member said, but he will be aware that that decision was taken by direct rule Ministers. I have no doubt that that is the type of issue that the Executive and Assembly must give thought to and expend energy on. I could not agree more with the Member that we must deal with that type of issue, but Rome was not built in a day. Nonetheless, we will return to those issues.

Many factors can make senior citizens vulnerable: their health and general fitness can deteriorate; they do not have the energy that they once had; and they are susceptible to illness, as their immune systems weaken. Basically, they find themselves — as will we all, one day — not as robust as they were when they were younger.

Bad weather can make outdoor conditions treacherous, and some senior citizens prefer to remain at home in the colder months. The Assembly has a duty to ensure that our senior citizens, who are valuable members of the community, remain safe, secure and comfortable in their homes. Keeping those homes adequately warm and damp-free is a major step towards improving the quality of life of senior citizens. Those positive outcomes reflect well for the individual and for the wider community.

Eradicating cold and damp is of tremendous benefit in warding off illness, particularly for people who suffer from breathing complications caused by coughs, influenza and bronchitis. In the worst-case scenario,

those conditions can develop into pneumonia, which is a drastic illness at any age.

I wish to bring to the Assembly's attention an issue that is dear to my heart: the warm homes scheme. That scheme was introduced in 2001 by a Minister who shall remain nameless —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is just about up.

Lord Morrow: I regret that. I gave way because I thought that I might get a few extra minutes.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to concentrate on the education and further-education Budget allocations. However, first, I believe that a Member from the unofficial Opposition, the Alliance Party, referred earlier to Sinn Féin's "legacy Budget". Although there is a legacy of the decisions taken by direct rule Ministers, it is very much the Executive's Budget. It sets strategic priorities that are clearly more challenging and far reaching than any that were set by the previous Executive under the tutelage of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party. Whatever else the Executive might be accused of, it cannot be accused of merely tinkering with the inherited, direct rule status quo.

The education and further-education budgets have been a key priority for the Executive. Investment in the education and development of our young people will make a major contribution to the economy, and economic growth will provide opportunities for all young people to prepare for life and work.

The education sector — including the Department of Education, and the Department for Employment and Learning — faces significant challenges in the years ahead. All sectors are undergoing radical reforms and changes to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Improving educational standards in all of those sectors is a key priority for the Executive. We want our education system to deliver equal opportunities for every young person and adult to learn and succeed. The best opportunities for everyone, from the very young to those who return to further education in later years, need to be the hallmark of our education system.

Many changes are currently under way, particularly in the primary and post-primary sectors. The revised curriculum gives young people an improved start in life, with a greater emphasis on developing their skills and the need for life and work experiences. The entitlement framework provides post-primary pupils with greater access to a range of academic, vocational and technical subjects. I have no doubt that the Minister of Education will soon announce proposals regarding transfer arrangements from primary to post-primary schools.

Mr Storey: I am glad that the Member has some insight on the issue of the Education Minister's bringing forward proposals for a replacement of the transfer

system. It is regrettable that the Minister is not as forthcoming on the issue.

Does the Member agree that, if, as he has said, the priority for education is to deliver, it is incumbent on the Minister of Education to prove that she is capable of making decisions that can deliver? The Member is aware that in recent correspondence with the Committee for Education, the Minister was unable to outline her priorities because she had not made any decisions. Obviously, there is an issue in respect of learning on the behalf of the Minister of Education.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for that. The Minister of Education will bring proposals to this Chamber and to the Executive in the not-too-distant future. It will then be a matter for the Assembly and for the Committee for Education — which Mervyn Storey sits on — to debate those proposals.

There are other issues regarding education, including the primary and post-primary sector, that the Minister and the Committee for Education have referred to over the past number of months. The disparity between primary and post-primary schools was raised by the Minister during a recent meeting.

Early years provision is a key priority for both the Committee and the Minister. Early years provision in education is how we can address issues so that they do not come home to roost in later years. The literacy and numeracy strategy crosses the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, and that has been recognised by the respective Committees as a key priority. If people are to be equipped to go into the world of work, literacy and numeracy are key skills that they must have.

I also welcome the fact that the Irish-medium sector is being improved, particularly through the club-bank scheme, which was recently debated. Funding for the teaching of principals, particularly in primary schools, has been a big issue over the years, and reference has been made to that in the draft Budget.

Kieran McCarthy raised concerns about funding for children and young people. The Minister of Education has recognised that issue. If that funding is to continue, it would have to come out of the Education budget; therefore that has to be a key priority for the Executive. That is linked to early years provision, and if that funding does not continue, it will undermine all the good work that has been done.

Youth-services funding also needs to be considered. Many people who work in youth services — which come within the remit of the Department of Education — have concerns about funding.

There are a number of concerns in relation to further and higher education. I am disappointed that tuition fees are still in place. The Minister referred to a review

of tuition fees early in the new year. However, evidence is emerging that tuition fees discourage people from taking up further and higher education. They are linked to maintenance grants, and there is a disparity between the maintenance grants to students here and those to students in Britain. We are losing out. The Assembly has yet to debate tuition fees. When that issue came to the Committee, a vote was taken not to allow fees to increase in line with inflation.

Moreover, I am disappointed that the further education lecturers' dispute continues. The Minister for Employment and Learning appointed someone to look into that; nevertheless, serious concerns remain. It is particularly unfortunate that this occurs at a time when colleges are merging. We look to higher and further education to bring about a high-quality training and learning environment to provide skills and people for the workforces of business, industrial and commercial sectors.

We see significant and far-reaching changes in further and higher education. The Executive recognise that investment in those sectors is crucial to the delivery of their vision of a thriving and buoyant economy. Increasing skill levels and improving participation in education and training are vital elements in a strong economy, and will play an important role in economic success. Further and higher education is at the heart of life-long learning and is one of the key priorities of the Executive.

The loss of jobs at Seagate illustrates the importance of further and higher education. Low-skilled jobs are vulnerable to overseas competition. The message to the Executive is clear: we need highly-skilled jobs which are protected, and therefore not as vulnerable.

In the draft Budget, more remains to be done for education and further education. There is concern over tuition fees. I am disappointed that the Minister did not take a more robust attitude to the recent inquiry into the failure of the Springvale campus. Given the high levels of deprivation in the area, he should have taken a more hands-on approach to the achievement of an educational campus on a site that straddles west and north Belfast. However, there is much in the draft Budget that is positive for the primary and post-primary sectors.

All in all, provision in the draft Budget for both education and further and higher education allows us an opportunity to deliver one of the key objectives of the Executive — a strong, vibrant economy. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B Wilson: My first reaction to the draft Budget was extremely positive. The presentation highlighted the economy, emphasised the need for innovation, the encouragement of enterprise and the creation of 6,000 highly paid jobs. In social terms, it rejected water charges, proposed free transport for the over-60s, and it emphasised the Executive's green credentials with the proposed introduction of a rapid-transit system for Belfast.

However, as the details emerged, the initial presentation seemed rather disingenuous. The draft Budget was rather like an Easter egg — attractive on the outside, but with little substance and with a great hole in the middle.

The draft Budget raises serious questions. It is based on unrealistic assumptions and party-political considerations and does little to tackle the real problems facing our economy. That is particularly true in respect of the environment. Recently the Assembly expressed concern about climate change and agreed to show leadership in putting sustainable development at the centre of policy making. There is absolutely no evidence of that in the draft Budget. The commitment to rapid transit is welcome; however, it has been under consideration for a least a decade, and the fact that work will not start until 2011 is disappointing.

The draft Programme for Government proposes reducing the carbon footprint by 25% by 2025. That is hopeful, but no interim targets are stated and there is no evidence of any change in policy to meet that target. Such long-term targets are ineffective and will achieve nothing unless they are accompanied by changes in policy, which this is not. To achieve the target, we must get commuters out of their cars and onto public transport, but an examination of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development capital investment programme for the next 10 years shows a ratio of four to one in favour of roads, and that differential is increasing. If we wish to reduce carbon emissions, we must take positive action to encourage greater use of public transport. Although such measures will have little impact on the fight against climate change, they are better than the contribution from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which is to end the reconnect grants and to stop funding the Renewable Energy Installer Academy. Peter Hain set up reconnect grants to encourage more householders to install renewable energy systems, making renewable energy cheaper, easier, and more environmentally friendly, and to reduce the use of fossil fuels.

Not only will that decision increase carbon emissions, but it is short-sighted as we have a growing local renewables industry that will be strangled at birth if the grants are removed. If the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is serious about encouraging the development of new technology, that scheme should be expanded. As a result of the decision, jobs and skills in new technology will be lost. Similarly, the decision to reduce funding for home insulation under the warm homes scheme will greatly increase carbon emissions.

Overall, the draft Budget seems to be a case of smoke and mirrors. Any increase in expenditure can be met only by making efficiencies — the proposal to make efficiencies of 5% in administration in each of the next

five years is extremely optimistic. If those efficiencies are not achieved, the draft Budget commitments cannot be met; if they are met, thousands of jobs will be lost, as the public sector is labour-intensive. That is not mentioned in the draft Budget, nor is there any indication whether it will mean compulsory redundancies.

The public welcome for the proposals on water charges may be premature. Overall, there appears to be no savings, with the costs transferred from one budget to another. The taxpayer will have to meet the same costs. The main recommendation of the Hillyard Report is that £109 million should be paid to Northern Ireland Water from the regional rate and that the Roads Service should pay £25 million for road drainage costs that are met by Northern Ireland Water at present. I ask the Minister for an assurance that the £25 million will not come from the existing roads budget, as it is already under great pressure, and the roads maintenance budget has been severely cut in recent years.

That will reduce the amount that Northern Ireland Water has to raise, but it also means that there will be £134 million less to spend on other services; that is largely ignored in the draft Budget, and it could explain why the Budget increase for the National Health Service is only 2.6%. As a former member of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and one who was involved in health for more than 20 years, I am extremely concerned by the draft Budget allocation to the National Health Service. An increase of 2.6% is the lowest that I can recall; it compares with an average of about 8% over the past five years.

Had a direct rule Minister presented such an allocation, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, along with many others, would have protested vigorously, as she did in response to previous direct rule allocations. In fact, a 2.6% increase is equivalent to freezing the budget, when one considers that, due to demographic pressure, Health Service inflation is higher than normal inflation.

A freeze, compared to a 4% increase in real terms in England, is totally unacceptable, particularly since our waiting and trolley lists and other problems are significantly greater than those in England. The differential in health expenditure between Northern Ireland and England has reduced significantly in recent years. A recent study has shown that, taking account of age profile and deprivation levels, the Health Service in Northern Ireland requires 10% more resources per capita than England due to greater need.

The present differential is approximately 4%. The proposals for 2008-09 would erode that differential completely.

The Department proposes new programmes to reduce the present suicide rate, promote healthier ways of living, halt the rise in obesity, implement the long-delayed

Bamford Review findings and reduce MRSA infections. However, the draft Budget does not provide the new resources that are required for any of those programmes. It is suggested that their funding will be met from 3% efficiency savings in each of the next three years.

5.30 pm

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that there are significant savings to be made, or does he suggest that, because we have done things a certain way in the past, money should be set aside, without there being a need to make productivity and efficiency savings?

Mr B Wilson: I was just coming to that. I recall, for example, that when I was a member of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, we had great difficulty in achieving efficiency savings of even 1%. As has been pointed out, there are efficiencies to be made in the NHS. However, those efficiency savings cannot be made overnight. The NHS is a massive organisation, so, like an oil tanker that is changing course, it will take time to make those savings. Restructuring the organisation could require the introduction of legislation, and that could take some years. Given the labour-intensive nature of the NHS, 1,000 job losses will be required to achieve the 3% efficiency savings. It seems rather strange to hear of job cuts in the NHS, when we regularly hear about the problems associated with the scarcity of doctors, nurses and midwives, and so on.

Although the rates freeze is politically attractive, if healthcare services for the sick and the elderly are reduced in order to pay for it, that is unacceptable. Is it really a freeze at all when the rates bill will include a separate charge, of more than 20%, to pay for water?

The draft Budget lacks substance and is based on unrealistic assumptions. It will lead to an increase in environmental damage, no significant improvement in the Health Service, especially for the mentally ill, and increased hardship for many of the poorest. Therefore, we should look again at its allocations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to address the House on the financial package that has been outlined in the draft Budget. I speak today as the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. There are many other things that I would like say, outside of that role, but I am unable to do so because Members are limited to 10 minutes in which to speak. As Members are dealing with issues that are complex for the agriculture industry, I feel that it is my duty to that industry to stick to my brief.

It is inevitable that some Members will not be happy with the draft Budget's allocations. We, in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, are no different. However, many of our disagreements and concerns

centre not necessarily on the allocation but on the inescapable bids that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development formulated. Therefore, I wish to express my Committee's concerns and lay them before the House.

At the beginning of October, the Department was presented with a report from the red meat task force, which painted a most worrying and depressing picture of that important agricultural sector. The report recommends that suckler-cow farmers leave the industry altogether; that they diversify into some, as yet unknown, new business; and that they should use their single farm payment — for which they work extremely hard — to aid that transition. Many Committee members cannot accept that position as the way forward for the red-meat sector. As yet, the Department's response has been to do nothing.

The Department has indicated that a sum of £100 million is available under the rural development programme for diversification schemes. The Committee welcomes that significant investment. However, this investment was budgeted for, and approved by the EU, long before the report on the red-meat sector even began, and did not take account of the serious picture that was painted by that report.

The investment is not just specifically for the suckler-cow farmer, but is available to anyone in a rural area who presents the Department with a viable diversification project. The Committee believes that the findings of the red meat task force provide sufficient evidence to merit an additional and substantial tranche of moneys. Furthermore, the Committee contends that a broader and more strategic approach is required in respect of the current state of the red-meat sector to ensure that the industry thrives in the long term. Action arising out of that strategic approach could include direct support to suckler-herd farmers in a scheme similar to that which operates in the Irish Republic, and a combined producer-processor retail-departmental approach to the Northern Ireland agriculture sector.

I turn to the Department's administration and resource budgets. The Committee is content with the level of those budgets and the level of efficiency savings that are being sought within them. Those budgets deliver front line services to farming and rural communities that must be maintained in these times of severe pressure on the agriculture industry. It is hoped that those efficiencies will not result in any reduced delivery efficiency, although I am not confident that that will be the case.

The Committee is aware that the Department intends to remove staff from markets and abattoirs as part of the wider efficiency savings. We call on the Department to rethink that intention until such times as new

technologies and processes are given the opportunity to bed in.

The Committee has grave reservations about the sale of the entire Crossnacreevy site to fund the farm-nutrient management scheme. The Committee emphasises that it is pleased to see the funding provided for the scheme, although it is of the opinion that, unless derogation from the EU to extend the deadline for the scheme beyond December 2008 is achieved, the budget of £50 million, with access to an additional £29 million, is too high. That is due to the inability to gain planning permission for in excess of 2,500 applications, and to find competent builders to undertake the works within that deadline.

The Committee believes that it is unnecessary to sell the entire Crossnacreevy site, which is still essential to the agriculture industry, particularly in the absence of any business case. The Department has agreed to a sale without presenting a business case either to the Committee or the Executive.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: I am sorry; I only have 10 minutes. I am sure that the Member would like to make his own contribution, which, no doubt, will be valuable. I shall continue on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Committee has been advised that the sale of the entire Crossnacreevy site would result in the potential receipt of £200 million, although, again, the Committee has not been provided with supporting evidence. The Committee is aware, however, that receipt of that sum is dependent on the site's being included in the Belfast metropolitan area plan as a development plan. That has not been promised in any shape or form either.

The Committee further believes that the Department has not considered alternative options, including the sale of part of the site, that would be sufficient to provide cover for the requirements of the farm-nutrient management scheme. The Committee acknowledges and appreciates that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has promised the funds to aid that scheme, which is essential to the farming community. Nevertheless, we cannot understand why the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development went to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ask for £79 million, only to give £200 million back in its place.

I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is very prudent in such matters, clapped his hands and thought that Christmas had come early. It would mean a potential loss of £121 million for the agriculture sector, but a gain of £121 million for the Department of Finance and Personnel. Who would not want such a gift to be handed out to all the other Departments?

5.45 pm

Nevertheless, that money is coming out of the agriculture industry at a time when it is absolutely crippled and on its knees. Given the Department's intention to sell the entire Crossnacreevy site, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has suggested that some or all of the additional receipts could have been used to fund additional programmes to support the agriculture industry in relation to the findings of the red meat task force report, which I mentioned previously. In summary, the Committee does not support that sale on the current basis, because no business plan or case has been presented to it for examination.

During yesterday's debate, I called on the Executive and the Department to reprioritise the targets for TB and brucellosis, which are currently to reduce incidence levels to 27% and 20% respectively. The Committee believes that the Department should aim to eradicate those diseases, rather than reduce their incidence levels. In the financial year 2006-07, the Department spent £22.7million on TB and approximately £13.5million on brucellosis. The Department has indicated to the Committee that it has successfully reduced disease levels over the past few years. However, the Department must consider whether spending almost £36 million a year represents value for money, instead of solving the problem by eradicating the disease and taking that money out of the pot. Prudence dictates that it is better to eradicate the disease.

My Committee took up many other issues, including animal health, cost sharing, the wildlife intervention programme and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. Those issues must be looked at carefully, bearing in mind that the agriculture industry has faced foot-and-mouth disease, bluetongue, avian flu, brown rot in potatoes and other major diseases that threaten the future of the industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to deal specifically with key issues for the Department for Social Development, such as the provision of warmer homes for the most vulnerable in our society. There is no reason why the Minister for Social Development cannot reprioritise her budget to meet stated objectives, such as the eradication of fuel poverty by 2010, which is an unrealistic target that will do nothing but provide false hope to those most in need.

There is special focus on the issue, as it is warm homes week. I urge the Minister to re-examine her strategies for dealing with the matter to ensure that the targets can be met within the timeframe that the Department for Social Development has set.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel addressed the issue of warm homes more positively than the Minister for Social Development, with the consideration

of rate relief for homes with cavity wall and loft insulation. The Minister for Social Development will operate within a budget containing the efficiency savings within which all Ministers operate. She is operating within constraints that she agreed could meet that priority requirement.

All Ministers must prioritise within their own budgets, taking the kudos when a project is delivered upon. However, it is not acceptable to blame everyone else, including the Executive, of which she is a member, when natural budgetary constraints come into play.

It is time that the Minister realised that she is part of the Executive. Holding such a position means that she should have the courage to make key decisions and the initiative to provide leadership, not only to her Department, but to the wider community. Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Wells): At the outset, I apologise that the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr Cobain, has been called away on an urgent matter.

I have been asked to deputise on his behalf, so I will therefore speak on behalf of the Committee for Regional Development. Mr Speaker, I thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak today. I also thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for co-ordinating the Assembly's response to the draft Budget.

Like other Committees, the Committee for Regional Development has scrutinised the draft Programme for Government over the past few weeks. During that time, it has taken evidence, both oral and written, from a wide range of stakeholders, including the Quarry Products Association; the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee; Help the Aged; Age Concern; the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action; the Federation of Small Businesses; and the CBI. On behalf of the Committee, I want to thank all those organisations and individuals who generously placed their time and expertise at the disposal of the Committee.

Traditionally, Committees have complained that the Budget allocations for their Departments are too low. Our Committee does not intend to break with that tradition. We intend to support the Departments' calls for additional resources. In the case of the Department for Regional Development, the Committee is of the view that, objectively, the allocations for the Department in the Budget are insufficient to meet the infrastructure, economic, social and environmental needs of Northern Ireland. For example, spending on transport in Northern Ireland is £65 a head below spending in England, as measured in the year 2005-06. That is against a backdrop of a much more dispersed pattern of rural settlement.

Funding for road structural maintenance must be adequate, transparent and secure. That is perhaps the major point that the Committee wants to make. The allocations of £56 million, £72 million and £70 million for the next three years are £125 million short of the £110 million per annum identified in the structural maintenance funding plan as being necessary to maintain our roads to an acceptable standard. The Committee is also concerned about the road safety consequences of continued underfunding in that area. Those risks have been highlighted in the most recent Roads Service annual report and accounts.

I realise that the inadequate allocations for structural maintenance are often supplemented with bids in the in-year monitoring rounds. Of course, Roads Service has been successful in many of those monitoring rounds. However, the Committee believes that that is not a viable long-term strategy for funding structural maintenance programmes. The Department is too dependent on being successful in the in-year monitoring round process. The Committee calls on the Minister and the Executive to recognise the value for money represented by planned maintenance and the public-safety risks associated with continued underfunding of the work in that area.

The Committee further calls for structural maintenance funding to be ring-fenced and clearly identified for the period of the Budget. That will allow the industry to make forward plans with confidence and to invest in developing the capacity required to meet Northern Ireland's structural maintenance needs on time and within budget.

Dr W McCrea: Does my honourable friend agree that when the Department for Regional Development is given such a substantial budget, it is vital that it is spent wisely? There was a plan for a bypass for Magherafelt. For 30 years, the people of Magherafelt town have been waiting for that bypass to be built, and we still do not have it. We thought that we might be in the running to get some movement on that matter.

However, a new plan has now been devised by some civil servant. Instead of giving us that bypass, the Department for Regional Development now wants to put that plan on the long finger and build a road that stretches from the Moneymore Road right down to the Castledawson roundabout. If that is the kind of brains that are in the Department, it is about time that there was a rethink; the Department is getting too much money instead of too little. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Wells: I am sure that the Committee would wish to support the honourable Member for South Antrim's call for that bypass after the completion of the Ballynahinch bypass. *[Laughter.]*

The Committee is also concerned about investment in road infrastructure, which is essential to the social

and economic well-being of Northern Ireland. A good-quality road network is crucial to improving journey times in Northern Ireland and to connectivity to and from our ports, airports and tourism facilities. In addition, a substantial amount of public transport is road-based. Access to health and social services, employment, education and cultural and sporting activities depends on an adequate, sustainable, safe and effective road network.

The Committee is concerned about the allocation to the roads capital budget, which, at £572 million, is significantly lower than the low scenario bid in the draft investment strategy. The current allocation will allow for the opening of the M1, Westlink and M2 upgrades in 2009. That project is safe, as is the dualling of the A4 from Dungannon to Ballygawley and the completion of the dualling of the main Belfast to Dublin road — the section from Beech Hill to Cloghogue, a scheme that is close to my heart. However, it is likely that the roads allocation will necessitate the deferral of some schemes; dare I say that two of those are the A6 dual carriageway from Castledawson to Toome and the A2 from Maydown to the airport at Londonderry.

Spending on local transport and safety measures, bridge strengthening, carriageway widening and major works on local roads will need to be less than was envisaged during the three years to 2010-11. The Committee calls on the Executive to review the roads allocation in the light of the importance of a free-flowing road system to the continued economic development of Northern Ireland.

The Committee also examined in detail the issue of investment in public transport, particularly buses and railways. We believe that that is important to the social and economic well-being of Northern Ireland. Like roads infrastructure, a good-quality integrated network of bus and rail transport is key to the underpinning of economic development, as well as access to education, employment, leisure and social services. Investment in public transport also brings enormous environmental benefits in the form of reduced carbon emissions and air and noise pollution.

A Member: You wrote that bit.

Mr Wells: I did.

In the past, there has been persistent underinvestment in public transport infrastructure. The Committee discovered that, in addition to the £426 million capital bid, only £196 million has been allocated in the draft Budget, including £137 million for rail, £47 million for buses, and £1.2 million for improved ferry services to Rathlin Island, which will certainly keep at least one Member happy.

The Committee calls on the Executive to deal with the failures of the past and to invest in public transport.

Failure to adequately resource public transport will have an adverse effect on the environment and exacerbate social exclusion, and might jeopardise the recent and much-welcomed positive economic growth.

The Committee has met both Into the West and the Northern Corridor Railways Group and has heard evidence of public-safety issues and speed restrictions, which are as low as 10 mph on stretches of track between Belfast and Londonderry. It is absolutely appalling that, after a huge amount of money has been spent on new trains for that line, their speed must be reduced to 10, 15 or 20 mph on various parts of the track. That is totally unacceptable.

Having championed the cause of women's access to concessionary fares, the Committee welcomes the proposal in the draft Budget for the extension of those fares. It is extremely good news for all concerned.

Age Concern and Help the Aged provided evidence to the Committee on the differential patterns of urban and rural use of the senior Smartpass and the bias against disabled people that is posed by the limitation of the concession to single-journey tickets.

Mr Speaker, time is running out fast. Therefore, I will turn quickly to the issue of environmental sustainability. The draft Programme for Government includes a priority to protect and enhance Northern Ireland's environment and natural resources. However, there is little evidence of the radical thinking and policies that are needed to deliver a 60% to 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, which was identified by the Prime Minister in a speech as recently as 19 November. The DRD allocations do not appear to reflect the need to deal with the issue with any immediacy.

The investment strategy's major proposals make substantial reference to the environmental impact of differing forms of infrastructure investment, but it is not clear to the Committee that that has been followed through in the draft Budget and the ISNI 2 allocation stage. Indeed, a quick glance at the draft Programme for Government indicates that it has not taken full cognisance of the hugely demanding targets for carbon reductions that are faced during the next 50 years.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, can I say at the outset that I am genuinely grateful to all Members? I believe that, in my efforts to get up and say a few words, I have actually lost pounds.

6.00 pm

I will start off in a mode of generosity. I listened genuinely and with good intent yesterday to the First Minister's speech on the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. I assure the House that we all want to do what is best for the people of Northern Ireland, and we got involved in the process

to see whether we could work something out. We have some concerns, especially about the lack of a financial package. In fact, Sinn Féin's Chief Whip, Carál Ní Chuilín, mentioned at the start of the debate that everybody agrees that there is not enough money in the draft Budget to go around, and I did not hear anybody demurring. Peter Robinson, Peter Weir and Nigel Dodds — everybody — have said that we need a financial package. The truth is that we did not get enough.

I also want to deal with the comments that have been made about whether or not the Ulster Unionist Party is in Government. We will not agree with every decision that is made by the Executive just because we have two Ministers in it. We reserve the right, as Members of the Assembly, to scrutinise the draft Budget and everything else that is going on.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member agree that the position of the Ulster Unionist Party in the Executive was dictated by the votes of the people? We are not there at the behest of other political parties — particularly the DUP and least of all, Sinn Féin.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his intervention. We are represented on the Executive as of right. With regard to whether it is right to oppose or to criticise a Budget, I quote from Ian Paisley Jnr:

"I found the Committee Chairpersons' comments in the report of the draft Budget very interesting — so much for a united approach. The Chairpersons of various Committees — and not just DUP Chairpersons, but Ulster Unionist, SDLP and Sinn Féin Chairpersons — all criticised the Budget proposals." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 8, p131, col 2*].

Also, Sammy Wilson — I was rather hoping that Sammy would be here, but unfortunately he has left — declared:

"I want to make the position clear from the start: the DUP is opposed to the Budget." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 7, p185, col 1*].

It is entirely legitimate for the Ulster Unionist Party to say that there are better ways to do things. We agree that there are limited budgets, and we will have to find a way of dealing with those.

When we were talking about the draft Programme for Government yesterday, I promised to talk about the Barnett formula. I do not propose to bore Members at this stage, except to say, following on from Mr Wells — [*Interruption.*]

I could not do that to you. [*Interruption.*]

I am depending on the indulgence of the Speaker to get through this speech.

The issue is per capita expenditure. Mr Wells talked about roads. Why do we have a higher per capita expenditure on roads? Because we have a large rural area, and we need more roads to go around. Furthermore, we need to have a headquarters. Northern Ireland is a

small country compared to England or Scotland, for instance, and therefore we have higher overheads. The Barnett formula recognises that some areas in any union are less economically viable than others, but that does not mean that they are any less valuable. That is why the Barnett formula is important to us, and it applies as much to health issues as it does to anything else.

I listened to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Sammy Wilson, talking about the education budget — I presume that he was reading from the same file that I have. Education had a baseline of £1,720 million last year, and this year it has a baseline of £1,626 million, so we have lost about £100 million before we start. Furthermore, in the rest of the United Kingdom, education budgets received an increase of 5.3%. I realise that the increases are unhypothecated, but we only got a 4.3% increase.

That unhelpful differential means that the Committee's analysis to date demonstrates that the Department will face particular difficulties in obtaining funding to maintain projects for children and young people and for the development of integrated education. I agree with Maurice Morrow that those issues and others, such as early years education, must be tackled.

However, the Committee has stated that the Department will not have any money in years 1 and 2 and will not, therefore, be able to tackle disadvantaged areas or to commit funds to community renewal. That is a problem: the money must be found for those people. The Committee notes its concerns that insufficient Budget resources could delay indefinitely any attempt to tackle the issues of special education needs or to develop the early years strategy.

The Assembly has said that it will tackle early years education: it is the right thing to do, but there is no budget. Efforts to improve levels of literacy and numeracy may have to be scaled back significantly. The Committee notes that not receiving the funding for the bid runs counter to PSAs 10 and 19 in the draft Programme for Government and is at odds with the commitments given after the report by the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster. The Assembly simply must deal with literacy and numeracy issues.

Perhaps the Department for Employment and Learning's budget could be used to tackle the issue. However, the Department of Education's bid for the improvement in literacy and numeracy was for £23 million next year, £32 million the following year and £32 million for 2011, but it received nothing. How can problems with literacy and numeracy be tackled if budgets are being cut and no new money is being brought in?

What is being done about adult apprenticeships or making ICT the third essential skill? The draft Budget states that DEL has apparently been granted an extra

bid of £36.8 million. However, when inescapable costs are removed, that leaves only £7 million. Alex Attwood pointed out that the departmental budget increases from £731.5 million in 2007-08 to £734.4 million in 2008-09, a rise of only £2.9 million. How can the Assembly tackle all the problems on which it made promises?

As Members have mentioned, resources must be targeted to areas of most need, such as north Belfast. I was quite taken by the fact there have been efficiency savings of £66 million in north and west Belfast over the past three years, and that some 400 teachers have been made redundant. If those redundancies had been in line with the decline in pupil numbers, only 140 teachers would have gone. Therefore, north and west Belfast are losing teachers.

How much money does it take to tackle that? Members have been asked to come up with constructive ideas, and I have done so: £3 million would pay for between two and five additional teaching assistants for each school to concentrate on literacy and numeracy and to help children and their parents in north and west Belfast. An extra 100 teaching assistants could be divided between 40 schools in areas that Members know have the greatest social need. Furthermore, that money would pay for six specialist teachers to give instruction on best practice.

London Challenge's report will show that it was able to make huge differences in the levels of literacy and numeracy with a budget of only £4 million. I ask all Departments to work with the Department of Education to amass that money. I agree that cross-cutting issues such as health, parenting skills, early learning and antisocial behaviour must be tackled. The Assembly would have community support in addressing those issues.

I promised the Speaker that I would try to be brief. To conclude, therefore, the Ulster Unionist Party is willing to work with Members in a reasonable, frank and positive manner, but we must work together: the Assembly is not a diktat.

Mr A Maginness: I am slightly confused. Yesterday, and for part of today, some Members wanted to turn the Assembly into the Supreme Soviet in order to rubber-stamp a draft Budget. The Chamber is intended for parliamentary debate, and it is the duty of all Members to scrutinise and criticise where necessary.

The SDLP will do that, as will our colleagues in other parties. To characterise us as being against the Executive or the spirit of the Executive is completely and utterly wrong. It is our duty to criticise. Members who are outside the Executive, specifically from the Alliance Party, should not be criticised for criticising the draft Budget; they have acted honourably in doing so.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that if the Government are confident about their programme, they should welcome the scrutiny of those in opposition?

Mr A Maginness: Yes. In fact, yesterday, the First Minister invited criticism, unlike some DUP and Sinn Féin Back Benchers. The Sinn Féin Whip, Carál Ní Chuilín, said that there is not enough money for everyone and that we should not use emotional blackmail. I represent North Belfast and I have no hesitation in criticising the draft Budget for falling short of the social-housing target for the next five years — 2,000 houses. That target will not be reached under the allocation that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has made in the draft Budget.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel told the Minister for Social Development to sell land and finance housing through private means. Only minutes ago, William McCrea was criticising the Minister of Agriculture for selling land — he pointed out the dangers of doing that. There are dangers in selling assets to provide capital for housing development in Northern Ireland, which all Members agree is absolutely necessary. 'Building a Better Future — Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018' states that that is one of the Executive's top priorities. How can houses be built without money? Does land have to be sold? How much will a Department raise if it sells all its land? How long will that take? If that is a solution — which I doubt — it is a long-term one.

Is Carál Ní Chuilín telling the 2,300 people on the social-housing waiting list in North Belfast not to worry because land will be sold so that in five or 10 years' time homelessness in North Belfast will be solved? That is ridiculous, yet it is what Fra McCann suggested to the House. He said that the Minister for Social Development blames everyone but herself, and he criticised her severely on all areas of her brief. Yet what does Fra McCann do? He backs the Budget that prevents the Minister for Social Development from achieving the housing allocations that will meet the needs of the homeless in Northern Ireland.

[*Interruption.*] He supports —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr A Maginness: He supports the Budget that will stop fuel poverty being alleviated in Northern Ireland. That is the right-wing agenda that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is putting before Sinn Féin Members and other Members. Members have a duty to reject that right-wing Thatcherite agenda. If Sinn Féin Members do not recognise that the draft Budget pushes a Thatcherite approach to social development, they must be politically blind and illiterate.

A Sinn Féin Member said that the Minister for Social Development should ask the housing associations for their assets. How can she do that? How can she tell a

private body that she needs its money for the Government's housing policy?

It would be impossible for the Minister to do that. The Minister for Social Development and her Department have a duty to make efficiencies; the draft Budget states that that Department will make efficiency savings of £113 million over the next four years, which is an important contribution. All Departments have a duty to look at efficiencies, and to use them to make funds available for other Departments.

6.15 pm

Mr Donaldson: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I will not, because I have only a few minutes left.

The Minister of Finance has suggested that there are additional sources of private finance — I would love to know where they are, and whether they are readily available.

DSD requested £992 million in its capital bids for housing and urban regeneration, and £373 million over the first three years of the investment strategy. The draft Budget allocations are short by £775 million and £139 million respectively, in terms of urban regeneration. These allocations are completely inadequate, and the Minister has said so to the Committee. The House should note that she had all-party support at the Committee in her quest to gain sufficient allocations for housing, urban regeneration and fuel poverty. No one dissented, so I am surprised that some members of that Committee who are here today are now retrospectively attacking the Minister.

The allocations are completely inadequate. They cannot provide 10,000 new homes over the next five years; that will be unrealistic if the allocations made by the Minister of Finance and Personnel remain. I hope that he listens to the comments made in the House today and amends those allocations, so that we can provide people in Northern Ireland with decent homes and eliminate fuel poverty at last. That is the duty of the Executive.

I note that the First Minister is here. One of my first memories of the First Minister is from the Bannside by-election, which he won. On that occasion he dedicated himself to improving the living standards of ordinary people and to eliminating poverty and the worst housing conditions that he had ever witnessed. I hope that he remembers that, because there is a duty incumbent upon him, and the Executive, to fulfil those promises.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I wish that I had some of Mr Maginness's tablets, to allow me to reach the ceiling in the way that he has. I will deal with the points that he raised, as well as the comments made by the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Basil McCrea, who, when he talked about

economics and statistics, made a very good case for more money being spent on numeracy. *[Laughter.]*

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate on the four-party mandatory-coalition Executive's draft Budget proposals. I do that following yesterday's debate on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland. It is essential, as part of the wider consultation, to hear the issues that concern Members.

The Assembly and its Committees have an important role — now and over the next three years — to ensure that the funds allocated in the Budget are translated into the maximum possible improvements in local public services. In that context, I record my gratitude to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the efforts it has made, and will continue to make, in drawing the issues together in this important process.

I have listened carefully to Members' comments on the draft Budget flowing from yesterday's debate, and I will attempt to respond to as many of the themes as possible. However, before I do that, I will highlight in broad terms what the four-party mandatory-coalition Executive are seeking to achieve with their public expenditure proposals. I will focus on three main issues: first, our key priority of growing the economy; secondly, core public services; and thirdly, the local contribution to funding public services through the regional rate.

As Members will be aware, the four-party mandatory-coalition Executive have agreed that the key priority should be to secure growth in the economy. That is not only because it is one of the aspects of our society where we are furthest behind the rest of the UK, but also because of its importance in so much of our everyday lives. It is not simply a matter of the amount of money at our disposal, but also of the wider benefits of having a job — not only for one's self-worth, but also for our families and the wider society.

Although progress has been made in some aspects of the economy — there has been an increase of more than 100,000 jobs since 1998 — significant underlying deficiencies remain in the economy that will need to be addressed if we are to sustain that growth in future.

In relation to competitiveness indicators such as business start-up rates and investment in innovation and workforce skills, Northern Ireland performs well below the UK average, and local productivity is about one fifth lower than the UK average. The highly regrettable recent job losses, including those at Seagate Technology in Limavady, Regency Spinning Ltd in Newtownards and Reid Transport at Cloughmills, have highlighted that we cannot compete solely on cost in the longer term. That point is highlighted in the draft regional economic strategy, which reached the stark conclusion that there will be little or no improvement

in Northern Ireland's position relative to the rest of the UK if there is not a radical rethink of the approach to economic development and support to local business.

The clear focus on the economy in the draft Budget, with its increased allocations for DETI, DEL and DRD, reflects an initial step by the Executive in addressing the issue. That move has received a broad welcome from key stakeholders. However, as with all public spending, it is not sufficient simply to increase funding. It is essential that the programmes of support for economic development are continually reviewed and updated to ensure that there is delivery on the key goals of halving the private-sector productivity gap with the UK average — excluding the greater south-east — by 2015, and of increasing the employment rate from 70% to 75% by 2020.

In taking forward plans to provide new and enhanced services for the people of Northern Ireland — for example, the extension of free public transport to everyone of 65 years of age and over — it is also important to strike a balance to ensure that core public services have sufficient funding, and also to provide the incentive to deliver existing services more effectively.

Although all Ministers made the case to me about the need for additional resources for their respective Departments, the main issues since the publication of the draft Budget have been the proposed resource allocation for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the capital allocation for the Department for Social Development. Some people have suggested that the position in some way undermines the Health Service, while the allocation for housing will lead to a crisis — indeed, according to the previous Member, the crisis of homelessness has already happened.

The four-party mandatory-coalition Executive would have liked to allocate more public-services funding. However, financial realities mean that that was not possible. In addition, concerns about impacts on services have been exaggerated to an extent that the facts show is not credible.

The draft Budget sets out plans for health and social care to receive an additional £450 million by 2010-11. That is equivalent to 51% of the total additional resources that will be available to the Northern Ireland Departments. There will be a further £340 million increase in spending power from efficiencies that the Minister has agreed to make.

Amid the doom and gloom that some have declared, it is important to recognise that the draft Budget allocation for DHSSPS will allow a number of service developments to be progressed over the three-year period, including improved services for children and meeting the revenue costs for capital investment in new and improved facilities. Additionally, the further

funding for pay reform that has already been made should result in improved public services. Those are some examples of what can be achieved from the £700 million of inescapable pressures, as defined by the Health Minister. It is up to him to decide which additional discretionary service developments are to be progressed over the Budget period.

I appreciate that Members wish that more money was made available. However, it is important that the context of the Health Department's proposed allocation be understood. In particular, I reiterate the points that I have made in recent weeks: expenditure on health and social care in Northern Ireland is 10% higher than in England; over the next three years, the draft Budget proposes that the Health Department will receive more than half of the additional resources that are available to all Departments; and, by 2010-11, health will account for almost 48% of the total spend.

The Health Minister will have more — and a larger proportion of — money at his disposal than any of his predecessors. To achieve higher levels of health spending growth would require substantial reductions to other Department's allocations, or a massive hike in rates. That cannot be justified.

Funding levels are only part of the solution. There is no point in pumping money into an inefficient system. It is noticeable that most of the people who opposed the level of the Health budget were silent when it was half of what is being proposed now.

Nothing that I have said suggests that some additional resources for the health and social care sector would not bring further benefits to the people of Northern Ireland. I fully recognise and support that, and I am open to suggestions as to where such funds would yield the most benefit. However, I am also open to suggestions about where those resources might be found. Mr Speaker, you are a patient man and, thus far, you have sat through the whole four-hour debate. When you are driving home to Londonderry, away from the Members who made bids for more money during the debate this afternoon and evening, I challenge you to think of even one who put forward a single suggestion as to how additional resources might be found to fund those bids.

The most obvious example of need in the Health Service is in the mental-health sector — and Members have referred to the Bamford Review. In Northern Ireland, that need is almost 50% higher than in England, and that is one of the main reasons why the overall local need for health and social-care services is higher. However, mental-health service funding is higher per capita than for England, which suggests that, in the past, either sufficient funds were not allocated or funds were diverted to other sectors, such as acute services.

The Health Minister identified mental-health services as a priority for his Department — albeit that that was his seventeenth priority. In that context, the draft Budget identifies just less than £50 million to implement the Bamford Review proposals by 2011.

6.30 pm

Mr Donaldson: I thank my Rt Hon friend for giving way. That issue is so high a priority for the Minister for Health that when the Assembly debated the Bamford Review on 18 December 2006, autism issues on 9 January 2007, and the future of Muckamore Abbey Hospital on 29 January 2007, he made no contribution whatsoever.

Mr P Robinson: I shall divert slightly from my speech to deal with that point, because there is an issue of which the Assembly must be mindful. The four main parties in the Assembly have Ministers in the Executive who are responsible for Departments. Mr Speaker, you decided, quite rightly, that the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP could not be moved today, but I noted that the only Departments about which those parties were concerned were the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department for Social Development.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You asked us very kindly to withdraw the amendments, which we did to facilitate the House. Is it in order for the Minister to refer to an amendment that we cannot defend?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. That is part of the heat of debate in the Chamber.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, the Member is right about one point — he cannot defend it; it is indefensible. *[Laughter.]*

Some parties have decided, somewhat like football supporters, to cheer for the Departments of their respective Ministers. I can understand parties wanting to support their Ministers vocally or in any other way that they can. However, some of us have responsibilities that go beyond departmental vested interests. We must look at the overall position of Northern Ireland. We must balance the issues of all Departments — not fight for only one or two.

Members must be careful when they are putting forward a case for one Department, for which their Minister happens to be responsible, that they do not forget the real need that exists in other areas.

I return to the issue of mental health. The allocation of £4.5 billion for the health budget, with an additional £8 million being made available, means that the figure that I have indicated was discussed by the Department of Health and my officials, as being required to implement the Bamford Review recommendations, would represent only 6% of the additional allocation, or just over 1% of the total allocation to the Health Department.

I am sure that Members will agree that, if the Minister wants to deal with that serious issue, he can ring-fence funding for some of the most vulnerable people in society, given that the required funding amounts to such a small proportion of the additional resources that are at his disposal.

I have been asked, outside the House, whether I could ensure that funds are allocated specifically for mental-health services, given the history of such service provision in Northern Ireland. Having considered that matter, I would be very reluctant to even think about micromanaging any Minister's Department. I am sure that, when the Minister gets down to the serious business of setting out his actual spending plans when the allocation is agreed, he will deal with that issue.

However, it must be said that the four-party mandatory-coalition Executive could allocate funds to the Health Service, with a ring-fenced portion for mental-health services, if it chose to do so.

Returning to the overall funding for health, a key point is that the figures quoted for additional requirements are simply unrealistic. The focus must be on using existing resources better, rather than asking for more funding. As I have said before, we need a better Health Service, not a more expensive one.

The concerns that have been raised about resource expenditure for health have been repeated about the capital expenditure for social housing. Social housing is an important priority for everyone in Northern Ireland, and it should be available for those who need it most. The Department for Social Development will have almost £720 million to invest in housing over the next three years. The investment strategy proposes further investment of over £1.2 billion over the following seven years, which brings the total funding to almost £2 billion over the next decade.

Members have been fond of quoting comparisons with England; let me join in. The number of social houses per head of population in Northern Ireland is already 30% higher than in England, and levels of housing unfitness here are the lowest in the United Kingdom. In addition, the number of social housing completions over the past five years was 60% higher here than in England.

Therefore, although I fully support the Social Development Minister's call for more investment in social housing — as reflected in the additional £20.4 million that I announced recently — the Department for Social Development will also need to actively consider how the proposed allocations from the draft Budget can be supplemented by additional income. That could come, for example, from private-developer contributions. I know that the Minister of the Environment has already had talks with the Minister for Social Development regarding issues that relate to planning. Indeed, the

Minister for Social Development should also be considering issues such as land sales.

I noted in a press statement issued yesterday by Mr Alban Maginness that he indicated that the allocation for housing was so bad that there was real doubt as to whether the Department for Social Development can build even one social house. Members discredit any cause that they have when they go off the scale in that way. Given the millions of pounds that will be available for housing in the Department for Social Development's budget, to make that kind of claim is petty and ridiculous.

As I have indicated to the Minister for Social Development regarding the scope for additional funding, additional resources are available for capital investment in 2010-11 from the draft Budget. Those resources will be supplemented by the ongoing work of the capital realisation task force. However, it is important to recognise that there will be a number of competing priorities for the additional resources that become available. The four-party mandatory coalition Executive will need to decide what should be delivered in social housing as opposed to other capital projects.

Incidentally, there is one contribution that Members can make — I have asked my colleagues on the Business Committee to press for a debate on the issue of rationalising our political bureaucracy, reducing the number of Departments in Northern Ireland, and reconsidering the number of Assembly Members for this small region of the United Kingdom.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure that all Members are saying "hear, hear" at this stage. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Practically every Member in the House has been able to speak today. Allow the Minister to respond.

Mr P Robinson: That will be a way of freeing up resources for use in front line public services. I hope that when the Business Committee considers the matter, there will be enthusiasm on the part of its members to bring that motion to the Assembly. Furthermore, I hope that when it does come before the Assembly, it will receive support across the Chamber.

I will now talk about the regional rate and the local contribution to public services. Despite the promise of a new four-party mandatory-coalition Executive, this remains a time of significant concern for many hard-pressed householders in Northern Ireland. Oil prices continue to rise, and the Bank of England base lending rate is 5.75%, which is almost 65% higher than its low point of 3.5% in July 2003. In addition, the price of household staples such as milk and vegetables are rising at a faster rate than incomes. At this time, a key duty of the four-party mandatory coalition Executive must be to ensure that it does not add to the already heavy burden

on households. In that context, Members will hardly need to be reminded that over the past five years, regional domestic rates have increased by 62%, with a 19% increase in one year alone.

Looking forward, the four-party mandatory coalition Executive has unanimously accepted the key recommendations of the Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report, which will lead to additional, but necessary, household contributions to those services from 2009-10.

While we will mitigate that expense, by recognising that the existing regional rate contains a contribution to those services estimated at an average of £160 per household, it is essential that we also recognise the historical and future pressures on household bills. Accordingly, the draft Budget proposes that there will be no increase in the regional domestic rate in each of the next three years. That is equivalent to a reduction of over 8% in real terms over that period.

Direct rule Ministers intended to introduce water and sewerage charges from 2007-08 without taking account of rate bills. Increases in the regional rate under direct rule were, on average, 9.8% per annum. Our proposals will mean that each household in Northern Ireland will save, on average, over £1,000 over the period 2007-08 to 2010-11 compared to the direct rule proposals.

Turning to the non-domestic sector, since 2001-02, the increase in the non-domestic regional rate has been 3.3% per annum. Recognising the need to limit the cost pressures on local businesses, the draft Budget proposes that the increase be held at the level of inflation in each of the Budget years. That will mean that there will be no increase in real terms in the burden to business from the regional rate in the planning period.

In recognition of the particular pressures facing the manufacturing sector, I propose to freeze industrial rates liability at 30% across the Budget period, which, again, represents a significant saving against the previous direct rule proposals.

Yesterday, I was astounded to hear one Member say that she opposed my proposals to freeze industrial rates at 30%. She said:

"However, all I see is subsidy to businesses and snubs to those who work for a living in our forgotten communities." — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p338, col 2].*

She went on to say:

"Chancellor Robinson has made the ludicrous decision to maintain the blanket subsidy to manufacturing companies by continuing rates relief." — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p338, col 2].*

and continued with:

"fat cats get benefits. Corporate welfare seems to be alive and well in "Robinsonland". — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p338, col 2].*

That same Member was at a breakfast this morning, which I also attended. There, it was pointed out that 48% of the manufacturing industry in Belfast is in her

constituency — and mine — East Belfast. I can tell her, having been around those businesses in East Belfast that, had we not taken that step, one company alone would have had to lay off 100 workers, and it would have been stopped from moving ahead with a proposal that would have meant 1,400 jobs in East Belfast.

Another company that I visited with the Department, only 10 days ago, indicated that the decision that had been taken gave them the confidence to go ahead and make the decisions to expand and therefore bring new jobs to that constituency.

Like the Member for East Antrim Mr Wilson, I noted the comments towards the end of that Member's speech when she decided to harangue Sinn Féin. She said that the DUP is walking all over it —

“on public-private partnerships, less Government and equality issues.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p339, col 1*].

I take from that that she actually believes that there should be more government. We were talking about the politburo a short time ago. I can remember watching a film about an invasion of the United States by Communist forces drawn from Russia and Cuba. It was the well-named ‘Red Dawn’. [*Laughter.*]

I believe that the decision taken to freeze industrial rates is a sensible one that will lead to more jobs, and importantly — as everyone will have seen over past weeks — it will do a great deal to safeguard the jobs we already have.

I am appalled by the blinkered and twisted thinking that assumes that a business-friendly Budget is good for business leaders and therefore it must be bad for the workforce. It is that kind of crazy logic that has led to the draft Budget being characterised as neo-Thatcherite and right-wing. That is nonsense.

This is a Budget for everyone. It is a Budget for business, but also one for the working man and woman. It is a Budget to get the economy moving — it is not right wing, simply right. Dawn Purvis chides Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party. She should speak to the workers in East Belfast whose jobs have been saved, and who will gain jobs as a result of the decision that we have taken.

6.45 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister remind the House of a quotation in yesterday's Hansard report from the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea, in which he referred to comments that “Red Dawn” made?

Mr P Robinson: I heard the Member for Lagan Valley applaud and welcome Ms Purvis's speech. I must say, however, that, after an intervention from me, he did qualify his comments by saying that he applauded some of Ms Purvis' remarks, although he did not specify which of her remarks he was applauding.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister allow me to specify those remarks now?

Mr P Robinson: No. The Member managed to wangle the opportunity to make a speech in this debate, and that has left us tight for time.

The approach that I have taken to rates reflects the four-party mandatory coalition Executive's desire to redress the balance from previous direct rule Budgets, in which the local ratepayer was expected to shoulder too great a share of the burden for the delivery of public services.

The 2004 spending review staff-reduction targets are an indicator of the departmental performance that we can expect. The fit-for-purpose target, which was established in December 2004, required that the number of Civil Service-funded posts in April 2004 be reduced by 2,300 by March 2008. In overview, progress to date is a clear indication that we are well on track to meeting that target. Indeed, the latest information shows that we are ahead of the planned trajectory.

Many commentators, including some present in the House, expressed concern that the target could be achieved only through a form of redundancy scheme; however, the Civil Service labour pool has proved to be more dynamic than those commentators thought possible. Our latest figures show that natural turnover in the Civil Service is 5.4%. On that basis, we can be confident that Departments are, and will continue to be, able to adjust numbers without recourse to any form of redundancy scheme. Looking ahead, we can be confident that that dynamism will be maintained, and possibly enhanced, as our plans to develop and grow the economy and a vibrant private sector begin to yield dividends.

The Alliance Party expressed concern at the inability of the draft Budget to address economic growth. The broader question is the extent to which a devolved Executive, with limited fiscal powers and budget, can address economic growth in a global marketplace that is worth many trillions of pounds. The approach adopted represents full use of the powers that we have, with a focus on putting in place the conditions for growth, through working alongside local business and employee representatives. Therefore, I fully believe that the four-party mandatory-coalition Executive's draft Budget proposals to reverse the downward trend and funding for economic development and to minimise the rates burden on business, together with plans to improve our economic infrastructure, are a significant improvement on the plans of each of our previous Administrations. I am under no illusion that even more could have been done, but I was determined to protect our public services, such as health and education, which also required additional funding, so my Budget has sought to strike a balance.

I share the view of many that savings could have been made from various sources, including the cost of division, which it is perhaps necessary for me to spell out. I dealt in some detail during Question Time with some of the Alliance Party's unrealistic expectations about what savings may come from that source. However, I share the view that savings could be made from that source, albeit on a more limited scale than the Alliance Party suggests. I have asked my officials to examine the findings of the Deloitte report, with a view to identifying those elements in it that can be addressed in the short term. Similarly, I encourage all Ministers to make as many savings as possible from that area, particularly as they have made it clear to me that the efficiency savings already expected over the next three years will represent a significant challenge to them.

Therefore, all scope for savings needs to be vigorously pursued. In taking forward its work, I will also ask the performance and efficiency delivery unit to consider the potential savings to be gained from reducing the cost of division.

There are two issues that I must address, the first of which is the role of the Executive. In any Government, the intention is that people who intend to seek a mandate should put their proposals before the electorate and seek an endorsement of those proposals. If it is a one-party Government, the process is simple: they use their manifesto as their Programme for Government, and they proceed. However, in the case of a voluntary or mandatory coalition, there is a requirement for them to agree on a Programme for Government. If there is no agreed Programme for Government, there is no coalition.

One cannot adopt a position whereby some people decide to be in Government, but do not want to agree with the Government's programme. That is an untenable position. That is not to say that Members of Government parties — in the Executive or in the Assembly — cannot choose to make comments, criticise — or suggest changes to — the Programme for Government, the investment strategy or the Budget. Last night, there was not one squeak from any of the Ministers who were prepared to allow their parties to vote against the draft Programme for Government. Not one of them suggested any change to that programme. Therefore, we need to have some sincerity in an Executive.

If there are going to be changes, and if there is a feeling that changes are needed, some Ministers have let down their Assembly colleagues by not suggesting those changes in the Executive. I am quite content for Members to express concerns, and for the Executive to consider those concerns when making final decisions about the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

The second issue that I must address is the fact that some parties in the Chamber appear to be in denial. It

is clear that an attempt is being made to suggest that there is an Executive in Northern Ireland that consists only of two parties. That is, quite transparently, not the case. I hope that, in the references that I have made tonight, that it is abundantly clear that we have a four-party mandatory-coalition Executive, of which the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP are part.

[Interruption.]

I am quite happy if Members wish to say that their party is withdrawing from the Executive. The Executive is built on a system that was negotiated by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. They are the parties —

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I call for order on all sides of the House. I have continually said that almost all Members from all sides of the House have contributed to the debate, as far as possible. The Minister is responding. I realise that, in the heat of debate, it is not easy for some Members to sit and listen. Nevertheless, the Minister is now responding. Allow the Minister to respond.

Mr P Robinson: Again, I make it clear that the four parties who are in the Executive need to have an agreed Programme for Government and need to agree a Budget. In neither case was an amendment suggested that would reduce the Budget in one area so that additional funding could be provided in another. No such proposal was put by any party in the Executive, including the two parties that are complaining.

No change was recommended to the draft Programme for Government by either of the parties who have now decided that they want to decry it. They are in denial and attempting to pretend that they are, somehow, out of Government, but at the same time taking the benefits of being in Government. That type of hokey-cokey party politics simply will not wash with the people of Northern Ireland. They know that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party are a part of the Government and are responsible, as is every party in the Government, for the decisions that are taken. In particular, the Ulster Unionist Party was gagging to get into Government.

It was gagging to get into Government so much that it put out statements telling the electorate of Northern Ireland that it would be in Government. Come what may, the Ulster Unionist Party would be in the Executive and would take its seats. I could spend time reciting its quotations, but the Ulster Unionist Party is on the record as saying that it would take its seats in the Executive and be accountable. I am quite content that the Ulster Unionist Party has signed up to the four-party mandatory-coalition Executive. However, if it decides that it does not want to proceed on that basis, we can go back and negotiate a new and different process from the one that currently exists.

This is the system that the Ulster Unionists negotiated. It was the DUP that said it was not satisfied with that system. It was our party that insisted on a requirement in the St Andrews Agreement legislation to examine the methodology and structures of Government in Northern Ireland, because we did not like the system that the Ulster Unionist Party had negotiated. We made significant changes to the accountability within that system, as many members of that party have already found out.

Indeed, it has to be said that the Ulster Unionists found out about the accountability functions so acutely that instead of coming into this Chamber to join their colleagues in the vote, their Ministers were skulking outside and were not prepared to come in. They knew that if they did they would be in breach of the ministerial code and would jeopardise their positions in the Executive.

I will deal with one further issue that has arisen in the debate. There has been a great deal of talk about the financial package. Let me give the full history of that package. Leaving aside the fact that the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP negotiated nothing positive in financial terms when they were in the lead position, they ended up with a reinvestment and reform initiative that forced rates in Northern Ireland up by 62% over five years. That is the legacy of the Ulster Unionist Party's negotiations. On the other hand, the Democratic Unionist Party renegotiated —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must allow the Minister to continue.

Mr P Robinson: We successfully renegotiated the reinvestment and reform initiative so that I am now able to freeze the regional rate, which I could not have done under the agreement that was reached by the Ulster Unionist Party. We have managed to increase the Budget for Northern Ireland. Let us remember that the £1 billion peace package that was mentioned was based on capital, not resource: that had always been the case. The increase amounts to significantly more than £1 billion of capital. There is no automatic end-year flexibility (EYF) for Northern Ireland. There is no automatic right to the asset sales. Those were delivered during the course of the negotiations with the Chancellor. The Ulster Unionists should know that, because their representatives were there too.
[*Interruption.*]

The Member should speak to Sir Reg Empey, because he was at Number 11 Downing Street with the rest of us. If the Member is suggesting that there is failure, then there is failure on the part of his party.
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have some order in the Chamber, please.

Mr P Robinson: The denial seems to go well beyond whether the Ulster Unionists are in Government, or not, but the facts are established historically and are on the record. I remember going to Number 11 Downing Street with Sir Reg and others as part of the negotiations for this package. If the Member is saying that his party stopped negotiations because it was no longer interested and gave up on a financial package, he can go and be answerable to the people of Northern Ireland. We managed to get the increase in EYF, and the asset sales, from which we will receive £1.1 billion over this period.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Robinson: I would love to give way, but as the Member can see, I am literally about halfway through what I want and need to say.

If we had taken the advice of the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry regarding the financial package, we would never have set about the business of trying to get it.

7.00 pm

Mr McNarry's statement, which is still on the Ulster Unionist Party's website, makes it clear that he criticised and attacked the Democratic Unionist Party for getting involved — and he is still wrong.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr P Robinson: He believed that by asking for a financial package we were handing a veto over to others.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs referred to fuel poverty, as did the Member for Foyle. Since 2001, fuel poverty has been reduced in 50,000 Northern Ireland homes. Over the past five years, the warm homes scheme provided energy-efficiency measures to over 11,000 households, with approximately 4,000 households receiving new or upgraded heating systems.

That is an important initiative, and the allocation of funding will need to be balanced with the range of initiatives in the wider housing budget, including new build, co-ownership, decent homes and private-sector grants. I agree that it is important that the Minister for Social Development should consult with stakeholders in taking those decisions.

The Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan mentioned social housing. The fact that there is a draft Programme for Government with targets is a matter of security to the Minister for Social Development. As the targets are there, the responsibility lies with the Executive collectively to ensure that she has the resources to meet those targets. Do not decry the targets: it is right that they are there, and it is the responsibility of the Executive to ensure that they are met.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs seemed to think that the budget for the Office of the First Minister

and deputy First Minister was open to criticism. It is interesting that he criticised an increase of £15·1 million over the three years in OFMDFM's budget, yet he did not criticise an increase of £688·8 million in the health budget. Considering that some of the increase in OFMDFM's budget will go to victims and their dependants, I would have thought that he may not have wanted to raise that issue.

The Minister of Health, Social Service and Public Safety, Mr McGimpsey, made an intervention during the debate. There was one notable factor in that. Although he indicated that he needed more money, not once did he suggest where it would come from. However, we have a clue where he thinks it would come from. I am saddened that, behind the scenes, Minister McGimpsey's Department has been arguing that additional water charging and higher rates bills could have been used to fund Health Service bids. I resisted such a course. The logic of the Department of Health argument would require ratepayers to pay more than three times what they are paying today. That is totally unacceptable.

I will give the same advice to the Minister of Health that his Department received from the expert who examined thoroughly the workings of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland — Professor John Appleby. The Department of Health had some communication with Professor Appleby to try to convince him of a particular issue, and that has been brought to my attention. In Professor Appleby's reply, he states:

"My impression is that a lot of work has gone into disputing the findings of the original report, in particular as I note to boost the need for more funding and to underplay the need for tackling poor productivity. Maybe this was only to be expected, but is disappointing nonetheless."

He goes on to say:

"It is surely hard to believe that the Northern Ireland health and social care system has or is operating at the very edge of its production possibility frontier."

Subsequently, he states:

"Surely the appropriate response now is to focus exclusively on how Northern Ireland can start to demonstrably and radically improve its productivity both in cost and quality terms. During the time that I spent on the original review, I was told by a number of people that the problem with waiting times was either intractable or only solvable with large amounts of extra funding. Neither has turned out to be true, and what appeared to be inevitable long-term trends have been dramatically reversed."

The lesson to be learned from Professor Appleby is to properly use the funds that are already available, rather than crying out for more funds.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members and the Minister for their contributions to what has proved

to be a healthy and generally constructive debate on the departmental allocations, and other issues, contained in the Executive's draft Budget.

In particular, I wish to thank Mervyn Storey, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, for the expert manner in which he set out the issues that have thus far been considered by the Committee. Of course, the Committee will continue that work in the weeks ahead.

Obviously, it is difficult to do full justice to the many contributions that were made in today's wide-ranging debate. With the Assembly's indulgence, I will start by commenting on the various policy headings, and I will reflect some of Members' comments on those matters. If I do not recognise some individual contributions, I hope that there will be no misunderstanding — there is certainly no intention on my part to ignore those comments.

In her comments, Martina Anderson set out the stark realities of a pattern of social and economic disadvantage. That is another legacy issue, so to speak, and one of the many that we must all continue to address. Mr Roy Beggs questioned the achievement of the economic package from the Chancellor. The Minister has pointed out that the four parties to the Executive — I will not attempt to repeat the tongue-twister that the Minister seems to have very expertly got his tongue around — were part of the negotiations. If we did not succeed in achieving all our objectives, it is clear that that consensus approach resulted in some achievements. In his typically sober and understated fashion, Sammy Wilson pointed out some examples of that consensus. In particular, he mentioned the punitive levy that was attached to the RRI, and, of course, the increased access to end-year flexibility.

Declan O'Loan called for flexibility when considering revisions to the draft Budget, particularly given that several issues, including further efficiencies and asset sales, are ongoing. That is fair enough — the purpose of the negotiation and the period of consultation is to allow an opportunity for evidence-based arguments to be advanced. Mr O'Loan also called for a critical examination of the efficiency targets and the role of the performance and efficiency delivery unit. He will be aware that the Committee is just about to receive a detailed briefing on that unit, including its remit and terms of reference.

Dr Stephen Farry welcomed the economic focus of the Budget, as did many other Members. However, he raised underlying concerns, including the high cost of economic inactivity and the large productivity gap with Britain. That is yet another legacy, but this time a legacy of failure of the Westminster policy that direct rule Ministers administered for many years. I believe that the Executive have begun the task of correcting that

long period of failure. Furthermore, Dr Farry called for the Treasury's one-size-fits-all approach to be challenged effectively, and he questioned whether the existing resources and economic tools, including the four economic drivers, are being used to maximum effect.

Predictably, I suppose, he addressed the cost to the economy of division. Again, the Minister acknowledged that there are some issues that could be considered. Everyone must be sensible and recognise that, although we have made significant progress, particularly in moving out of conflict, the work to heal divisions will take time as those divisions have emerged over many generations. Confidence-building in our community will also take time, especially as regards guarantees. Debates such as this could be informed by an awareness that there is an audience. We must inform people that we have re-established the primacy of politics.

To turn again to the financial and economic issues, Simon Hamilton highlighted the positive responses to the draft Budget from the Federation of Small Businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, the Institute of Directors, and other key stakeholders.

It also pointed to the continued cap on industrial rates and the freeze on regional domestic rates as positive outcomes for the economy. Again, the Minister has responded to that directly. The Committee for Finance and Personnel have acknowledged and welcomed those measures unanimously. Mr Hamilton's point was supported by Mr McQuillan, who also welcomed the economic emphasis of October's draft Budget statement.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Durkan, addressed the finance issue and highlighted the need to include visible funding and focus on the social economy and on innovation. His Committee looks forward to engagement with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on tourism development. Mr Durkan also informed the Assembly that his Committee would have preferred Safe Start's allocation to be brought forward within the first year of the Budget period. Those are helpful and constructive suggestions.

Basil McCrea, among many contributors, discussed the lack of a sufficient financial package and raised the issue of the Barnett formula and the needs that remain unaddressed by the draft Budget allocations. All parties would acknowledge that the Assembly is, inevitably, in the era of deficit Budget projections because there is simply not enough money. The financial cake must be divided in such a way that as many as possible of the parties' priorities can be dealt with. The judgement is not — as is the argument from some parties — as to whether there are sufficient resources, but whether there has been equitable and fair distribution of available resources. The defenders of the draft Budget, of which

I am one, would argue that a good beginning has been made.

Ms Anderson highlighted fuel poverty and social housing, as, indeed, did several other Members. She called on the Minister for Social Development to prioritise those issues in the context of tackling disadvantage and achieving equality. Mr Beggs also picked up on the issue of housing and fuel poverty, as did Mr O'Loan, who also focused on energy efficiency. Although Ms Ní Chuilín supported those arguments, she also called upon the Department for Social Development to examine its unused asset base with a view to freeing up resources.

Mr McCann reiterated the call to progress the social housing programme and called on the Minister for Social Development to reprioritise in that regard, while not conceding on the case for additional funding. Mr Brady mentioned the issue of warm homes and drew attention to a ministerial statement on the matter. He also discussed fuel poverty and echoed the call for reprioritisation of departmental spending plans. In a passionate address, Alban Maginness warned that the budget for social housing would not be met under the existing allocation.

Simon Hamilton pointed out the comparison between health costs here and elsewhere and highlighted the Appleby Report's conclusions, to which the Health Minister responded that health provision is about improved performance rather than increased spend. Ms Ní Chuilín highlighted investment in health as a strategic measure that would boost economic development. In particular, she, and several other Members, highlighted the need to deal with the priorities that are identified in the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability.

The Minister, Mr McGimpsey, set out his case for additional funding for health. He referred to increasing pressures while also reconfirming his commitment to tackle efficiencies. He also argued that the Health Service is underfunded compared to that in other regions and highlighted the greater need that exists here. The Assembly can anticipate that that debate will continue until the settlement of the Budget allocations.

The Chairperson of the Health Committee, Mrs Robinson, called for money to be found to meet the needs of the Rape Crisis Centre. Although she supported the case for social housing, she cautioned against any funding transfer away from health in that regard and warned against any further delay in the implementation of the reform of health and personal social services.

She emphasised — as she has previously in the House — that mental health is a priority for her Committee, echoing the comments of Carál Ní Chuilín. Brian Wilson expressed his dissatisfaction at

the allocations for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and his concerns at the reliance on efficiency savings.

7.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, called for additional provision to benefit a range of projects, and he is concerned that the efficiency drive will impact on some lower-priority services. I guess that that is a common cause of concern across the board. In response to an intervention from Declan O'Loan, Mr McGlone also called for financial resources to enable the establishment of an environmental protection agency. Brian Wilson also addressed that matter, and he said that the targets for reducing carbon emissions were inadequate, and that there was insufficient allocation to promote sustainable development.

Mr Roy Beggs mentioned funding for children, which is cross-cutting issue. He also mentioned the recent report on the work of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, and said that the outcome of that report should be reflected in the draft Budget. Maurice Morrow placed focus on investing in provision for childcare in the early education of young children and emphasised the priority objective of improving the quality of life for our senior citizens.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Sue Ramsey, informed the Assembly that the Committee considers that the overall allocation will not be sufficient to meet the goals and targets of the draft Programme for Government. She made a range of suggestions about the Department's allocation and said that a higher priority should be given to research and development, funding for PhDs and to the promotion of ICT as an essential skill. She also called for a range of measures in the areas of further and higher education. Paul Butler also underlined the need to give high priority to the education and further-education and higher-education sectors, as did other Members. Paul Butler also placed great emphasis on the linkage between education and economic development.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, David McNarry, emphasised the need for further and timely information on draft Budget issues from DCAL. He also called for a complete uplift for that Department's budget, and highlighted a range of specific proposals.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Jim Wells, spoke on behalf of that Committee. He supported his Department's call for additional resources, and he highlighted the shortfall in roads spending compared to other regions. On behalf of his Committee, he also supported further investment in public transport.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Rev McCrea, set out his concerns arising from the report of the red meat task force. He stated that his Committee was content with the level of administration and resource allocation in the draft Budget for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, but he emphasised his concerns about the sale of the entire Crossmacreevy site.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel reminded Members of the benefits that will accrue for wider society from the focus on economic development, and he pointed to the importance of striking a balance between ensuring that core public services have sufficient funding, and taking steps to maximise the performance and value for money of those services. He also robustly challenged those who are advocating additional funding requirements to state how they believe those issues can be funded out of finite financial resources that are presently available to the Executive.

He defended the overall allocation for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and called on the Department for Social Development to consider how the social-housing allocation can be supplemented by greater revenue, effort and other measures within the Department. The Minister pointed to the savings that householders will make from the freeze on the domestic regional rate, and urged them to compare that to the position under direct rule. He also highlighted the continued cap on industrial rating and highlighted the favourable position now, compared to the direct rule system.

The Minister informed Members that the Civil Service headcount-reduction target will be achieved without any compulsory redundancies. The Minister, as I said earlier, defended the financial package and pointed to the renegotiation of the reinvestment and reform initiative as enabling the freeze on the domestic regional rate. He also highlighted gains in respect of the end-year conditions and sale of assets. Go raibh mile maith agat.

The need to maximise cash-releasing efficiency savings is a core theme throughout the draft Budget. A total of £793 million is targeted for efficiency savings by 2010-11, which is equivalent to 3% annually over the CSR period. That target will be achieved, in part, by specific, targeted reductions in the administration costs of Departments.

In addition, the proposed performance and efficiency delivery unit will, with agreed and appropriate terms of reference, examine the scope for Departments to deliver even greater cash-releasing efficiencies. In the drive for greater efficiency, it is crucial to redirect the resulting savings to front-line services, and I doubt that anyone would object to that being the overriding aim.

However, I sound a note of caution at this point. The Committee is aware that the targeted savings of £793 million have already been removed from departmental baseline budgets. Therefore, any slippage in achieving the planned efficiencies could result in a cut in spending on front-line services. Nothing better underlines the requirement for all Members — members of Committees and Ministers — to work together to ensure that we meet the targets that we have set ourselves, while maintaining, sustaining and developing the delivery of front-line services.

The Committee plans to publish final departmental efficiency delivery plans alongside the final Budget. The departmental Committees will, therefore, have vital roles to play in monitoring and scrutinising the progress of their respective Departments in achieving those planned efficiencies. That is a practical example of sharing power and responsibility.

The draft Budget includes other strategic and cross-cutting issues, not least of which is the planned reduction in over-commitment and the need to bear down on underspend. Again, the Assembly Committees will have an important role in monitoring and scrutinising departmental progress.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel looks forward to receiving formal feedback from the other Statutory Committees on the draft Budget's allocations to their respective Departments. Those will be included in the Committee's report on the draft Budget that will be submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel before Christmas and published shortly thereafter. The report will also reflect the themes that emerge from this debate and will consider the main strategic and cross-cutting issues.

The Committee looks forward to examining the final Budget and to debating it in the Chamber next January. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the draft Budget, announced on 25 October 2007 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Adjourned at 7.23 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 3 December 2007

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy
Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Special EU Programmes Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the eighth meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in special EU programmes sectoral format.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The North/South Ministerial Council met in special EU programmes sectoral format in Dublin on 7 November 2007. It was the first NSMC meeting in that sectoral format since the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive were restored in May of this year.

The Irish Government were represented by their Minister for Finance, Brian Cowen, who chaired the meeting. I represented the Northern Ireland Administration, and I was accompanied by my colleague the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie.

The meeting began with a report from Pat Colgan, who is the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). He updated us on developments since the Council last met in that sectoral format, which was on 9 October 2002. Mr Colgan outlined a number of achievements that there had been in those five years. Those included the completion of work to close the first EU Peace programme and the performance of the Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes. The Council commended Mr Colgan on his successful management of those two programmes. Both Peace II and INTERREG IIIa have, to date, achieved the annual spending targets that the European Commission set SEUPB.

Mr Colgan informed the Council that SEUPB's annual report and accounts are fully up to date and have been published with clean audit reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland and his counterpart in the Republic. The SEUPB has also

delivered its corporate and business plans within the time frame that the two finance Departments agreed.

Mr Colgan also reviewed progress on the development of the Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes. The Council was informed that the work on programme development had been undertaken in both an evidence-based and participative manner.

The final draft programmes were approved and subsequently sent to the European Commission for negotiation. The Commission formally approved the two programmes on 6 November. I am therefore pleased to be able to announce that both programmes will shortly be formally launched and opened for funding applications.

The Council emphasised to Mr Colgan the need to address the observation that the Protestant community has failed to benefit fully from the opportunities available under the Peace programmes and, indeed, some wider Government initiatives. The Social Development Minister and I stressed the importance of that matter, and the importance of the full participation of all communities in the new programme.

Mr Colgan assured us that SEUPB will continue its efforts to promote Peace funding throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties, and will encourage all communities to participate. Projects to build community capacity will again be funded, and all appropriate steps will be taken to encourage applications from both communities.

The Council noted that the new Peace III programme has a total budget of €333 million. That comprises the €225 million provided from the EU budget, and match funding from Northern Ireland and the Republic.

The programme will carry forward the work of its two predecessors, with a continued focus on the promotion of reconciliation and a shared society.

The Council welcomed the fact that victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland have been listed in the programme document as a key beneficiary group for programme funding. Mr Colgan agreed that the Special EU Programmes Body would work closely with the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in order to ensure that Peace III complements that organisation's programme of work.

The INTERREG IVa programme will have a budget of €256 million — some 40% more than its predecessor, INTERREG IIIa. That funding will be used to assist cross-border economic development activities in areas such as tourism and business support. The new programme will cover a wider geographical area than its predecessor because areas in western Scotland are, for the first time, eligible to participate.

The Council welcomed the inclusion of the west of Scotland in the new programme as a development that

can both benefit from and enhance the long-established social, cultural and economic links that exist between Northern Ireland and Scotland. I and Minister Cowen look forward to working with our Scottish colleagues on the ambitious new programme.

The Council noted that Peace III and INTERREG IVa will have a more strategic focus than their predecessors. As in the rest of the EU, the emphasis will be on supporting larger, multi-annual projects that target identified needs in a structured and systematic way.

Furthermore, there will be an attempt to lessen the work of programme administration, which some stakeholders have found unnecessarily burdensome. To that end, SEUPB will take on more of the work of programme delivery so that the number of intermediary bodies can be correspondingly reduced.

The Council approved SEUPB's corporate plan for 2008-10, and its 2008 business plan. We also approved a modest increase in SEUPB staffing to enable it to deliver the new programmes. That increase reflects the greater involvement of SEUPB in future programme delivery, and the corresponding reduction in the number of intermediary funding bodies.

Finally, the Council noted SEUPB's annual report and accounts, which were presented in advance of their submission to the Assembly and to the Republic's Parliament. The Council agreed its intention to meet again in special EU programmes sectoral format in April 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has already made an initial examination of the work of the Special EU Programmes Body, and held an evidence session with its chief executive, Mr Pat Colgan, and other officials on 26 September 2007.

Last May, President Barroso announced the creation of a special task force with the stated purpose of assisting us to maximise the benefits of European programmes and to make maximum use of experience from across the EU to further our economic aims and promote growth, innovation and opportunity.

Will the Minister update the Assembly on the progress of the task force and state what role SEUPB will play in that regard? Will he also indicate, following the introduction of the 2007-13 programmes, what steps the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the SEUPB will take to promote long-term sustainability of projects and prepare for the period post-2013?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome the involvement of President Barrosa, and I welcomed his visit to Northern Ireland when, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I had the opportunity to meet him. I was

impressed by his interest in Northern Ireland and with willingness to assist, particularly in tooling-up Northern Ireland to deal with the new set of circumstances in which it would have to compete for funds.

As funds will be allocated on a transnational basis, and will involve other regions or members of the European Community, it will be likely that our partner, in particular, would be the Republic of Ireland. In those circumstances, SEUPB might have an important role in brokering arrangements and assisting us.

Sustainability is part of the selection criteria for the 2007-13 programmes, and SEUPB will be promoting more strategic projects than before. As such, that will help sustainability. The hope is that Peace funding will be reduced in line with the facts, and I think we are very fortunate. Most people were delighted when the initial Peace project and funding came forward. A lot of work was carried out by our MEPs at the time in securing the second tranche of Peace funding, and we have been very fortunate to have achieved Peace III funding.

Most people recognise that, with the additional burden on the EU budget due, in particular, to enlargement, it is unlikely that there will be a Peace IV allocation. Therefore, it is important that we get real strategic value from Peace III.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney local strategic partnership and as a member of the monitoring committee for Peace II.

I thank the Minister for his statement. During the Committee for Finance and Personnel's initial scrutiny of SEUPB, an issue arose regarding the distribution of EU funding. Will the Minister comment on what new measures will be put in place to ensure that there is equitable distribution of new funds across Northern Ireland? Will he also comment on the increased role for SEUPB in programme delivery, which has resulted in a reduction in the number of intermediary funding bodies? Will the more centralised approach to implementation run the risk of losing the involvement by communities from the bottom up?

Mr P Robinson: The Member has considerable knowledge of the subject. He did not quite say whether equitable distribution was to be on the basis of location or communities: I suspect that he means the latter. It has been recognised that there has been a perceived under-representation of the Protestant community. I raised that issue at the meeting, and I was strongly supported by the Minister for Social Development.

Around 44% of funding under Peace I went to the Protestant community. That was increased to 47% in Peace II, in no small part because it was possible in Peace II to draw down money for capacity building.

12.15 pm

Therefore, over time, the figures have improved. Peace III is likely to have a more strategic focus, so I trust that that trend will continue. However, I am reminded of the joke about the lottery: in order to win the lottery, it is necessary to buy a ticket. In this case, in order to receive funding, it is necessary to submit an application. All Members must encourage people in the Protestant community to submit applications to ensure equity.

Under Peace III, a smaller amount of money is available than under Peace II. The amount of that money that can be used for administrative purposes is also restricted; that figure had been 10%, and it is now 6%, which means that there is only one quarter of the amount of funding available for administration than previously. We must examine methods of delivery and take steps to reduce levels of bureaucracy, although that will reduce the useful bottom-up approach. However, the local community will be involved as much as possible.

Mr Beggs: Historically, INTERREG funding has been perceived in many quarters as assisting border areas in particular. Can the Minister tell the House how INTERREG IVa, which will include Scotland, might benefit communities and bodies in the north-east and in my constituency of East Antrim, which have natural linkages with Scotland?

Mr P Robinson: The inclusion of the west of Scotland in INTERREG IVa is a new development, which I welcome. My colleague the Member for East Londonderry clearly welcomes this move, as he indicated during my statement.

Changes in INTERREG IVa mean that maritime borders will now be included. That border, of course, exists between parts of Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, because there is no border between Northern Ireland and Scotland. However, any scheme must involve the three regions — Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland — and not simply Northern Ireland and Scotland, which would not meet the criteria. However, the scheme would allow us to encourage tourism and cultural links among the three regions. The Scots have never been hesitant about availing of funding, and I am sure that we will learn from them during the process.

Mr O'Loan: I note the Minister's earlier answer. Does the Minister agree that the "perception" that the Protestant community receives fewer benefits from Peace funding is, indeed, a mere perception and that the funding proportions in Peace II were close to actual community proportions? Does he also agree that any shortfall in funding for Protestant communities has been objectively and independently assessed as being related to relative disadvantage in Catholic areas and

that SEUPB has worked constructively, and continues to do so, to tackle any under-capacity to avail of funding in Protestant communities?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure that I accept the Member's statistical review.

I indicated that the uptake in Peace I was 44%, whereas the community division is around the 54% mark, which probably indicates that the Catholic community received in the region of 56%. That means that it received funding above its weight. There are two issues: first, because the criteria included the TSN factor, that clearly would have been one of the issues at play; and secondly, as I said to colleagues, no small part of it is the fact that there were more applications from the Roman Catholic community than from the Protestant community. However, I was happy to see that between Peace I and Peace II, the statistics indicate that there was a move to a more equitable division. I hope that that continues. If all of us encourage those applications to come in, I believe that we can improve on those statistics.

The Minister for Social Development accepted the statistics and the perceptions and indicated that this is not unique to European funding and that she has encountered it in other areas. She is doing particular work on capacity building to ensure that there is more of an uptake from the Protestant community.

Dr Farry: I welcome the community-relations focus of Peace III. However, will the Minister recognise that there should perhaps be a stronger emphasis on cross-border work under the reconciling communities priority rather than under the shared society headline, which should be more Northern Ireland focused? Will he also recognise that the issue in the Protestant side of the community is that of capacity building, and will he agree that allocations should be on the basis of quality of project and need rather than rigorous communal allocation?

Finally, with reference to INTERREG and the strong economic focus of this stage of the scheme, does the Minister foresee any dangers — when the Peace money dries up and we have to rely purely on structural funds — of INTERREG being broadened to deal with the social as well as the economic aspects?

Mr P Robinson: In relation to the first part of the Member's question, projects can, of course, be put forward for any form of reconciliation, and they will be scored on their merits. I agree with his second point: there is an open and transparent system that judges the merits of each of the applications and it is on that basis that the scoring takes place and the determination of appropriate projects is assessed.

At the same time, unless there were significant discrimination, one would not intervene to make any changes. It is moving in the right way; it is about

capacity building, as the Member suggests. The Minister for Social Development has recognised the need in that area and is building up programmes to improve capacity in Protestant areas. However, I return to my original principle: there is still a job for elected representatives to encourage that community and, where they see a deficit in capacity, to attempt to consider ways of filling that.

There is one other factor to consider. There is a cultural reticence, to some extent, that prevents some in the Protestant community from making applications. There are a number of factors that must be overcome, but chief among them is capacity building.

Mr Weir: I welcome the Minister's statement and also declare an interest as a member of North Down local strategic partnership. Will the Minister comment on the share of the Peace III resources that will be available for administrative activity and how that compares with Peace II?

Mr P Robinson: As I indicated earlier, the amount of funding available under Peace III is reduced, and therefore the amount available for administration is reduced. It had been 10% under Peace II; with a larger overall figure, it is now 6%. That means that we really need to tighten down on administration. I am one of those who believes that that is no bad thing. The purpose of those funds is to get them where they can be most used in the community rather than building up the bureaucracy. I welcome the fact that we are forced by necessity to allocate less to administration.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Minister's comments and proposed actions to encourage a fairer distribution of funding across both communities. Another group of people who have been under-represented in the past are the innocent victims of terrorist violence. What steps are being taken to encourage uptake and to increase awareness among victims' groups?

Mr P Robinson: Again, this is an issue that both the Minister for Social Development and I raised at the meeting with Mr Cowen. It has been agreed that SEUPB will make contact as soon as we have a Victims' Commissioner. SEUPB will look at the programme that the Victims' Commissioner is developing and attempt to work along with that office in delivering projects to benefit both victims and survivors.

Mr Savage: The Minister advised us that the programmes were approved by the European Commission on 6 November. When will we know which applications have been approved?

Mr P Robinson: The next stage is for the Executive, at our meeting on 18 December, to look at the criteria and, if those are agreed, to roll out the programmes very quickly thereafter.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the meeting that has taken place and the tone of the report and of the Minister's comments. I want to ask three very quick questions.

I very much welcome the decision to provide funding for victims and survivors. What is the likely budget line for that? Given that the opportunity for funding is to be launched soon, is the Minister aware that the Victims' Commissioner will be appointed during December? The commitment of SEUPB to work with the Victims' Commissioner can thus be achieved.

Secondly, can the Minister confirm how border partnership groups will continue to be involved in the INTERREG programme? They have been essential in building up capacity and understanding around the border.

Thirdly, I acknowledge that there has been under-application by the Protestant community heretofore to the various Peace programmes. The much more balanced application rate is welcome. However, will the Minister reassure me that there is no intention that any European funding be targeted exclusively at any one community, be it Catholic or Protestant? It is very important that no EU programme — or any Government initiative, for that matter — should be targeted exclusively at one community.

Mr P Robinson: I understand that the indicative allocation for victims and survivors is €25 million. As far as the Victims' Commissioner is concerned, the Member has asked me something that is beyond my pay grade. However, as I understand it, every effort is being made to resolve that issue. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have given a date by which they intend to make an announcement.

The Member points out rightly that there is no requirement to have any ring-fencing for any section of the community. The basis on which allocations are made is the merit of the applications. We do need to point out that, even though Protestants are statistically under-represented, at 47%, there is still a very significant uptake. Some 7,000 projects have been funded under Peace II thus far, and all sections of the community have benefited from that. There is still that statistical imbalance, but it is becoming more slender.

12.30 pm

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the potential that Scotland's involvement in the INTERREG IVa programme will bring. Will the Minister tell the House what contact the SEUPB has had with the Scottish Executive about that involvement?

Mr P Robinson: Brian Cowen, the relevant Minister from the Republic, and I will want to make contact with our Scottish counterparts. At official level, contact will, of course, have already been made, and in the European Community, considerable

discussion will have begun and will be ongoing. I believe that Northern Ireland will benefit from the inclusion of Scotland in the project, and I look forward to seeing the programmes that will be implemented as a result. I know that some links exist between the north coast and Scotland, and the project might be a suitable vehicle, if that is not a pun, through which those can benefit.

Mr Ross: I welcome the Minister's statement. Will he confirm that, unlike in previous rounds, all EU structural funds are fully additional to Northern Ireland? Will he perhaps explain the implications of that?

Mr P Robinson: With the exception of the Peace funding, which I believe had to be fought for, there had not been true additionality.

When making allocations to Northern Ireland, the Treasury took into account other structural funds such as INTERREG — those funds are now truly additional. That clearly means that Northern Ireland benefits, given the extent of the funds that come to it through those programmes.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's statement, especially the constructive tone that he lent to it.

John Hume said that the European Union was one of the finest models of conflict resolution in human history. I note that the Minister said that the programme will:

“carry forward the work of its two predecessors with a continued focus on promoting reconciliation and a shared society.”

I know that it may be above the Minister's pay grade to speak for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but there does not seem to be much evidence of that office's embracing the concept of a shared society. Will the Minister reassure the Assembly that in so far as he can, he will encourage the programme to continue with its good work on reconciliation and the development of a shared society?

Mr P Robinson: I have no reluctance — and I am pretty sure that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister has any reluctance — in encouraging reconciliation in Northern Ireland where it is needed, including, indeed, reconciliation beyond our borders. I do not think that it would be proper to characterise either the First Minister or the deputy First Minister as being reluctant to act on that matter or of dragging their feet on it.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Given that he has already said that a smaller amount of money will be available under Peace III compared to what was available under Peace II, is there a plan to ensure that funding will be available in the future for those projects that are currently funded by Peace II and whose funding will end in June 2008? I am referring specifically to those projects that are delivered in the community and voluntary sectors.

Mr P Robinson: We need to be clear that Peace funding was never intended to be a long-term arrangement; by its nature, it was special and temporary.

Therefore, a growing emphasis was placed on the sustainability of projects that were given life by funding. I hope that that, to a large extent, will be the case. There is still some life left in Peace II, and I trust that all of the projects that were started under it can be sustained. However, as the emphasis of Peace III moves to a more strategic level, and funding is for reconciliation, it is unlikely that there will be continued funding for projects that were born under Peace II.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Road Transport Licensing (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2007

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

That the Road Transport Licensing (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/461) be approved.

The purpose of the motion is to increase current road freight and passenger licensing fees to recoup fully the cost of processing applications for road transport licences. Specifically, the fee for a road service licence will increase from £3.25 to £6.50 a month, or part of a month, and the fee for a road freight operator's licence will increase from £7 to £30 a complete year. A road freight vehicle licence will increase from £4 to £5 a month, or part thereof.

The fees for road-freight and passenger-operator licensing have remained unchanged since 1997, and a sizeable increase is necessary to keep the accounts in financial balance. The current fees do not recover all associated costs, and significant deficits have begun to accrue since 2004.

Fee increases were not put in place earlier for several reasons, including the intention to undertake a fundamental review of freight licensing and anticipated new charges for criminal-record checks. When it became clear that neither issue would be resolved in the short term, it was decided that the fee increases could be delayed no longer. However, Members will be aware that the Executive Committee has approved the drafting of new legislation which, when passed, will introduce reforms to the licensing of the freight industry. Those reforms will not only improve road safety and enforcement, they will enable the cost of licensing to be spread more fairly across the whole industry. Until then, however, the Department still needs to recover the costs; hence the proposed fee increase.

Using a partial regulatory impact assessment, the Department consulted on the fee increases, and that consultation ran from November 2006 to January 2007. There were over 2,500 consultees, but fewer than 20 responses were received. Following the consultation, the fee increases were discussed in detail at meetings with the main trade representatives, and there was general acceptance that the full costs must be recovered.

In conclusion, the loss on freight and passenger licensing has been met in recent years by the Department of the Environment and, ultimately, the taxpayer. That cannot be sustained, as Government accounting rules require that the Department recover annually the cost of freight and passenger licensing. That is why I propose that, today, this statutory rule be affirmed.

Question, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Road Transport Licensing (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/461) be approved.

Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Deputy Speaker: Although no time limit is set for the debate, the Business Committee has agreed that Members' contributions — other than the Minister's — should be limited to five minutes.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill dealing with nuisance or disturbance on Health and Social Services premises which are contained in clause 107 of, and schedule 18 to, that Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

The Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill was introduced in Westminster on 26 June 2007. One section of the Bill deals with nuisance and disturbance in hospitals in Northern Ireland. Although, with the Secretary of State's consent, I could have introduced legislation in the form of an Assembly Bill, I did not wish to miss the opportunity presented by the Westminster Bill to make legislation available at the earliest possible date to assist healthcare workers.

Health and social services bodies in Northern Ireland frequently experience low-level nuisance or disturbances that cause annoyance to staff and patients alike. For example, some visitors make undue levels of noise in hospital wards and waiting rooms and persistently demand the attention of staff for no medical or other legitimate reason. Such incidents can cause significant problems, such as low staff morale, absenteeism and low level of staff retention.

Health and social services staff currently have no power to remove persons who create a nuisance from hospital premises without the assistance of the police. The new legislation will change that. It provides for the creation of a new offence of refusing to leave hospital premises having caused "a nuisance or disturbance" to staff. Secondly, it empowers certain authorised staff, or the police, to remove from the premises those who create a nuisance or disturbance. The removal should be undertaken with as little confrontation as possible, and reasonable force should be used only as a last resort.

The new offence will not apply to patients or to any other person on the premises:

"for the purpose of obtaining medical advice, treatment or care".

Neither will it apply to anyone who has a "reasonable excuse" for causing nuisance or disturbance or refusing to leave the premises. For example, the news of a bereavement, or behaviour caused by concern for a relative, may constitute a reasonable excuse. Authorised staff will not be permitted to remove a person who requires "medical advice, treatment or care", and that will preserve the rights of individuals to receive medical treatment.

The Department will issue guidance on the exercise of the power of removal. In particular, it will stipulate the type of behaviours that may be caught by the new offence and the procedures to be observed before a person is removed. The legislation is restricted to hospital premises only. To widen the scope of the offence to include a broad range of health and social services service-provider settings would have proved impractical at this stage.

If a person is prosecuted and found guilty of an offence, he or she could receive:

"a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale."

That figure currently stands at £1,000.

I am fully aware of the unacceptable number of verbal and physical attacks that are carried out each year on healthcare staff in hospitals and in wider community settings. The new provisions, however, are not intended to deal with such attacks. My Department is working on proposals to introduce new robust legislation that will make it a specific offence to carry out such attacks on staff. I will bring those new proposals to the Health Committee and to the Executive in due course.

The provisions of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill are intended to deal with low-level nuisance and behaviour that causes disturbance in hospitals in Northern Ireland. Their introduction will empower health and social services staff to take immediate action to remove those who create a nuisance or disturbance on the premises. They will act as a deterrent to those who engage in such behaviour. I ask Members to support the motion.

12.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): Over recent years, attacks and assaults on staff working for the emergency services have increased.

They range across all the emergency services, from assaults on doctors, nurses and other front-line hospital staff, particularly in accident and emergency departments, to attacks on health and social care staff in primary care settings and in the community, to the emergency services, particularly Ambulance Service and Fire and Rescue Service staff going about their work, often in trying and difficult circumstances. All sides of the Assembly agree that such appalling attacks must end. A comprehensive range of measures will be required to tackle the problem. Legislation is only one of those measures; nonetheless, it is very important.

Today's motion, which endorses the extension of certain provisions in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill to Northern Ireland, is a welcome move in the right direction, and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety fully endorses it. On 22 May, during a debate on assaults on emergency

workers, the Minister gave a commitment that this Bill would be extended to Northern Ireland. In September, departmental officials came before the Committee to explain the provisions in the Bill. They explained that the Bill will not deal with violent incidents; those must continue to be dealt with by ordinary criminal law. However, it will deal with low-level offences, such as where individuals create a nuisance or disturbance in a hospital setting. If that type of behaviour is not stopped, it can often lead to more serious disorder or violence. Unfortunately, the Bill will only apply to health and social care premises. It will not cover doctors on call, for example, or health and social care staff working in the community.

The Committee wholeheartedly welcomes the provisions as a small but significant step in the right direction. However, we have one concern. The Bill will give power to certain health and social care employees to remove from premises any person creating a nuisance or disturbance. The Committee fully recognises the need for such action to protect staff and patients, but it wants an assurance that those who are given that power will receive rigorous and appropriate training. They must be able not only to handle people who are abusive and aggressive, but to distinguish between someone who is being threatening or abusive and someone who is agitated or behaving strangely due to a medical or mental-health condition and who perhaps needs urgent medical or other attention.

During the debate on 22 May, the Minister acknowledged that Northern Ireland needed a single comprehensive piece of legislation:

“to protect all emergency workers and promote a culture of zero tolerance towards violence and abuse directed at staff.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p182, col 1*].

He also referred to the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005. I ask the Minister what progress has been made over the past six months on developing the proposed consolidated legislation for Northern Ireland, similar to that which was introduced in Scotland. When will it be brought before the Assembly? I support the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat. The provisions in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill relate to nuisance and disturbance. Although this is a reserved matter, it is a welcome development for staff to be given the authority to remove people who are creating low-level nuisance. As the Minister said, this relates to visitors making undue noise and persistent demands on people’s attention without any clear medical reason.

The Bill is a clear demonstration of the Department’s and the Assembly’s commitment to hospital staff. My only regret is that, as the Chairperson of the Health Committee said, it has not been extended to doctors and other on-call healthcare professionals. Perhaps we can look at that in the future, because our support is

about recognising the value that we place on all healthcare workers.

The Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, as outlined, will not affect anyone who has what the Minister described as a “reasonable excuse” — for instance, anyone who has just received news of a bereavement or anyone with certain medical or mental-health difficulties. That is to be welcomed. Currently, security staff do not have the power to remove anyone who is abusive or who is causing serious nuisance and disturbance, and they are often left feeling helpless when such situations arise.

Although I support the motion, I have a couple of caveats. I am concerned about any potential there might be for the person who is being removed to suffer any shock or harm. The Minister mentioned “reasonable force”, and I would like him to define that for the House. Will the staff who are using reasonable force be made more vulnerable? I suppose that that is a catch-22 question. Ultimately, staff will have to be properly trained, and the training must be constantly monitored and evaluated. I assume that the Bill has been screened, but I must ask whether it has the potential to affect anyone’s civil or human rights.

I hope that the legislation will lessen the abuse and attacks that staff, regrettably, have to endure. It will have the potential to act as a good deterrent; I have no doubt about that. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that the Assembly places value on all staff and healthcare workers, as well as on patients and their visitors. As the Chairperson of the Health Committee said, the Committee supported the zero tolerance policy towards violence in May, and I am encouraged to see these additional measures afoot. With those caveats, I support the Bill. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I support the motion, and I am glad that the Health Minister has brought it before the House. This issue has occupied my attention for some time, and I have campaigned long and hard. It is completely unsustainable for any democratic society to allow attacks on health workers, especially in the accident and emergency departments. I am glad that there are specific definitive statements set aside to pinpoint the areas in which a criminal charge can be brought against someone who indulges himself or herself — under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or for whatever reason — on those who are trying to assist them to regain their health.

However, we have to look beyond the hospitals and the accident and emergency departments. In these days when the health system is developing and evolving and many health workers are out in the community, we constantly hear stories of those who have gone to homes to help people and who have been abused verbally and physically by those whom they have gone to help, or

by members of their family. The Bill should reflect all these things and cover all emergencies in that way.

We are also appalled when we read of attacks on ambulance workers or on any aspect of the emergency services. The powers must be there to deal with those who think that it is entertainment to attack ambulance workers or their vehicles. I trust that the Bill will not be delayed, and that it will go forward quickly so that healthcare workers can be encouraged and motivated in the knowledge that this House supports them in the defence of their principles and their safety.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party supports the Bill, just as other Members and parties have done. However, it is important that Members see the motion in its proper context and recognise that it is a limited element in addressing the broader problem: the threats to health workers across the spectrum and in a range of locations.

Obviously, the Minister is restricted today by the terms of the Bill that was drafted in Westminster and is up for discussion there. As an Assembly we have a much broader agenda, and it is important that we recognise that the terms of this piece of legislation are relatively restricted.

First of all, it deals effectively with non-criminal behaviour. While causing a disturbance or nuisance in hospital will not be a criminal offence, refusal to leave under direction will be. In that sense the Bill parallels a lot of the antisocial behaviour legislation that has been passed in the United Kingdom in recent years.

Like other Members I have concerns over gaps in the legislation. There are major problems with attacks on healthcare workers outside formal health-sector buildings, notably ambulance staff, paramedics, and doctors on call. There is also a parallel with other public-sector workers — for example, those who work for the Fire and Rescue Service. When criminal offences are committed against those who are doing an important job for the public good of society, it is important that those offences be treated as aggravated offences, subject to stiffer sentences when the culprits are caught and brought to justice through the courts. That type of approach would recognise the serious nature of those offences, in that they are not just offences against the individuals who carry out the work, but a threat to the public safety and all of society.

Healthcare workers, like Fire and Rescue Service workers, must feel confident going into situations where they are required to give assistance to people who are suffering and in need of urgent medical, or other, assistance. That needs to be addressed through legislation in this Assembly, because the UK legislation is not sufficiently broad. I am puzzled as to why that type of legislation is not being put forward on a UK-wide basis, but, as it is not, it is incumbent upon this

Assembly to take action, because the community at large feels very strongly about this issue.

Another gap in the legislation is the issue of potential patients themselves causing problems. The Minister has referred to that. There is a need to ensure that people who are in need of medical assistance receive it, but we must be equally conscious that a lot of the problems of nuisance and disturbance come from patients, or potential patients. I have in mind the situation on a Friday or Saturday night when a lot of accident and emergency facilities are attended by people who are under the influence of drink and drugs. That has sometimes caused major difficulties. We must take that kind of scenario into account and provide the necessary protection for the staff, who are doing an important job. Other people using the facilities are also under threat, and it is important that we consider all of society in the legislation.

Recognising that we can only do what is contained within the UK Bill at this stage, the Alliance Party is happy to go along with the motion today, while urging the Minister to take broader action to address the wider range of concerns.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Mr A Maginness: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the Minister's proposal. It is both balanced and reasonable, and should have the support of all Members of the Assembly.

As Dr Farry pointed out, we are dealing with non-criminal behaviour that manifests itself in low-level nuisance and misbehaviour. This provision is very limited, but nonetheless to be welcomed by nursing staff and anyone engaged with working in a hospital setting. I note that the Bill is confined to hospital buildings, which is perfectly reasonable in the circumstances that the Minister has highlighted.

In a professional, legal capacity I have come across many instances of misbehaviour by patients — and non-patients — in hospital buildings.

It is a disturbing trend in the Health Service, and it must be addressed at a broader level by the House.

1.00 pm

In a sense, the Minister is using a mechanism to deal with this type of mischief, to remedy it and to give the power of removal to hospital authorities. However, it falls short of what is necessary in a broad range of misbehaviours that affect Health Service staff across many disciplines.

Justice and policing powers have not been devolved to the Assembly and, if nothing else, this provision highlights that gap. The sooner policing and justice powers are devolved to the Assembly, the sooner we can address the wide range of outstanding issues that

affect our constituents, whether they are workers or people using hospital services. People in our society are very concerned about nuisance or disturbances in Health Services premises.

I am sure that the Minister feels frustrated about not being able to address those issues today. The sooner policing and justice powers are devolved, the sooner we can address them.

I appeal to all Members of the House to work constructively towards an early return of policing and justice powers to the House. My party supports the Minister's proposition.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate. It should be seen as part of an ongoing strategy for zero tolerance in dealing with verbal and physical attacks and assaults on health and social services staff, not only in hospitals but wider afield.

Several measures have already been implemented, including the setting up of a zero-tolerance strategic group and a publicity campaign. Every trust is required to have policies in place to deal with violence against staff. We have used advertising posters and have carried out a leafleting campaign. Over 10,000 personal alarms have been issued, a pilot scheme in the accident and emergency department of the Belfast City Hospital is operating in conjunction with the police, and a senior director in each trust has explicit responsibility for staff safety. We can take those steps thanks to the opportunity afforded by the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill.

The next stage is proposals for new legislation that will make it a specific offence to assault any member of the healthcare profession while he or she is on duty, and we are working on those. Those measures will be specific to individuals and employees, but not to premises.

I take Mrs Robinson's point about low-level nuisance leading to higher levels of nuisance activity. However, specific guidance will be issued next year as part of the process, so that it will be clear whom hospital authorities are entitled to evict from Health Service premises and whom they are not. Anyone attending hospital for medical treatment — patients or others on the premises to obtain medical advice or treatment of care — will be exempt from eviction, because of the point made by Mrs Robinson, and the point made by Ms Ni Chuilín about the right to healthcare treatment. That is part of the thinking behind the measures. Those rights will not be impeded because of a particular medical condition, which may cause an individual to appear to act as a nuisance, but whose behavior is indicative of a deeper medical complaint that requires treatment.

That is part of a process and strategy that we will continue to pursue because the number of assaults is rising. In 2006-07, there were just over 6,000 assaults, and that is completely unacceptable.

Sadly, it is necessary to bring forward such legislation to deal with something that should be a given in society: that we look after those who care for us. However, we must do so. It is not a minimal response, but, it is, as Mr Maginness described it, a reasonable one, and it is part of a general strategy to deal with the unacceptable level of violence that is directed towards staff. Therefore, I ask all Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill dealing with nuisance or disturbance on Health and Social Services premises which are contained in clause 107 of, and schedule 18 to, that Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ad Hoc Committee: draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

Motion made:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 48(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the proposal for a draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, referred by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 4 February 2008.

Composition:

| | |
|-----------|---|
| DUP | 3 |
| Sinn Féin | 3 |
| UUP | 2 |
| SDLP | 2 |
| Alliance | 1 |

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

[Mr McNarry]

[Mr Burns]

PRIVATE MEMBER'S BUSINESS

Health Service Reform

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 a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Mrs I Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward a health and social services reform Bill, as a matter of urgency, for consideration by the Assembly.

I am delighted to propose the motion. The DUP cares passionately about the Health Service, as, I hope, do the other parties in the House. There was consultation on the draft Health and Social Services (Reform) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 from January to April 2007, and, until 8 May, its proposals were widely supported.

In recent times, there has been much discussion about the Budget allocation for health and whether, in respect of its share of overall resources, half the cake is sufficient. I am somewhat alarmed by the impression created by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's commitment to reaching his Department's efficiency targets. I hope and trust that those targets will be reached and that the efficiency savings, which are important, will result in an improved Health Service.

In the Democratic Unionist Party, we mean much more when we speak of efficiencies. Merely meeting efficiency targets may get us through the next couple of years; however, the position of the Health Service will be no better in three years' time, come the next comprehensive spending review, when the massive proportion of the block grant sought by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will have rocketed even further. That is why fundamental change to the operation of the Province's Health Service is essential.

This is not about point scoring; it is about getting the best Health Service for the moneys that are put in. We cannot afford to keep plugging away with the same old methods, content that health will receive double-digit increases in Budget after Budget. We cannot have half the cake now, Minister McGimpsey, and two thirds of it in the future.

Overhauling the way in which we commission services is vital. Key to the reforms is the replacement of the four existing health boards with a single authority, and the establishment of locally based commissioning groups comprising general practitioners and other local health professionals.

The formation of the single health authority is much more than a simple matter of rationalisation. The most

important consequences of that will concern performance management and the financial management of health services across the Province. Until the authority is in place, we will underachieve; we will not realise the maximum outcomes for the resources that we invest.

The Minister says that he does not want to rush; he wants to consult with stakeholders. Perhaps he should consult his own party and Assembly group. The Minister's party was most vociferous in support of reforms — it was certainly supportive of such reforms until 8 May 2007, when the Minister took office.

In 2005, when the further consultation document on the review of public administration (RPA) suggested backtracking from a single authority, the Minister's party leader, Reg Empey, in that party's submission, was quite adamant in stating:

"We view the current proposals as a recipe to continue the existence of the current health boards without an improvement in service. The Ulster Unionist Party has proposed the formation of a single Hospital Authority at the regional level with the creation of primary health care groups... we cannot agree to the current proposals as we view them as a retrograde step which, if implemented, would stymie the development of a... health service for the 21st century."

Less than one year ago, his party's health spokesperson, Robert Coulter, said:

"The failure to create a single Northern Ireland hospitals' authority is one of many glaring missed opportunities in the RPA model." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 21, p63, col 1*].

However, on 15 November, on 'Hearts and Minds', UUP Health Committee member John McCallister described his party spokesman's cherished single health authority as the "mother of all quangos".

Why the sudden change in opinion since the Minister came into office? Where do other members of the Ulster Unionist Party stand? Are they with their party leader and their party spokesman, or are they with Michael McGimpsey?

No doubt, the Minister will continue to prevaricate, and claim that he needs more time. However, few people in Northern Ireland buy his excuses. The reforms have already been the subject of consultation twice. Too much time has already been lost. The current health structures have been in place for 35 years, yet, bizarrely, the Minister has argued that that is all the more reason to take his time.

Undoubtedly, some people are resistant to change. The House can only hope that the Minister is not one of them. Northern Ireland cannot afford a Health Service that operates in that way and is still in the mindset of the early 1970s.

We must increase productivity, because it is 11% worse than that in England. Doctors, nurses and all the other front line staff work tirelessly. There is little more scope to increase the work that they do. They are not working 11% less hard than their colleagues in England.

I have no doubt that even to suggest that would make them fairly angry. Therefore, the problem must be the way in which the system works. A new system of commissioning is needed, with incentives to increase performance. Health professionals view the Minister's delay as a blow to the completion of the reform that has been ongoing for more than five years.

There are now only five trusts. I welcome that reduction, with the proviso that commissioning structures should be put in place to reflect the needs of patients in a bottom-up — rather than a top-down — manner.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is the largest such body in the United Kingdom, and one of the largest in Europe, with 22,000 staff. It spends £3 million every day. An organisation that large makes the establishment of a regional authority a necessity.

1.15 pm

One of the targets in the draft Programme for Government is to reduce by 50% the number of unplanned hospital admissions by 2011. That can be achieved only by investing in better care in the community, primary-care intervention and self-care. Commissioning bodies should be facilitators in this, comprising GPs, dentists, pharmacists, optometrists, lay people, allied health professionals and nurses, all working together to commission services for patients in their areas of expertise.

The single health authority was to be the commissioning organiser, maintaining the local care groups and commissioning regional services — a single bureaucracy that would support local groups and reduce duplication. Its performance-management role would be the key to holding local commissioning groups and trusts to account — something previously sadly lacking in the National Health Service in Northern Ireland. Doctors and nurses are constantly being quality-assessed for their competence to practice. However, nothing ever seemed to be in place to sufficiently assess management structures.

Many staff nearing retirement saw the overhaul of structures as a chance to plan for early retirement, allowing flexibility in the service in order to keep the number of compulsory redundancies to a minimum. Some have already gone, but others are now being told that the change has been delayed for at least one year. That is not the greatest morale-booster.

People in the boards are working in stressful conditions, and vacancies are not being filled. That could be forgiven with the April 2008 deadline fast approaching and a target to work towards. What impact will the delay until at least 2009 have on the vacancy controls? What reforms will be implemented to ensure that there are few compulsory redundancies?

There was a lot of scepticism in the medical profession about these reforms, and it took a long time to bring

them on board, particularly the doctors. The delay is a major let-down; one needs only to read this morning's newspapers to see that. The legislative process must commence. Members do not necessarily have to agree on everything at this stage — it is unlikely that we will — but let us get the process moving by introducing the Bill and having the debates. The Minister wants to talk to stakeholders — let us use the time now to do that. The Minister should not waste valuable months, and maybe even years, consulting before finally introducing a Bill, only for Members to have to go away and consult again.

The UUP tabled a motion criticising the legislation that is passing before this House. There is no reason not to have a health reform Bill. The excuses for delay from the half-the-cake Minister are, unfortunately, only half-baked.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion, and I agree with most of the comments made by Mrs Robinson regarding fundamental change in the Health Service's being essential. It is important to get the best service with the resources that we have.

The review of public administration has been ongoing since 2002, when the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) launched the initial consultation on its terms of reference. The premise of the review was to reduce bureaucracy, create savings and restructure the public sector. Regarding the changes to the Health Service, five new health trusts have already been created, which is a welcome reduction from the overburdened 18 health trusts. However, in order to complement those changes, we need the introduction of the health and social care authority, the establishment of local commissioning groups, and the one-patient client council.

The main driver for change in what was to be the new healthcare environment was to be a revolution in commissioning. The introduction of those structures is vital to counterbalance the powers of the newly established trusts. We now find ourselves in limbo in that regard.

The Minister has stated that he wants to take his time to fully consider the impact of pushing forward with those changes, and that he wants to get the changes right. I agree with him in that respect — they must be right; we do not want to see change for the sake of change, with no benefit to the Health Service. However, a prioritisation of those issues by the Minister is required.

The failure to push on with change is leaving the Health Service in disarray. Morale in the Health Service is low, and many rumours are circulating regarding what is happening to people's jobs, to commissioning powers, and regarding the retention and recruitment of staff.

That is all detrimental to good working environments. It would be remiss of Members, as elected representatives,

to ignore the comments of health professionals who are directly involved and who are concerned at the decision being deferred for at least a year.

I have been lobbied by GPs who have been appointed to local commissioning groups. One GP described the current situation as a hiatus in the development of those groups. GPs say that the groups sit monthly and are wasting public money: they are starting to become disheartened and feel like withdrawing from the groups, as they do not want to support a sham. Apparently, the local commissioning groups nominally share responsibilities for decisions on commissioning that are actually made by the boards.

From those comments, it is clear that the support gained from doctors and other health professionals over the past 18 months, and the impetus in taking forward the proposed RPA changes, are in danger of being lost. Further delay in RPA reforms will impact negatively on the savings that they are designed to achieve.

It has been suggested that some services are already being removed or withheld; for example, according to one trust area, cognitive behavioural therapy has been suspended due to the present uncertainty. I am sure that the Minister will agree that that is not in keeping with his commitment to make mental-health services a priority.

The current situation is frustrating and confusing for all involved. I know that the Minister must take difficult decisions, but I urge him to take them as a priority. We want a Health Service that caters for the needs of all and that is efficient and accountable for the benefit of all the people of the North. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am glad that the motion has been tabled. Anyone looking at the monolith of the Health Service will agree that reform is necessary. I am glad that the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who tabled the motion, has noticed that the Ulster Unionist Party has called for this kind of reform for quite some time.

My question is: what kind of single health authority do we want? The proposal is for a health and social services authority that will replace the four health boards. Such an organisation has been asked for, through legislation, for some time. It would have an annual budget of £140 million and 1,800 staff. Members should look at that proposal and see it for what it is: a glorified quango. I am sure that those who propose the motion do not wish to advance "quangoland" in Northern Ireland any further. We have far too many quangos, and we do not want a super-quango that will drain £140 million from the health budget every year and carry a burden of 1,800 staff.

The Royal College of Nursing has supported the Minister's stance and believes that the direct rule proposals now being adopted by the DUP are flawed because they fail to provide for accountability. The

health and social services super-quango is to have 11 senior executives on salaries that will be well in excess of £100,000. The monstrous and unaccountable health and social services authority was the creature of direct rule Ministers. Why is the DUP adopting this further drain on the Health Service budget?

The recent draft Programme for Government made us all sit up and ask where we had heard it all before. An Ulster Unionist Minister is crying for more money for the Health Service; but what was presented as new was an amalgam of Bills generated by the Civil Service machine under direct rule Ministers and rehashed and represented to us.

In other spheres, a sensible solution would be called for. The one thing that I am afraid of is that, under political pressure, and because he belongs to one particular party, the Health Minister would bring forward something not carefully thought through.

I think back many years, to the time when we looked for a new hospital in Ballymena. Under political pressure, the location of the new hospital was changed from Ballymena and it was built in Antrim. We were told that that was the right hospital in the right place. Looking back over the past few years, some may have commented that it would have been better had time been taken to think the project through properly, in which case the hospital would not have been located in Antrim, but in or near Ballymena, where it would have better served the area to the north-east of our Province.

The trade union UNISON has said that that model, which some are attempting to rush through the Assembly, was in direct contradiction to the structures-and-reform model that was developed locally in the Hayes Report, and the RPA process. UNISON went further, and stated that the draft Order was established without specific consultation or an equality assessment, and replicated the dysfunctional elements of English Health Service delivery, including the purchaser/provider split, and the retention of the trust model.

Unionists correctly said that they believed that legislation should be drafted in response to the consultation and introduced as an Act of the Assembly for consideration in the Chamber, and by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as per the normal legislative process.

The Health Service is not a toy to be played with among political parties; it is for the patients, whom we should put first, rather than our political ideals.

Mrs Hanna: I had tabled an amendment to the motion, and I am sorry that it was not accepted. I am not sure why that was, because a much more constructive debate is necessary.

I do not believe that there is any Member — not the Minister, the Chairperson, or any members of the

Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety — who does not subscribe to the idea of radical reform of health and personal social services.

First, I shall deal with the proposal for a single health authority. In common with other Members, I have some reservations and concerns about delays, the detrimental impact on staff morale, and the potential loss of savings. The new health and social care authority must commission services on a regional basis. Unfortunately, five minutes does not give me time to go into the other recommendations, but they are equally important.

Thanks to the findings of the Appleby Report and the Wanless Report, it has been well established that the Northern Ireland health spend is higher than in GB, although the differential is eroding. Professor Appleby also makes it clear that the differential for Northern Ireland's needs — on indicators agreed in the Department of Finance and Personnel — has increased from 7% to 14%, and that the funding gap based on need rather than raw population is thought to be around £300 million. By 2011, that gap will increase to £600 million.

Those realities must be recognised by the Assembly. That funding shortfall will not go away. Despite bickering among Members and parties, the shortfall remains, and if we are serious about looking after the health of the people of Northern Ireland, we must decide how we will address that. There are things that we can do: we can encourage people to take responsibility for their own health; we can examine the issue of repeat prescriptions; and we can educate doctors to save money by prescribing generic drugs and reducing prescriptions.

Members will know that 70% of the health spend goes on staff pay, and through the RPA, we are considering a reduction in staff, partly through wastage, and through the reduction of bureaucracy and administrative duplication. The Bamford Review has made a strong economic case based on early intervention and increased action to promote good mental and physical health, particularly through early intervention, parenting and early-years support.

1.30 pm

The National Health Service celebrates its sixtieth anniversary in July 2008. Its founder, Aneurin Bevan, described it as “pure socialism”. I prefer to say that the most socialist initiative that a democratic Government ever took is also the most politically popular. It is the hallmark of a decent society that it has an excellent and equitable healthcare system. The founding principle of the National Health Service was that it must be free at the point of need, even though healthcare demands are unimaginably different and complex compared with anything that was envisaged 60 years ago.

There must be greater efficiency, effectiveness, innovation and value for money in the deployment of healthcare, and the SDLP fully backs those demands. My party accepts that the growth of a dynamic and innovative economy is a priority. However, it must also be accepted that to have a physically and mentally healthy population is the best investment than can be made in any society. People are society's biggest asset. The 10% productivity gap between Northern Ireland and GB in the delivery of health services can and must be closed.

Dr Farry: Like other parties, the Alliance Party supports the motion. However, Members must recognise that the motion has been tabled in the wider context of a row between the DUP and the Ulster Unionists over the health budget.

Members must also be conscious that Health Service reform is not, by any means, the only area in which the Executive have been dragging their feet with the review of public administration. The feet-dragging that has occurred over the health and social care authority runs parallel to that which the Minister of Education and her Department have been doing over the education and skills authority. Therefore, rather than focus on the failure of one particular Minister, Members must recognise that there has been broader failure in the Executive to deal with the difficult choices that must be made in governing Northern Ireland.

Members must also be conscious that there is now a democratically elected Assembly for Northern Ireland. With it, the context changes radically. It leads much more easily to the creation of Northern Ireland-wide single authorities to deliver the outcomes of policy decisions that are taken by Ministers and MLAs. There is a strong case for having a single health and social care authority for Northern Ireland, which has a population of 1·8 million people. A health authority for that size of population is not unusual in many other regions on these islands.

Many Members are conscious of inconsistencies in the health and social care that is offered across Northern Ireland. Although that is a matter for the trusts, boards, or whoever their successors are, a single health authority for Northern Ireland can only assist in the process to establish consistency in the service across Northern Ireland.

Budgetary considerations for a single health authority are also relevant to the debate. Members must be conscious of the fact that the health sector is under tremendous funding pressures. For example, Northern Ireland has enhanced need per capita compared with elsewhere on these islands; a greater number of the population is in worse health; drugs are becoming more expensive; the cost of healthcare technology is rising; and people are living longer, which, although that is to be welcomed, creates its own financial pressures.

Northern Ireland also has growing demand for measures such as free personal care for the elderly — a matter that is close to the heart of my colleague from Strangford, Mr McCarthy. It is important that such issues are put on the agenda. At present, Northern Ireland suffers from the opportunity costs of not dealing with fundamental reform in the health system.

My party has considerable sympathy with the Minister's call for more funds. Despite the fact that the health sector gets the lion's share of funds, enhanced need in Northern Ireland means that it is falling behind the rate of growth in the rest of the UK. The Assembly must reflect on and tackle those statistics.

Mr Easton: Does the Member accept that the health sector gets 51% of all new moneys?

Dr Farry: I fully accept that point. Equally, that amount of money is not sufficient to meet the gap between health funding in Northern Ireland and that in the rest of the UK.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member accept that it is immoral to do the same thing, over and over again? Moreover, if there are efficiency savings to be made — and increased productivity — that allow moneys to be released, that should be done. We should not continue to do the same old thing, time and time again. The Appleby Report highlighted the fact that there are efficiencies to be made. Surely major efficiencies can be made, even by simply establishing a single authority?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute for taking two interventions.

Dr Farry: I do not agree with the honourable lady that it is immoral. Nevertheless, I agree with the remainder of her point. We cannot stick with the status quo; we must have change in Northern Ireland. By the same token, there are areas of the health sector that require urgent investment. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to his credit, set out a comprehensive list of bids under the comprehensive spending review. Virtually none of those bids was met.

There are matters that the Assembly has endorsed — for example: free personal care for the elderly; free prescriptions; increased funding for mental health; and the recommendations of the Bamford Review. We are losing out on those issues, because we have not addressed the reforms. However, we still need an uplift in the health budget to meet those additional costs, something that we cannot even remotely consider at present.

Although the honourable lady is correct in saying that we must have greater reforms in the Health Service and greater efficiencies, the Minister is equally right in saying that we are losing out on money and that the funding gap with the rest of the UK is getting wider and wider. It is important that we do not polarise the debate and that we recognise that we need to move

forward on both those strands in order to provide a Health Service that is fit for purpose.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member accept that £2 billion was provided for the health budget in 2000-01? In 2007-08, £4 billion will be provided for the health budget. Will he agree that we have seen double the benefits to the Health Service because of the doubling of that budget?

Dr Farry: The Member is correct about the figures. Health budgets across the UK have risen at the same rate. Northern Ireland is no different to any other part of the UK. We need to find greater efficiencies and to release that money to reinvest in other facilities.

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

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Easton: The people of Northern Ireland had every reason to expect that the establishment of devolved Government at Stormont would deliver a more efficient and better Health Service for Northern Ireland. We have had 40 years of terrorism and civil upheaval that has left us with an infrastructure that needs to be renewed. We are left with an economy that has suffered greatly as our traditional industries have declined. We have had years of direct rule by Ministers who have not faced up to their responsibilities as they might have done. We have had four decades of wasted opportunity, economic inertia and instability.

We have seen many plans, investigations and reviews set in motion. However, the truth is that we have seen a great deal of prevarication, with important and critical decisions being deferred to another day in the hope that the problems would go away or be dealt with by someone else. It is now time to deal with the problems and to stop waiting for other people to solve them. It is time to get to work to build the better Northern Ireland that we promised our constituents when we sought election to the Assembly.

When it comes to dividing and apportioning financial resources to the Departments, we know that those resources are limited. The cake that is to be divided out is a certain size, and no amount of discussion will avoid the necessity of taking hard decisions. The only way in which to increase the size of the cake is to grow a dynamic, innovative economy. In that endeavour, we need to examine every aspect of the way in which we do things to ensure that, in every area of public life, we are making the best of our resources.

We need to ensure that, in every division of our economy, we have highly efficient and effective public services that deliver value for every pound that is spent and that make the best use of the revenue provided, and of our existing assets. We must all accept that collective decisions will be made that challenge individual Ministers

and Departments. It is vital to ensure that pressures are placed equally on all Departments and that they all accept that they have a responsibility to work for the common good.

There is a responsibility on all Ministers to ensure that their Departments are challenged and stretched to make their part of the overall organisation more streamlined, more effective and less expensive. The fact that something is better does not always mean that it has to cost more money. We must examine every aspect of our endeavours to ensure that they are the best that they can be.

The health budget of £3.8 billion represents 48% of the entire block grant for the Province. Indications are that, in the next three years, health and social services will receive 51% of all new moneys. We spend more per capita of the population on health than the rest of the United Kingdom, yet our output is much poorer. I have worked most of my adult life in the Health Service, and my experience has given me a belief that as much money as possible should be spent on the people who need help and on those who are in the front line in providing that help.

We must do away with expensive quangos. We need centres of excellence and increased productivity. We need to make massive efficiencies in the cost of drugs. We must look particularly at the level of staff in administrative areas of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), and there must be joined-up practice across the various trusts.

The levels of sickness and the cause of low morale among staff must be examined. Outpatient waiting lists must be reduced, and there should be charges for those who miss appointments without offering a reason or any notice of their intentions. Salaries and wages must be considered, and an equitable system developed in which nurses, in particular, receive a fair wage. We must also consider closely those who earn large salaries, including doctors, to ensure that there is fair distribution all round.

We desperately need to reduce waste and bureaucracy. Those who work in DHSSPS know that those changes are necessary. Above all, the four health boards must be replaced by one streamlined cost-effective authority that could establish locally based commissioning and enhanced responses to local needs.

The UUP's response to the RPA consultation in February 2004 said that Northern Ireland has the most over-administered Health Service in the United Kingdom. In 2005, when it seemed as though Professor Appleby was less than enthusiastic, Sir Reg Empey reminded us that:

"The Ulster Unionist Party has proposed the formation of a single authority at the regional level with the creation of primary health care groups."

The Ulster Unionist Party's 2005 manifesto said that:

"...there's too much bureaucracy and too little flexibility."

"To reduce bureaucracy

We would replace Northern Ireland's 4 health boards with 1 health authority."

That reflected the 2001 manifesto, in which it was said that co-operatives, with control of their own budgets, should be formed to deliver primary care locally, and that acute care should be managed through a single Northern Ireland authority.

Why then has the Minister refused to act on the advice and intentions of his own party and its manifesto? It is time for the Minister to get on with his job and stop his whinging —

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

Mr Easton: — and provide a better Health Service for the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On 9 October of this year, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety announced that the structures for health and social care trusts and the Ambulance Service would not change until April 2009. The reasons given were the need to ensure that we get it right, and, in particular, to ensure that any new structures and changes will deliver the best outcome for people — and, above all else, meet local needs.

I doubt that any Member would argue against that. We all want to ensure that any change will result in better outcomes for staff, patients and carers. We are all committed to reforming and improving services for people who seek health, some of whom are among the most vulnerable in our society.

Improving services for staff, patients and carers is a priority for everyone, and the need to augment the outdated structures and services that should be germane to achieving effectiveness and raising public confidence in our health and social care system is now a matter of concern.

That having been said, the rationale behind the motion is about having the drive and the ability to see those changes through and to end the uncertainty that has become prevalent throughout the health and social care system.

Most, if not all, of us have been recipients of health and social care to some degree or another. We all expect that care to be effective, and we expect delivery. However, the delay in establishing a single healthcare authority has unsettled many in our health and social care system.

Let us reflect on some of the main themes of the proposed restructuring. The first is a new health and social care authority to replace the existing four health and social services boards. The second is to establish seven primary-care-led commissioning groups in the local authority, which will involve local health and

social care professionals. It will also involve lay representatives in planning services at community level and in partnership with communities. The third is the abolition of certain agencies and the transfer of their functions, staff, assets and liabilities to other health and social care bodies.

1.45 pm

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has met, and will continue to meet, staff-side representatives from the unions and some of the colleges. There are concerns about the length of time in which reforms were to occur. People in the system are fatigued, and burnt-out by reviews and the prospect of more of the same. That has had an impact on Health Service staff. Despite that, they have continued to provide services and care with compassion and professionalism of the highest standard.

The motion calls for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a health and social services reform Bill as a matter of urgency. He should also try to ensure that reform takes place. We must make sure that the issue is not ducked. Local communities must be able to play a meaningful role, such as taking part in local commissioning groups. Some of those groups have argued that they have been considered as add-ons, rather than being integral to the health agenda.

We must all acknowledge and embrace the challenges that reform will bring. The review of public administration, the Executive's Agenda for Change strategy and the need for better investment in mental-health services must be time-bound, and our approach must be based on the realisation that our Health Service is 35 years old and is becoming archaic. The Assembly must see movement; otherwise, the anticipated savings that can be accrued from reform will begin to dwindle. We will also lose experienced and highly-trained staff, which will have a long-term impact on the health system.

I support the motion on the basis that if a health and social services reform Bill is introduced, we can scrutinise it line-by-line, and end the wait for overdue reform, restructuring and implementation. As elected representatives mandated by the people, we all agree that the lack of investment under direct rule has had an impact. We have a responsibility to bring about changes that ensure equality for all citizens, regardless of post-code. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate, and I congratulate my colleagues on securing the debate on such an important issue. We have clearly shown how we all support the guiding principles of the National Health Service, how each and every one of us wants to see a better Health Service for all of the people of Northern Ireland, and how we all admire the dedication to duty of our health professionals.

Earlier, we heard about some of the physical dangers that they have to face in the line of their duty. Yet, all of their efforts are being hampered by systemic problems that stifle the NHS in Northern Ireland. We have already heard from the Chairperson of the Health Committee how spending on health and social care in Northern Ireland will more than double from £2 billion in 2001 to over £4 billion in the current Budget period. However, nobody could say that productivity in the Health Service in Northern Ireland has doubled over that period, proving the point made in the Appleby Report that it is the use of resources rather than the amount of those resources that is important.

It is worth reminding the House of some of the grave inefficiencies in the Health Service in Northern Ireland that were highlighted by Professor John Appleby during the course of his work. He found that the unit cost of hospital procedures, hospital throughput, consultant productivity, the average length of stay in hospital and spending per head on prescriptions were all significantly worse in Northern Ireland than in England. Even if we were as efficient as England — hardly a model of efficiency in health provision itself — immense differences could be achieved. More patients could be seen in less time, and massive savings could be made for front-line services.

Reform that targets those inefficiencies and improves the way in which the Health Service does its business is long overdue. That is why we all supported the consultation on the draft health and social services (reform) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. One would have thought that this issue would have been at the top of the new Minister's agenda. During a debate last week, the Member for North Down Brian Wilson compared the Health Service in Northern Ireland to an oil tanker. However, if we are to change direction we must start turning the wheel. Since assuming office, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has shown no desire to address seriously the radical reform of Northern Ireland's Health Service that is required. If anything, he has shown himself to be a roadblock to reform.

Instead of tackling the issue head-on, he is heading in the opposite direction. Instead of doing what would receive widespread support in the House and further afield, he has illustrated a desire to head in the opposite direction, exemplified by his freeze on the RPA reforms in health. The creation of a single health authority and local commissioning boards has been widely recognised as being an essential element in a more efficient and effective health service. I only wish that the Minister would show as much passion about tackling inefficiencies in the Health Service as he does about whingeing and crying for more money.

As other Members have said, the Ulster Unionist Party was in favour and supportive of the reforms.

Around a year ago, the UUP's health spokesman, Rev Coulter, said that the failure to create a single authority was one of the many glaring missed opportunities in the restructuring model. One might ask what has happened to the UUP's 2005 election manifesto pledge:

"To reduce bureaucracy

We would replace Northern Ireland's 4 health boards with 1 health authority."

It seems that ditching election manifestos is now at epidemic proportions in the UUP.

There is a consequence for not carrying forward those reforms. Dr Brian Patterson, chairman of the BMA (British Medical Association) Northern Ireland Council, recently said:

"The health boards are required to soldier on for at least another 18 months, but are they fit for purpose? They have lost many core staff to the new trusts or left the Health Service entirely. Those who are left are demoralised and paralysed to an extent by uncertainty."

The BMA's criticism was shown to be spot on when that sense of paralysis and poor morale resulted in the resignation of David Sissling as chief executive designate of the HSSA (Health and Social Services Authority). A man whose capture was a coup for Northern Ireland has been lost to our Health Service, and our patients and health professionals will prove to be losers for that.

As if demoralisation and paralysis were not bad enough, the state of stasis comes at a cost. Key management staff that have been appointed to the HSSA at an estimated cost of £500,000 are still in post. Rather than costing money to create the HSSA, it is costing much more not to go ahead with it. Foot-dragging is costing us a fortune. I urge the Minister to listen to what has been said in the Chamber today and to listen to people in the Health Service, and health professionals in bodies such as the BMA, who are urging him to move forward and get on with his job and do what he knows he has to do.

Mr McCallister: Some strange and bizarre claims have been made today. Since Mr Hamilton is so good with election manifestos, will he consider reading his own party's manifesto, as well as ours? The DUP's 2005 manifesto states:

"Northern Ireland has suffered from relative underfunding for decades. More than 20% extra spending per capita on health care is required to achieve the same level of service as England."

It is strange that the DUP has made such a turnaround. The DUP's 2007 manifesto states that:

"the Health Service in Northern Ireland has suffered from long-term under-funding relative to the rest of the UK."

The problem with the DUP's finance and personnel spokesman, Mr Hamilton, contributing to the debate on health is that he is fixated with the money; that aspect is all that he knows. It is strange that in the House of Commons on 5 April 2005, a month before

the general election, Mrs Robinson criticised the direct rule health budget increase of 9% as insufficient. Why is a 1·2% increase sufficient now?

Mr Hamilton: Does the Member accept that the allocation in the draft Budget to health includes not only that increase, but much, much more for health?

Mr McCallister: The increase will give the Minister of Health £16 million to develop new activities in the Health Service this year. Mrs Robinson quoted some figures on how much the Health Service spends each day and mentioned the Belfast trust; £16 million would not run the Health Service for two days.

Mr Easton keeps bringing up the old chestnut that 48% of the draft Budget is to go on health provision. However, the Department's portfolio covers health, social services and public safety — everything from doctors and nurses to the Fire and Rescue Service.

Mrs I Robinson: It was £2 billion before that.

Mr McCallister: You are on record as saying that that is not enough.

Mrs I Robinson: And it is £4 billion now.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCallister: The DUP has clearly distinguished between direct rule Ministers' policies, which it criticised, and those of the proposed strategic health and social services authority. Its proposals differ little from those advocated under direct rule. However, the DUP suddenly wants to run with the direct rule Ministers' proposals. Even Mr Hamilton said in his contribution that England was not a great model of financial efficiency to follow, so why does he wish to impose the same system here?

The Labour Government in Britain have increased bureaucracy in the NHS enormously. In England, the average number of managers grew from 21,400 in 1997 to 30,900 in 2002. Central-function staff numbers there have increased from just under 61,000 to more than 72,000 in the same period. Most of the extra money that the Government have pumped into the NHS — money that is in no way matched in Northern Ireland — has gone on bureaucracy, consultants and administration. Experts consider —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I will, if the Member is quick.

Mrs I Robinson: I may have misunderstood the Member, but does he suggest that to pump more money into additional staff and management is the right direction in which to go?

Mr Speaker: The Member, because he has taken two interventions, may speak for an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I propose that we get the model right, because there is no point in our jumping headlong into something. As Dr Coulter has pointed out, it has already cost £140 million to create the strategic health and social services authority.

Mrs I Robinson: You supported the —

Mr McCallister: Your party supported a 20% rise in its 2005 election manifesto, but it does not —
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCallister: The Member's party supported a 20% rise in its 2005 election manifesto, but it does not seem to trouble her much to go back on that promise.

The way in which to handle the situation is to establish a plan for where our Health Service is headed. Everyone agrees that it needs to be reformed, and everyone agrees that that reform project is huge. I have every confidence that the Minister will deliver on a reform agenda. I know that the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety likes to engage in party political point scoring, but there is too big a job at hand for her to be doing that. The Committee should be working with —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I have already given way to Mrs Robinson once, Mr Speaker. She is not as generous with her time when she is speaking.

Mrs I Robinson: Nobody asked me to give way.

Mr McCallister: Basil McCrea asked you to give way, and you refused.

We must get Health Service reform right. The Minister is right to take his time and consult with people so that we might get the model that we want. Our view of healthcare is very different from that of the DUP. Mrs Robinson may think that the best way in which to deliver healthcare is to have one hospital in Belfast and have everyone drive to it —

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

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome this important debate on the reform of the Health Service. We must not allow political point scoring to distract us from that debate, because, as elected representatives, we are all aware of the demands that are placed on the Health Service, day and daily. We are also aware of the support that the Health Service needs in order for it to deliver.

I wish to state an important fact about need. The Appleby Report pointed out that, although a differential did exist between here and GB, based on need, of 7%, that differential has now risen to 14%. That is an inescapable fact whether it occurs in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department

for Social Development, the Department of Finance and Personnel, or wherever.

We all know that health professionals, carers and the service users have highlighted how they find the uncertainty that surrounds proposed Health Service structures confusing and worrying.

We know that some of those problems have been inherited from the period of direct rule, but we know also that, as an Assembly, we must move on and deal with those issues, and establish plans and timetables as quickly as possible.

2.00 pm

Important issues must be tackled, including the future of primary care and mental-health plans, the care of the elderly, and, not least, the morale of health workers. Morale is very low due to growing pressures, and because of delays in implementing the Agenda for Change programme.

I draw Members' attention to the situation in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, where 99% of workers have gone through the job-matching process, yet 32% of them have still not received their pay award. In the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area, 20% of workers have still to receive their pay award, which is backdated to 2003. It is a disgrace that, at Christmas 2007, key workers still have not received their payments.

I share the view that the Health Service is failing to satisfy the public because of some inefficiencies and the seemingly endless bureaucracy that many users encounter. Those matters must be addressed. As the motion states, reform of the Health Service must be "a matter of urgency" for the Assembly.

I wish to turn to PFIs because, as we know, 10 new hospitals are in the pipeline under that process, and some of the tenders are at an advanced stage. The Enniskillen hospital is the pathfinder PFI project, and that is moving forward. We cannot afford to make mistakes, because we have seen them made elsewhere with PFI projects. Currently, there is not a Department-led, coherent approach to the handling of PFI initiatives.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member agree that it would be most unfortunate if members of the Health Committee were to initiate a process in an attempt to stop progress on the hospital for the south-west, which is to be built at Enniskillen?

Mr Gallagher: It would be most unfortunate were anyone to try to delay progress on that hospital. However, in reality, it is too late for delays. Progress is being made, but an inconsistent approach to such big undertakings has been adopted by the Department. That could prove very costly. For example, in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, people and services are included in PFI tenders, and that has led to concerns about jobs

and working conditions. In the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area, there is an entirely different approach whereby people and services are not included in the tenders.

There are important issues in respect of jobs and conditions, and people know what has happened in England, where some PFI projects have been disastrous and where private operators have been able to make savings by cutting design standards and by reducing bed numbers.

All 10 of the new hospitals that are planned under PFI arrangements are crucial. The Department of Health must ensure that all the trusts adopt a common approach in order to avoid the mistakes that have been made elsewhere.

Mr G Robinson: I pay tribute to Health Service staff, who carry out their duties in a professional and diligent way — sometimes at personal risk, as we have heard. Everyone in Northern Ireland should be grateful that such dedicated people work in the NHS.

In the DUP's 2007 manifesto, we committed ourselves to improving the Health Service in the Province. We knew that that would involve tackling the problems of understaffing, trolley waits, health promotion, illness prevention, addressing the needs of our longer-living population, services for the disabled, and, most of all, effective use of the available resources.

The Health Minister seems to be unwilling to accept those aims, despite having almost half of the entire Northern Ireland Budget to spend.

If more money were to be made available to the Minister, which Department does he suggest should take a cut in budget? Every Department faces financial challenges, and all Ministers are addressing problems in prioritising resources. All of them accept that there has to be a greater return for every £1 spent. For health, that will involve looking at innovative ways of carrying out treatments; greatly reducing the number of readmissions; tackling hospital-acquired infections such as MRSA; and adopting a more community-based approach to care.

The best way to start the improvements that we all want in the NHS is by ensuring that there are enough well-trained, highly motivated staff with high morale to carry out patient care. As someone who, from personal experience, understands the need for a motivated workforce, I believe that we must address the current low morale of NHS staff. I am frequently told about that by NHS staff and it must be the starting point for all reforms of health provision.

We acknowledge that all areas of public-sector funding in Northern Ireland have suffered; the Appleby Report confirmed that. Therefore it is essential that every £1 spent on the NHS produces the greatest possible

benefit for the population. One way of achieving that is to move towards a Health Service delivery system that focuses on prevention rather than cure. The Minister should not be afraid of examining models in countries that have preventative rather than curative health service provision models for ideas on how our healthcare model can be reformed and adapted.

I could give the Minister a long list of suggestions, but he may not want to hear them, and I have only a few minutes to speak. I ask him to examine the area of neurology urgently. Northern Ireland has a chronic shortage of neurologists, which needs to be addressed urgently because it affects those with long-term — and lifelong — health requirements who therefore have greater need of medical support and expertise.

I am sure that the Assembly understands that any reforms proposed will be implemented in the mid- to long term. However, it is important that the Assembly hear the Minister's vision for reform urgently. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I congratulate my colleagues on tabling the motion. The issue is close to the hearts of many inside and outside the Chamber who want to hear what will happen to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I contacted the Minister recently about a constituent of mine who suffered what could only be described as a nightmare hospital visit that lasted three days when it should have lasted one. She was left alone and frightened as she awaited treatment. The Minister, in his reply to me, agreed that that was unacceptable.

Many cases have been publicised that detail, in precise and awful terms, the horrible experiences suffered by people due to glaring failures in our Health Service. In my constituency, patients bring blankets with them to keep warm while awaiting their appointments and tests in the outpatients' department of the Ulster Hospital. That cannot be tolerated.

I could tell many such stories; perhaps others could top them. However, no one here is under any illusion about the state of the healthcare system. Our system, despite having a talented workforce, doctors and surgeons, does not, sadly, provide what people need.

Northern Ireland has the largest spend per head on healthcare, yet there are no real dividends from it. No one in the Chamber would argue against the case for reform; however, some will try to distract us from the fact that they are not pulling their weight or doing their job.

The issue is not complex: there must be urgent reform.

The Minister has been given half the money in the draft Budget, and it is the job of the Assembly to hold him accountable for spending it. The 51·5% represents £454 million of new money. A Member earlier mentioned the figure of £16 million: the actual figure is £454 million.

The motion calls for actions instead of mere words, and it reminds the Minister that it is his job to introduce a reform Bill urgently and that it is the job of those elected to the Assembly to consider it. I was brought up on the simple phrase: if you are going to do something, do it right. I understand the Department's desire to introduce a Bill that will change the system and have a positive effect on people's lives.

However, this reform was planned long before devolution day. My colleague Simon Hamilton has already mentioned the fact that the consultation and the start of this planned reform was in place as far back as 2005. At that time, the then, and current, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party stated that he wanted to see change. If he wants to see change, I suggest that now is the time to implement change. Initially, the Ulster Unionist Party fully supported change, yet as soon as a UUP Minister is in place, it is backtracking and saying that more time is needed. If anything, the need for change is even more urgent.

Why is the Bamford Report at number 17 in the Health Service's list of priorities? Mental health is important, and additional moneys have been allocated, but why is the Bamford Report not receiving —

Mr McCallister: Will the Member detail some of the earlier health bids, or will he accept that those earlier bids concerned inescapables, which is why mental-health provision is priority number 17?

Mr Shannon: I am not sure whether I thank the Member for his intervention, but I will respond to his comment. Mental-health provision is not an inescapable. We as a party put in an additional £450 million, and the bids must be addressed by that extra money. Why is that money not being used?

I live in the real world, not in a world of rainbows and pots of gold. I would like to visit a world where time has slowed down and where excessive research is conducted that has no effect on people. There should be no delay; we want Health Service reform straight away.

The British Medical Association has issued warnings and pleas to help the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to realise that this situation cannot continue indefinitely.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that, if the Minister restructured his budget bid more sensibly, he might be able to manage his resources?

Mr Speaker: The Member is allowed an additional minute for taking two interventions.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his constructive comment; he is correct.

Medical professionals are crying out for a change in the system that will enable them to utilise their skills and to do what they long to do — help people. Members

also want to help people. It is the Minister's responsibility to implement change and urgently issue a health and social services reform Bill before the system implodes and all the people of the Province suffer. I urge the Minister to tidy up his house and to put things in order. He must do this in a real-world timescale and not in the twilight zone in which some people seem to live.

Not so long ago, the Ulster Unionist Party was complaining about a lack of legislative movement, only to discover that its own Minister is holding back what could possibly be one of the Province's most important reforms. The situation would be laughable if it did not impact so seriously on the lives of our most vulnerable people. The Minister must introduce a motion for change, because we need reform, not empty words. He has the money — £450 million in additional money — and we ask him to do his job and allow Members to examine the Bill and so do our jobs. This is not a mere matter of numbers and data.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Shannon: It is a matter of real life and death for some people.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I shall do my best to respond to the points that Members have made.

I am very clear about what I want from our health and social care system. It is what everyone wants: the best standard of treatment and care for all, delivered by motivated and highly skilled staff. Since I took up post in May 2007, I have been struck by two things: the dedication and commitment of our healthcare staff; and the vital need to transform the system within which they work.

Five years ago, the review of public administration was hailed as one of the most radical reforms to public services in Northern Ireland in 30 years. The key aim of the RPA was to create a modern, accountable and effective system of public administration that would deliver high-quality public services to our citizens. Local government, education and, of course, healthcare structures were all set to be transformed for the better under the RPA.

Five years later, Members are entitled to ask what has changed. The education system has four education and library boards, with plans to replace them and establish one education authority. Local government still comprises 26 councils, with as yet no apparent agreement on the final number of councils, which is a key feature of the work in which I am engaged.

What about health? The RPA's main proposals for health included: the establishment of a single health authority to replace the four boards and take on some Department and agency functions; a reduction in the number of health trusts; the establishment of one patient and client council to replace the five health and

social care councils, and the creation of seven local commissioning groups tied to the proposed seven local councils, in line with the coterminosity that was regarded as important.

2.15 pm

To date, and in sharp contrast to the lack of progress in other areas, the Department has been pushing ahead with the RPA reforms. In April this year, the number of trusts was reduced from 19 to six: five health and social care trusts and the Ambulance Service. Most staff are now working in the new organisations, and the trusts employ more than 50,000 of the 70,000 people who are employed in the health sector. I have informed staff of my decision that the current trust structures should remain largely as they are.

However, the proposals for the establishment of a huge regional health authority caused me the greatest concern. The authority was to have 1,800 staff, a budget of well over £100 million and was set to become another large quango. As Minister, I want to examine further whether another administrative body, on top of the Department, trusts, and so forth, is required. In addition to the obvious question of the affordability of such a huge organisation, I want to be satisfied that any new structures will deliver my objectives and are robust enough to deal with current demands and future challenges. To do otherwise would be to fail the people of Northern Ireland.

The authority, as proposed under direct rule, would be similar to the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland, which has been the subject of much controversy and criticism due to its lack of accountability. One of the main objectives that the RPA was expected to deliver is democratic accountability, but where is the democratic accountability in an organisation that has no local representation? The direct rule proposal stipulated that the new authority would not have local representation.

Other characteristics of the RPA include community responsiveness, equality, human rights and quality of services. Under the proposals, the current four health boards and four health and social care councils would be replaced by one patient and client council. Where is the accountability? Can one large organisation speak for patients from all over Northern Ireland? Surely it would be better to reinforce and strengthen the existing health boards and councils.

I remain to be convinced that the excellent work being carried out on behalf of patients by the existing health councils would be improved by establishing one large body, and therefore I want to examine that matter further. I was also concerned to hear that several agencies were to be abolished and their functions transferred to the new authority.

I was particularly concerned about the proposal to get rid of the Health Promotion Agency, whose work is the envy of similar agencies across the UK. It works to publicise the main departmental objectives of reducing the misuse of drugs and alcohol and the spread of sexually-transmitted infections. As the Health Service moves towards a focus on prevention, the public-health messages so successfully delivered by the Health Promotion Agency, particularly to young people, have never been more important.

Much has been made of my decision not to plough ahead with the direct rule proposal. Many people have said that the Health Service will suffer and that the waiting lists are already returning to the bad old days of five years ago. That is simply not true. Waiting times for operations and appointments at outpatient clinics have dropped dramatically. People who need surgery no longer wait for years.

Look at the facts: in April 2006, 74,000 patients waited for over 26 weeks for outpatient assessment; today there are none. Some 6,500 patients waited for longer than 26 weeks for surgery; today there are none. Since April this year, the number of people who wait for more than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment has fallen from 22,000 to 5,100, and it continues to fall. The figures speak for themselves. That is a huge achievement and proves that the Health Service is transforming, and staff and patients are reaping the benefits.

There are three key elements of the system that I want to see in place. First, performance management is crucial. The system must ensure the delivery of targets and objectives. Secondly, strong financial management will ensure that we live within our means and get the maximum return on our investment in health and social care. Thirdly, commissioning is crucial. By that I mean the process of planning and resourcing services to ensure that they meet the needs of the population and ensure value for money.

To those functions I have added democratisation — in other words, examining ways in which to give local people and councillors a strong voice in the system. I am exploring the possibilities for enhancing the role of local government in the delivery of health and social care. I am also exploring ways of more collaborative working with district councils to help to address health inequalities. I am talking to as many people as possible, including representatives from trade unions, the British Medical Association and local commissioning groups. Those discussions have been very fruitful and underline the importance of taking the time to get it right.

There are some concerns about the delay, particularly in relation to commissioning. I believe in local commissioning, but I am still considering how many local commissioning groups there should be, what their most effective boundaries should be and their make-up. There are seven local commissioning groups coterminous with seven local councils, but I am unsure whether there will

be seven local councils. I am exploring other options — for example, if there are 11 or 15 local councils, how will that affect the numbers of commissioning groups and their boundaries?

Since April 2007, local commissioning groups have been working with boards to develop care plans and priorities. The chairs of the local commissioning groups have said that they are willing to continue working with me and the boards. They are grateful for the time being given to help them to develop in their roles. I expect reforms to be implemented by April 2009, but that is not the date for reaching my decision: I hope to make an announcement on that soon. As I have already stated, that does not mean that reform grinds to a halt. My Department —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McGimpsey: I will give way in a minute. My Department is leading the way in delivering savings as a result of the review of public administration, with plans to remove almost 1,700 staff and to deliver more than £53 million of savings. Can the same be said of other Departments?

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Minister for giving way. Perhaps he could indicate the time factor involved once he has made his decision on the structures of a single authority. How long will it take for primary legislation to be enacted?

Mr McGimpsey: The decision will be made soon, and I anticipate its implementation by April 2009. We all know the timetabling for legislation: it goes through the Executive, then through the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and then through the Chamber.

I will issue challenging RPA savings targets to each health and social care organisation shortly. I will insist that each body provides me with plans on how savings will be achieved. That will not be easy. It will mean removing one in every four managers, one in every four back-office staff, and 10% of the remaining administrative support staff. Those savings will deliver resources to secure front-line services over the CSR (Comprehensive Spending Review) period and dramatically improve productivity to health, social services and public safety.

Mr Shannon said “we as a party” have given the Health Service £455 million. I thought that it involved more than simply one party. It is interesting that we have a four-party mandatory coalition, yet “we as a party” have given £455 million. Against that, we have £700 million of inescapable costs. *[Interruption.]* Mr Speaker, if I may be allowed to continue. Therefore, on the current account of the Health Service, we are running a proposed deficit of £250 million under the draft Budget.

All the wagging of heads in the world will not change this: there is £700 million of inescapable costs and “we as a party” put in £455 million to cover it. That leaves a gap of £250 million. That is where the importance of CSR comes in, because CSR and the 3% will provide an anticipated £343 million, which leaves us only £97 million for resources. Some £16 million will be made available in year one, and all the talking in the world —

Mrs I Robinson: Nonsense.

Mr McGimpsey: Shouting “nonsense” will not change those figures.

Those savings will deliver resources that secure front-line services over the CSR period and dramatically improve productivity in health and social services. Do not be in any doubt of my desire and commitment to transform our Health Service. I will achieve the necessary efficiency savings and plough them back into front-line services. That will not be easy. I do not have to remind Members that Northern Ireland has greater need and less funding than England. In fact, we are underfunded by £300 million, and that total will double in three years if the draft Budget allocation is agreed. That is not acceptable.

A great deal is being asked of Health Service staff, and they continue to respond to every challenge. I ask them to be patient while I take time to consider the future structures. We have a rare opportunity to make a major alteration to our structures, and that will not happen again for many years. It is vital to get it right and ensure that we have a model that will continue to transform our Health Service and respond to new challenges in the years ahead.

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I received a ruling from the Business Office at 1.45 pm today regarding your decision about my question for oral answer by the Minister for Social Development. You will be pleased, Mr Speaker, to know that I do not intend to attempt to question your ruling. However my understanding from the Business Office is that the Department knew about my question’s being on the Notice Paper on 21 November, and the court case took place last Friday, yet I was not informed that the question was being withdrawn until 1.45 pm today. Mr Speaker, can you establish for me when the Department was aware that there would be a likelihood of my question’s being invalid, and why I was not informed at that time?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I am happy to come back with a full response to the Member at a later sitting.

As we are approaching Question Time, I suggest that the Assembly takes its ease until 2.30 pm. This debate will resume at 4.00 pm, when Mr Thomas Buchanan will make his winding-up speech on the motion.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Satellite Cancer Unit: Altnagelvin Area Hospital

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the provision of a satellite cancer unit to be located in Altnagelvin Area Hospital, which would serve the population of the North West. (AQO 1044)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): It is important to note that Altnagelvin Hospital is one of five cancer units in Northern Ireland that provides a full range of cancer services to the population, from screening and diagnosis to specialist oncology therapies. The other units are at the Ulster Hospital, Antrim Hospital, Craigavon Hospital and the cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital.

However, radiotherapy for the population of Northern Ireland is provided at the cancer centre in Belfast, which was developed to meet needs until 2015. An initial assessment of projected cancer incidence and demographics conducted by the Department suggests that a combination of radiotherapy services in Belfast and Altnagelvin would best meet the needs of the population beyond 2015. Any future development of radiotherapy services will, of course, be subject to a full economic appraisal.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will the Minister continue to hold discussions in the future with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to explore what mutual benefits could be developed if further investment were made in cancer services at Altnagelvin? Does he agree that it is a scandal that the provision of additional oncologists and radiotherapy capacity, which would improve survival rates for a range of cancers, will not be possible, thanks to the draft Budget currently proposed and backed by the DUP?

Mr McGimpsey: My first responsibility is to provide for the people of Northern Ireland, and, because the number of patients is rising all the time, need will have outgrown the cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital by 2015. Therefore, we need to make further provision, and we need to plan that this year in order to be ready. The best option for the people of Northern Ireland

appears to be Altnagelvin, so there is a conversation to be had with the Republic about selling cross-border services for those in need.

There are 8,500 new cancers diagnosed every year, and the demand for services is rising as our elderly population rises — the cohort age group of people over 65 years of age is growing all the time.

I made a clear bid within my budget proposals for additional oncology and radiotherapy, and that remains. I would very much regret not being able to meet that need, due to the reasons I have just given the House.

Mrs M Bradley: Can the Minister state what other plans exist for co-operation between health Departments, North and South? Can the Minister also indicate when the new provision will be introduced in the north-west?

Mr McGimpsey: I am giving a situation report, not an announcement about new provision in Altnagelvin. There is some work still to be done, and I am merely stating the situation at the moment.

As for North/South co-operation, there is a joint suicide strategy, joint pandemic flu planning — because flu knows no boundaries — and joint child protection, which is another important area for discussion and co-operation.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister has already outlined some of the measures that he is planning, but what assurance can he give the House on equity and equality for the provision of all cancer services for the people of the north-west? Is he also planning to develop all-island approaches for cancer services for the population of the north-west through the work of the North/South Ministerial Council, particularly for Altnagelvin, Letterkenny and further afield?

Mr McGimpsey: With regard to the provision of cancer services, as I said in my earlier reply to Mr McClarty's question, my first responsibility is to the people of Northern Ireland. However, we will co-operate where mutual benefits can be accrued, North and South, and that includes health. Cancer is a key area, and the need for cancer services is growing in the South as well as in Northern Ireland.

We want to ensure that no part of the population faces greater disadvantages in gaining access to diagnosis, treatment and management of cancers, and that is the case. Most of the population can access cancer services in Northern Ireland within the 60-minute rule.

New Hospital Provision

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the announcements about the provision of a new acute hospital for the south-west by 2012 and a new local hospital for

Omagh in 2013 are identical to those announced under direct rule. (AQO 1039/08)

Mr McGimpsey: All my formal announcements have confirmed the plans to develop a new acute hospital for the south-west, located to the north of Enniskillen, and to develop a new enhanced local hospital in Omagh. I have also made it clear that the new enhanced local hospital complex in Omagh will provide a range of services, including a healthcare centre, inpatient mental-health services and a 24/7 urgent care and treatment centre.

Mr Neeson: Can the Minister outline the timescale for the completion of those projects? Can he assure the House that he will try to maximise the benefits on a shared facility that can be used on a cross-border basis?

Mr McGimpsey: The anticipated completion date for the hospital in Enniskillen is 2011; for the hospital in Omagh, it is 2012. My first responsibility is to provide for the people in Northern Ireland, and I am willing, keen and anxious to consider and enhance that provision through co-operation on a North/South and east-west basis. We have healthy relationships within the United Kingdom and within the island of Ireland, and that benefits our people.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On the issue of capital investment in future hospital provision, the Minister was quoted in the media last week as suggesting that a commitment to build a new women and children's hospital on the RVH (Royal Victoria Hospital) site might be put in jeopardy. Does the Minister acknowledge that his reported remarks have caused widespread concern, and will he now clarify that he has no intention of subverting the commitment to proceed as planned with the building of the new women and children's hospital on the RVH site?

Mr McGimpsey: I made the point that there was some conjecture about the new women and children's hospital on the RVH site — something that is badly needed and that was promised when the Jubilee Maternity Hospital was closed at Belfast City Hospital. Many Members campaigned and argued that the Jubilee Maternity Hospital should not have closed until the new women and children's hospital on the RVH site was opened, but to no avail.

It is now 2007, and that hospital facility is not within the three-year period of this comprehensive spending review: it falls within the next three-year CSR period. However, I made the point that the Budget constraints are so tight that, if I had the new hospital today, the Department could not afford to staff it because of the revenue consequences of capital build. Members will see, in the inescapable costs, the revenue consequences of capital; that was exactly the point that I made.

Mr Bresland: Will the Minister assure the House that the new enhanced local hospital in Omagh will have a 24-hour doctor-led urgent care and treatment centre?

Mr McGimpsey: I am happy to give the Member that assurance. At the time, I said that I was looking at three elements in relation to the new hospital in Omagh. One element was 24/7 urgent care and treatment, which I confirm today.

Another element was to review the emergency ambulance service, and the third was to commission a feasibility study into a midwife-led maternity unit. That study should report back to me in the next few weeks. Therefore, I can give all three of those assurances on the new local hospital for Omagh.

Increased Healthcare Spending

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the need for increased healthcare spending in Northern Ireland; and to outline the comparison between healthcare spending in Northern Ireland and England, on key areas, including children's issues and mental health.

(AQO 1016/08)

Mr McGimpsey: In 2005, the Appleby Report concluded that it was necessary for Northern Ireland to spend approximately 7% more than England in order for it to provide the same standard of care. Draft figures from an update to that work suggest that the need differential now stands at about 14%. Need is 10% higher for National Health Service-type services, and up to 36% higher for social services functions. To tackle that gap and match the 3.7% growth rate in England would mean that an additional £600 million to spend would be required by 2010-11.

Without that money, we will continue to provide second-rate services for children and mentally ill people. To be crystal clear, if the draft Budget remains unchanged, the gap with England will not be addressed but will widen.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister agree that the gap between expenditure in England and Northern Ireland that was identified in the draft Budget is clearly unacceptable, and that there is considerable need in Northern Ireland that must be addressed? Does he also agree that, rather than engaging in personal attacks, it would be useful if all MLAs and Executive members were to work together to tackle those pressing problems, which affect so many of us?

Mr McGimpsey: I certainly subscribe to the idea of cradle-to-the-grave free-for-all-citizens and taxpayer-funded healthcare as one of the state's key principles. Many exercises have been undertaken to ascertain whether that aim is sustainable, and the conclusions have

invariably been that our Health Service is sustainable on an investment basis. The Appleby Report recommended a real-terms investment of 4.3% during the 2005-12 comprehensive spending review period. Clearly, we are falling well behind that. Consequently, there is a 25% greater mental-health need, and funding is 25% less than that in England — a clear differential. Our spend on children is the lowest in the UK — we are 35% behind England, and 44% behind Scotland. The proportion of our population that is aged over 65 is growing at the fastest rate in the UK, and that means that need is growing quicker here than it is in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Mrs Hanna: Given the spending shortfall in child mental-health services, and the fact that 5% of our children have a clinically recognised mental-health condition, how will the Minister address that crying need?

Mr McGimpsey: Mrs Hanna is a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, so she is well aware that that need is difficult to address. After inescapables — what I cannot avoid paying for — and providing for conditions such as killer diseases, my number-one bid is for mental-health provision. That bid was roughly four times the size of my allocation. Those are the sort of difficulties with which I have been presented. Much has been made of Northern Ireland's per capita spend compared with that for the rest of the UK. In fact, in 2006-07, we spent 9% more per capita than was spent in England. That over-spend is now down to 6%, so, while the gap is narrowing, the need is growing, and the allocation gap will double from £300 million at present to £600 million in three years' time. Therefore, the question remains as to whether Northern Ireland, as a society, can sustain the Health Service.

Mr Easton: Does the Minister agree that his political grandstanding on health spending in the draft Budget serves only to make healthcare staff and members of the public lose confidence in the Health Service and in his ability as a Minister, despite his being allocated 51% of all moneys for Northern Ireland and having the largest-ever Northern Ireland health budget?

2.45 pm

Mr McGimpsey: Last week, I began consulting staff in the acute sector. I did not hear that view expressed by any staff then — *[Interruption.]*

I will continue, Mr Speaker, if I am allowed to speak. Thank you.

Health Service spending is not about percentages: it is about the people of Northern Ireland; it is about patients; and about maintaining the National Health Service's cradle-to-grave healthcare, which is free for all our people. We appear to be saying that people here can have that service, but it will not be as good as it is

in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is unacceptable.

We are £300 million behind England — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr McGimpsey: — under the draft Budget, and that will double over the next three years. That is unacceptable.

Maternity Unit: Omagh Area

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider the establishment of a free-standing midwife-led maternity unit for the Omagh area. (AQO 1049/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I recently asked the Western Health and Social Services Board to explore the possibility of providing a stand-alone community midwifery unit for Omagh. The board will provide me with a report of its findings by the end of the year. I will fully consider those findings in reaching my decision.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for undertaking that work with the Western Health and Social Services Board. I must emphasise that, because of the long distances that people in County Tyrone must travel to the nearest acute hospital with maternity provision, mothers have given birth to babies en route to hospital. Will the Minister assure the House that he will demonstrate a personal interest in arriving at creative solutions for maternity provision that will meet the needs of the people of County Tyrone?

Mr McGimpsey: As for personal assurance, one of my first visits was to Omagh because of concerns about services there and about the provision of an enhanced local hospital. As I said in response to a question from Mr Bresland, I gave assurances about ambulances, a doctor-led 24/7 urgent care and treatment centre, and a consultation on a midwifery unit. That consultation will conclude shortly, and, when I receive the reports, I will come back to the House as quickly as I can. The key criteria are a safe and effective tier of choice for women and the provision of safe and effective emergency transfer arrangements when necessary. As I said, I will immediately report to the House on the results of the consultation.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister must think that if he repeats something often enough people might believe it. The issues are efficiencies and productivity. A draft Budget allocation of £4 billion — *[interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mrs I Robinson: Four billion pounds is a significant amount. I wonder what the Minister wants to take away from other Departments to increase his allocation. Will

the Minister comment on the 2002 Ulster Unionist Party manifesto, which pledged extending choice for pregnant women through midwife-led maternity units? Never mind Omagh — what has he done about other midwife-led units across the Province?

Mr McGimpsey: Mrs Robinson said “Never mind Omagh.” The people of Omagh have a different view about that and about their area. Six months ago, when I had the honour of taking on this job, the Omagh consultation was one of my first undertakings.

The midwife-led maternity unit at Downpatrick is at an advanced stage of development, and there are opportunities for other such units. We must ensure that maternity services are sustainable, and we must take into account the views of all stakeholders and the impact on other services. However, the criteria that I mentioned to Mr McElduff seem to offer opportunities for such a unit, provided that it is safe and effective for mothers and infants.

Mr McCallister: I hope that the consultation goes well. A midwife-led maternity unit in Omagh is essential, and I am sure, as the Minister stated, that the people of Omagh are not in the “never mind Omagh” camp. Perhaps Mrs Robinson’s view is also “never mind Downpatrick” — it is certainly not mine.

Does the Minister agree that further investment in maternity services is required across Northern Ireland, and that the draft Budget — as proposed and backed by the DUP — will do nothing to help in that area? Is that not a disgrace?

Mr McGimpsey: I think that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr McGimpsey: As I explained earlier, with £700 million of inescapables and £450 million coming in, we operate a proposed current-account deficit of £250 million. Despite calls from sedentary positions, it is difficult to move forward on that basis.

Regarding consultancy-led maternity services, we operate the one-hour rule. However, as I said, that means units being influenced by their ability to access anaesthetic, paediatric and theatre services. The number of births is also a factor. There is a role for midwife-led maternity units, but we must wait to see the report on the feasibility study for Omagh.

Mobile Cervical Cancer Unit

5. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on an incident which took place on 12 November 2007, in the Markets area of Belfast, in relation to a mobile cervical cancer unit. (AQO 1018/08)

Mr McGimpsey: It is totally unacceptable that anyone who is working to save lives and to provide a public service should be subjected to any form of abuse. That is why I launched a campaign in June 2007 to spell out clearly the message of a zero-tolerance approach to attacks, abuse or threatening behaviour against healthcare staff.

Today, I have already sought the Assembly's endorsement of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill that deal with nuisance or disturbance on hospital premises.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister is aware that, on 12 November 2007, in his own constituency, a bus bringing workers into the Markets area to screen women for cervical cancer was ordered to leave by a supposed community worker, who is paid through public funds. The Markets is an area that has a low uptake of screening services, and the bus had to leave with very few of the women having had the opportunity to avail of the screening.

The person who ordered the bus out was associated with Sinn Féin, and was paid from public money by the Department for Social Development —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to ask his question.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Minister indicate whether he has had any discussions with Sinn Féin regarding that issue? Has he had any discussions with the Minister for Social Development about the funding of the Markets Community Association, which pays those wages? Furthermore, will the Minister assure Members that nurses will not be intimidated out of areas by people simply because they are not liked?

Mr McGimpsey: I fundamentally agree with the principles of what Mr Wilson has said. That incident was deplorable and disgraceful. Without getting into the details — because it is currently under investigation by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust — the conclusion of the leading nurse was that it was best to leave the area because a small crowd had started to gather.

That small group, and the alleged involvement of that worker, did their community a disservice because, after breast cancer, cervical cancer is the single most common cancer for women worldwide. It respects no race or creed, and that is the same in the Markets as it is in any other part of Northern Ireland.

The workers were there to provide a vital service. The keys to tackling cancer are screening, early detection, early treatment, and early intervention. Those women in the Markets were denied that by the actions of that small group. We will persist in providing that service because the people in that area deserve it.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's last comments, which confirmed that his Department will persist in providing those services to people living in the Markets

area of Belfast and other communities in the North. My colleague Mrs Hanna the MLA for South Belfast wrote to the Minister within 24 hours of the incident.

I ask the Minister two questions. Does he agree that incidents of this nature must be subjected to the full rigours of the law? Does he agree that, in the event that the circumstances of the incident are confirmed, any person involved in causing that incident should have his or her employment status reviewed and, where appropriate, terminated, to send a message to the victim in this case, and to the people of the Markets and to those in other communities who are not yet free from that sort of behaviour, that that sort of action will not be tolerated by any Minister, Member or citizen in the North?

Mr McGimpsey: Like Mrs Hanna, I represent that constituency. I completely agree with Mr Attwood's remarks, both in principle and in practice. The individuals responsible should be subject to the full rigours of the law and I agree with him in respect of their employment status. It is absolutely reprehensible, given the sort of risks that women run with respect to cervical cancer which kills 80 women each year in Northern Ireland, to deny them treatment. It is disgraceful. I agree exactly with the Member.

Mr Cobain: All Members join with the Minister in condemning the attacks on healthcare workers in the Markets. The Minister has already alluded to his zero tolerance strategy. Will he tell the House what other steps he will take to thwart further attacks on healthcare workers?

Mr McGimpsey: Today, we received endorsement for the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, which deals with incidents inside hospitals. My Department is also working up legislation to make it an offence to create nuisance or disturbance on Health Service premises and interfere with Health Service workers. That legislation will be effective in this area.

However, the incident represents a threat so serious that it is more a matter for the police than for the Health Service. As Mr Attwood has pointed out, the full rigour of the law is required in such incidents, which go beyond verbal abuse and which have a very serious undertone.

Brook Clinic: Public Funding

6. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what public funding has been provided to the Brook Clinic in Belfast, in each year since 2000. (AQO 1094/08)

Mr McGimpsey: Health and social services boards have provided funding to Brook Clinic since 2000. My

Department has also provided funding to it. The statistics are too detailed to read out: a copy of the information has been placed in the Library.

Mr McCausland: Does the Minister agree that the Brook Clinic promotes views that are at variance with those of many in Ulster in Protestant and Roman Catholic communities?

Does he acknowledge that the organisation Love for Life promotes values that are in keeping with those of many people in Ulster, and that it carries out valuable work to promote the well-being of young people, especially in schools? Will he therefore indicate when he proposes to meet Love for Life to hear the organisation's request for core funding?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not in a position to comment on Love for Life at the moment.

The question was about the Brook Clinic, which since 1992 has provided a free confidential service for teenagers in Belfast. Its service includes contraceptive information, advice and supplies, after-sex contraception, pregnancy testing, counselling, help and advice. It does not give advice on, or make referrals for, abortion. That is important.

We have a strategy for sexual health. The aspects that I have talked about reinforce the need to reduce the number of sexually transmitted infections, now running at 2,900 per annum; delay sexual activity among the young; reduce teenage births — last year there were 1,427 teenage births; and provide swift access to genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinics.

There is a need for work in that area. If Love for Life is offering support, I am prepared to consider that sort of proposal.

3.00 pm

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

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Belfast Sewer Project/Project Alpha/Project Omega

1. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the announcement of the Belfast sewer project — project alpha and project omega — contained in the draft investment strategy 2008-18, are identical to the schemes already existing in the Investment Strategy launched by direct rule Ministers in December 2005. (AQO 1063/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): A LeasCheann Comhairle. I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that project alpha

and project omega for the Belfast sewer project, referred to in the draft investment strategy 2008-2018, are the same as those announced by direct rule Ministers in the investment strategy in December 2005. That is due to the size and complexity of the projects, which span a number of years and represent a significant investment aimed at improving water and sewerage infrastructure.

The Belfast sewer project commenced in May 2005, and will not be completed until the end of 2009. It will upgrade Belfast's Victorian sewer system at a cost of £130 million, and includes the construction of a large-diameter tunnel. Projects alpha and omega are public-private partnership projects, which commenced in June 2006 and May 2007 respectively. Although the bulk of the construction work will be completed by 2009, both projects have a 25-year concession. The projects aim to deliver a number of newer, upgraded water and waste-water treatment works at a total cost of £232 million.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for the clarification. No one would argue that the projects are either short-term or unnecessary. However, I commend the Department on its ability to recycle, because the announcements have already been made at other times in other places, and it appears that they have been dressed up again for the current round of budgeting.

Previously, the Minister has — rightly — identified that installing bigger pipes is not the only answer to the problem of flooding in urban areas. What progress is being made on the sustainable urban-drainage project to deal with new development and retrofitting in older properties?

Mr Murphy: In relation to the commentary in the first part of the Member's question, the Executive's announcement of the investment strategy in respect of the Belfast sewer project refers to its completion, which is an acknowledgement that the project has already started. We must continue to invest in it, and I presume that the Member would have had a more substantial case for disquiet had the Department not announced that it would spend the money to complete the project, as with others.

In relation to the second part of the Member's question, the studies are ongoing to provide the most effective, and retrofitted, drainage system possible for newbuilds. Those studies will take some time to complete, and weather conditions this year have exacerbated flooding problems, particularly in the Member's constituency of East Belfast.

The overall health warning is that no system can compete with the type of downfall that we had in June in Belfast, Omagh and other areas of the North. Nonetheless, the studies continue to endeavour to make the drainage system as effective as it can possibly be.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister ensure that the planned systems will be upgraded in accordance with the most recent EU directives?

Mr Murphy: We are always guided by EU directives, and where we are found to fall foul of them, infraction costs inevitably follow. The EU directives are uppermost in the thinking of all Departments when deciding how an issue is approached. I assure the Member that EU directives will continue to dictate how the Department for Regional Development conducts all such business.

Narrow Water Bridge Project

2. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to advise what progress has been made on the Narrow Water bridge project following the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting of 14 September 2007. (AQO 1125/08)

Mr Murphy: A LeasCheann Comhairle. At the third meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format, held on 14 September 2007, the council noted the Irish Government's proposal for the construction of a bridge at Narrow Water linking County Louth with County Down.

The Irish Government have granted funding to Louth County Council to undertake preliminary technical work on the proposal. The matter will be kept under review and the results of the technical work will be examined when they become available.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. At present, the Narrow Water bridge project is the major local talking point in South Down, the Cooley peninsula and further afield. Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you encourage short questions and answers. Therefore, I ask the Minister whether he is fully committed to the proposed Louth-Down link at Narrow Water. In the interests of saving time, a one-word answer from the Minister will be sufficient. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Murphy: Had the Member asked a short question, there may have been a short answer. I want to correct certain information that the Member publicised locally, to the effect that matters in relation to a bridge at Narrow Water were advanced and that it would only take the Department for Regional Development to agree to it for the project to be delivered. That is completely inaccurate. Louth County Council's study into the technical aspects of the project has only just begun. When a proposition of support for the project is put to the Department, I will happily give an answer. Such a proposition has not yet been made.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister agree that a far more worthy project than a bridge at Narrow Water is that of a southern relief road? Like my colleague the

Member for Newry and Armagh, I hope that the Minister's answer to a proposition for a bridge at Narrow Water is no. In order to develop tourism and trade and, in particular, to promote the growth of Warrenpoint as a major port on the eastern seaboard of the island of Ireland, does the Minister agree that the southern relief road is essential?

Mr Murphy: I believe that the Member has fallen into the trap that, regrettably, many of his local colleagues and lobby groups have also fallen into, which is to consider those as competing projects. I do not consider them as such. Both are worthy projects and are being advanced. Studies are being conducted into both.

At present, the study into the southern relief road is being conducted by the Roads Service in the North. That is not complete. The study into a bridge at Narrow Water is being conducted by Louth County Council. That is not complete either. Rather than view them as competing projects — both of which are important to the people of the area and of the east coast in general — the Member would do well to wait until the study that is being carried out into each of those projects is completed and the benefits to the people of South Down, Louth and the east coast of Ireland can be determined.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister elaborate on what the Department is doing to improve links between County Louth and South Down in general?

Mr Kennedy: Nothing. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Murphy: At present, all that one can do is buy a boat. As I said during my previous answer, Louth County Council has been tasked with the study into a bridge at Narrow Water. The Executive have dealt with the Irish Government through the transport sectoral meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, which will keep us up to date with the study.

Roads Service is conducting the study into a southern relief road at Newry. I have asked both groups to engage with each other in order to ensure that there is maximum exchange of information between them. When those studies are complete, the issues will return to North/South Ministerial Council's agenda. I hope that progress can then be made.

Translink SmartPasses

3. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the actions his Department is undertaking, or considering, to ensure that the highest proportion possible of those eligible, possess Translink SmartPasses. (AQO 1057/08)

15. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the proposed extension of the

SmartPass to the over 60s, what steps his Department has taken to promote the uptake of the scheme.

(AQO 1117/08)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to answer question 3 and question 15 together.

The Department for Regional Development has developed an application process that it believes is simple and convenient for customers. It is advertised in local and regional newspapers and continues to be advertised on buses, trains and in stations. During the past two financial years, expenditure on advertising was approximately £85,000. The Department works closely with bodies that represent groups of people who are eligible for concessionary travel.

As a consequence of those measures, the uptake of SmartPasses is currently estimated to be in excess of 75%. That compares with a rate of about 63% in Britain. Steps have not yet been taken to promote the uptake of the scheme for people who are aged 60 years and over. Should the decision in the draft Budget to extend free travel to those people be confirmed, the Department will discuss with relevant groups the best steps to encourage uptake, including the issue of additional targeted publicity.

Mr Cobain: The Minister will be aware that the Committee for Regional Development has concerns about social exclusion in rural areas of the Province.

Will the Minister tell the House what his plans are to ensure that people who are socially excluded — particularly, pensioners in rural areas — can actually use their SmartPasses?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know, as Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, that the Department made a bid for a range of moneys to be made available to expand the concessionary scheme as broadly as possible; to take some of the people with disabilities from the half-fare concessionary scheme to a full-fare concessionary schemes and to target areas where uptake of the scheme is least.

The Member is right to highlight rural areas. We made a bid to extend concessionary fares to include travel on services that are provided by rural community transport partnerships. Unfortunately, we have not been successful, in the current round of the Budget, in those bids. We will continue to press our case and to ensure that people avail of the SmartPass scheme. We will bid, in further rounds of the Budget, to ensure that people who are accessing rural transport can also avail of the SmartPass scheme.

Mr Neeson: Will the Minister agree that it is ridiculous that Translink SmartCards, which can be used in the Greater Belfast area, cannot be used on train services in areas covered by Translink Metro buses?

Mr Murphy: That particular problem has not been raised with me, previously. Last week, I had a discussion with the Committee for Regional Development about the idea of purchasing tickets for single journeys, or return journeys, using SmartCards. I will gladly raise that issue with Translink. The purpose of any scheme where concessionary fares are introduced is, as the Committee's Chairperson has said, to tackle social exclusion.

If those concessionary fares are introduced — and the transport providers have some systems that mitigate against that — we want to resolve those issues as, otherwise, the purpose of introducing the cards in the first place is defeated. I will happily go to Translink to deal with that issue.

Mr T Clarke: Is it true that the Minister does not intend to roll out the SmartPasses to 60-year-olds until December 2008, even though money has been allocated in his departmental budget for that purpose?

Mr Murphy: There is no intention to roll out the scheme in December 2008. We intend to roll out the scheme in the summer or early autumn — not in December. Obviously, the Budget has not yet been agreed. While the draft Budget indicates that we have been successful in our bid to lower the age at which people become eligible for concessionary fares from 65 to 60, that has yet to be confirmed by the final budgetary decisions in January 2008. After that, an equality impact assessment will be needed to ensure the way in which the scheme will be rolled out, and to access those groups that will need to avail of it. The technical facilities will have to be changed to ensure that those passes can be produced and that we are aware of all those people who are entitled to them. That process will take a couple of months.

If the final decisions on the Budget go along the lines that we hope that they will, it is intended that the scheme will be rolled out for the summertime or the early autumn, and not in December 2008.

Bus-Replacement Scheme

4. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of the Translink bus-replacement scheme. (AQO 1120/08)

Mr Murphy: A LeasCheann Comhairle. The current bus-replacement policy is aimed at delivering the target age limits for Translink's bus fleet as set out in the regional transportation strategy. The targets are that the average vehicle age should be no more than eight years, with no bus being more than 18 years old, and no coach being more than 12 years old. The overall policy objective is to achieve a modern, comfortable and reliable bus fleet that encourages people to use public transport for their journeys instead of private cars.

We have had some success in stopping the long-term downward trend in the number of people who travel by bus. I am pleased to report that the number of bus passengers in Belfast has increased by almost 14% over the past two years.

Mr McKay: Will the Minister tell the House how many more replacement buses are due to be purchased by his Department?

Mr Murphy: A LeasCheann Comhairle. Translink expects to buy 240 replacement buses during 2007-08 and 2008-09; 69 replacement buses in 2009-10; and 90 replacements buses in 2010-11. The total cost of those is estimated at almost £62 million. The 2007 draft Budget will allow the bus-replacement programme to be rolled out as planned.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister outline his views on the potential of hybrid and green technologies as alternative fuels for the Translink bus fleet?

Mr Murphy: That type of fuel has been used in some of the Department for Regional Development's vehicles. We are investigating the matter and will continue to investigate it.

The Programme for Government sets out the Executive's objective of reducing our carbon footprint, and we want to investigate each and every opportunity to do that. We will therefore continue to investigate the uses of such fuel in Translink fleets as well.

3.15 pm

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister consider it acceptable that, as a result of the bus-replacement programme, some pupils travel on buses that have essential safety features, such as seat belts, while others do not?

Mr Murphy: Our intention is to bring all school bus fleets up to a high standard, but the necessary changes cannot be introduced overnight. There has been substantial investment in the bus fleet, which brought a large number of buses up to the required standard. As I said in response to an earlier question, that investment will continue. A substantial investment of, I think, £62 million has been allocated in the draft Budget, so there will continue to be investment in procurement to replace the older buses in the Translink fleet. That will bring all buses up to the standard to which the Member referred.

However, I presume that the Member will understand that, since the first bus fleets were introduced only this year, the entire fleet of Translink buses cannot be brought up to the required standard overnight. A substantial capital investment is required and will have to be budgeted for over several years. If this year's draft Budget is approved, there will, fortunately, be a substantial improvement in the coming years.

Adverse Winter Weather

5. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the ability of the Roads Service to deal with adverse winter weather conditions. (AQO 1122/08)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service recognises the scale of the challenge, but it is prepared to deal with adverse winter weather conditions. Every night from now until the middle of next April, more than 270 people will be on standby to salt main roads, and approximately 50,000 tonnes of salt is stored in depots across the North.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. At the weekend, six people tragically lost their lives on the roads, and adverse weather conditions may have played a role in some of those accidents. I am sure that our thoughts and prayers are with the bereaved families.

As the Minister will be aware, almost half the West Belfast constituency is rural, and the roads in that area are increasingly being used by commuters travelling to and from Belfast. Will the Minister confirm that the Roads Service will be deployed to ensure that gritting and sandboxes are available to keep those roads — along with other roads in built-up areas of Lagmore, Twinbrook and Poleglass — clear and safe, despite any adverse weather conditions?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his question, and I agree with him. I once again extend my sympathies to the bereaved families. The exact causes of the tragic accidents over the weekend are not yet known, but they are dreadful tragedies for the families involved. The Minister of the Environment, who has a keen interest in road safety, and I will ensure that everything possible is done to reduce the number of such tragedies.

We are aware that quite a few of the roads in West Belfast have become routes for people commuting to work in the city, particularly since work began on the Westlink. The gritting schedule is based on the number of vehicles travelling on any given road; it is not based just on the size of the road or the fact that it is a rural road. We will ensure that, as far as possible, 80% of roads are covered by the gritting schedule. As a matter of interest, raising that figure to 90% would double the costs. The gritting schedule gives priority to the most heavily travelled routes. Roads Service is conscious that, as a result of work on the Westlink, many routes in and around West Belfast and other parts of the city are experiencing more traffic flow. We will ensure that such roads are kept up to standard.

Mr G Robinson: The Minister will be aware of the tragic deaths over the weekend. Can he guarantee that the Frosses Road will receive special attention during

the winter months due to the volume of traffic on it and the sadly high number of fatalities there?

Mr Murphy: As with all the other road tragedies this weekend, the tragedy on the Frosses Road was a huge blow for the families involved. A number of accidents have occurred on that stretch of road over the years.

The Member will be aware that it is an 18-mile stretch of road. The cause of an accident on any given part of that stretch is another matter entirely, and it is much too early to speculate on the reason for the accident at the weekend. The Member will know that there are plans to upgrade and improve stretches of the Frosses Road. In the interim, we will look to road safety, which will involve the winter gritting schedule. We are aware that there is heavy traffic on that road, and all steps will be taken to improve safety there until the upgrade goes ahead.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his answer. Would not the money that his Department has spent on consultancy fees in the past year have been better spent on road safety and on the expansion of the roads system, especially coming into what is predicted to be a severe winter, and bearing in mind that he has a budget of just £50 million?

Mr Murphy: There are several issues to consider in answer to that question. Any spending on consultancy fees was done as part of spending plans that direct rule Ministers approved last year, and I want an opportunity to examine that spending. It is simplistic, however, to say that if money were taken from one place, it could be put to better use in another. The money that is available allows Roads Service to cover 80% of the roads across the North — all classes of roads. If that budget were to be increased to cover 90% of the roads, the cost would double. Cost alone is not a reason for not doing that work, but the Member knows that we are working to a finite budget, and resources must be prioritised as best we can.

I am happy to examine how money is spent across the Department, and I am sure that other Ministers will do the same for next year in order to see where improvements and efficiencies can be made.

Public Lighting in Rural Areas

6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans for the extension of public lighting in rural areas. (AQO 1132/08)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service last relaxed the policy provision of road lighting in rural areas in 2002, to take into further consideration public buildings with significant night-time use. The demand for more rural lighting must be balanced against the environmental and financial costs of providing and maintaining additional public

lighting. There are no plans for a further review of rural public lighting criteria at this time.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Minister will agree that all policies should be rural-proofed. Will he give an undertaking to the House that he will examine that set of criteria, which were last reviewed in 2002, and update it with a view to improving conditions for people who live in rural areas?

Mr Murphy: The Member is right to say that rural proofing should play a part in our decisions. The criteria that are used when considering the provision of street lighting in rural areas are the density of housing in a community, including public buildings with significant night-time use, and road safety, where street lighting would contribute to a reduction in the number of night-time accidents. As with all policies, the Department is happy to examine them as we go along, and, as the Member said, the criteria were last reviewed in 2002.

There are circumstances in which people might criticise the overuse of street lighting in rural areas, in that it detracts from the rural character. All those factors must be taken into consideration. However, I have outlined the main criteria. If the Member wishes to re-examine those criteria, I will be happy to take her points on board.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's comments on street lighting in rural areas. One of the effects of increased street lighting is what is known as light pollution. What is his Department doing to reduce light pollution?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my answer to Mrs Kelly's question, we must consider the rural character, and that is another reason for doing so. In order to minimise the effect of light pollution, Roads Service makes use of more efficient lantern systems and lamp types, which offer better control of downward lamp output and are designed to reduce the amount of light that goes up into the night sky. Roads Service also aims to lessen levels of light pollution by not over-lighting roads. Designs for all street-lighting schemes are carried out to the appropriate category for each situation and in compliance with the latest guidance from the Institute of Lighting Engineers for the reduction of light pollution.

Strangford Ferry

7. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's expenditure on the Strangford ferry, and the income that was generated by the ferry, in each of the past 3 years. (AQO 1004/08)

Mr Murphy: Roads Service advises me that the cost of operating the Strangford Lough ferry service

was £1,529,896 in 2004-05; £1,549,921 in 2005-06; and £1,783,498 in 2006-07.

The income generated during each of the three financial years was £898,155, £910,715 and £1,016,727 respectively. I will supply those figures to the Member in writing if he wishes.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister recognise the important link that the ferry provides for Strangford and Portaferry in the premier borough of Northern Ireland — Ards? We are linked with the borough of Down, of course.

Is the Minister aware of the tourism potential for the Strangford ferry, and for Northern Ireland as a whole, and of the importance of continuing to subsidise it in order to realise that potential?

Mr Murphy: I do recognise that, and even people from outside the Strangford constituency will recognise the importance of the Strangford ferry and the contribution that it makes to travel in an isolated rural area of the peninsula. I also recognise the ferry's contribution to tourism.

The service recovered 55% of its costs in the last financial year, which is regarded as fairly good for this type of operation. That shows the level of subsidy that it enjoys, and it is because of its importance that it enjoys that level of subsidy. If one were trying to run such a service to make money, one would fall short. The level of funds that are returned against the costs of operating the ferry shows the importance to which the Department and the Executive attach to that transport link.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although the Strangford constituency is some distance from my constituency of West Belfast, I recognise the importance of the tourism potential. As someone who has used the ferry on many occasions, I may have a conflict of interest, but will the Minister tell the House whether there will be a review of its fare structures?

Mr Murphy: I welcome the Member's interest; I thought that Belfast people did not get out of the city very much. The fares for the ferry service were last revised in 2004, and a review of the fares is under way.

Cherrymount Link Road

8. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to reconsider the proposed access arrangements from St. Michael's College, Enniskillen, to the college playing fields, which will be affected by the proposals for the new Cherrymount link road. (AQO 1060/08)

Mr Murphy: A LeasCheann Comhairle. I recently met representatives from St Michael's College, and my Department's Roads Service is in consultation with it

about the provision of a footbridge from the college to its playing fields. The proposed location will provide access to the football pitches from St Michael's and will also facilitate the needs of schoolchildren attending two other schools, St Joseph's College and St Fanchea's College, as well as providing access for the general public.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that assurance. What plans does the Minister have to extend the Cherrymount link road, from its proposed route onto the Tempo Road, onto the A4 Belfast Road?

Mr Murphy: It is expected that the statutory procedures that are associated with the Cherrymount link road scheme will be published next month, and that will bring the procurement of that transport link to the next stage.

Road Speeds

9. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress his Department is making to ensure that road speeds are limited in new residential developments. (AQO 1121/08)

Mr Murphy: The guidelines for the design of road layouts and new residential developments in the North are contained in the supplementary planning guidance, 'Creating Places: Achieving Quality in Residential Developments'. The guidance was published jointly by Planning Service and Roads Service in 2000, and it is intended to help developers to achieve high quality and greater sustainability in the design of all new residential developments. 'Creating Places' requires that traffic-calming measures are designed in the layout of residential roads to reduce vehicle speeds to a targeted maximum of 20 miles an hour.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that reply but, given the renewed carnage on the roads over the past few days — which a number of Members, including the Minister, have addressed — will the Minister give an assurance that he will work with the Minister of the Environment to ensure that a programme is rolled out in all residential areas to ensure that there will be a significant reduction in speed where necessary?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that I have already met the Minister of the Environment formally to discuss road safety.

The Member is quite right. Without going into the causes of the most recent accidents, driving at excessive speed without regard to conditions is a major factor in collisions. I have met the Minister of the Environment and the PSNI, because there is a joint responsibility for dealing with prevention, advertising and educating people about the danger on our roads. We must also

assess what assistance Roads Service can offer. My Department will continue that work with the aim of reducing the incidence of road fatalities.

Translink Trains: Dual-Destination Signage

10. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects Translink trains operating on the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line to carry dual-destination signage similar to that used on the Maiden City Flyer Goldline service. (AQO 1131/08)

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My answer will be brief. NI railways will implement dual-destination signage on internal and external display screens on new CAF (Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles) Class 3000 trains on the Belfast to Derry line by the end of December 2007.

3.30 pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Affordable Housing

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Social Development to report on the implications for the provision of affordable housing arising out of the draft Budget 2008-2011. (AQO 1077/08)

Fuel Poverty

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of how the Executive's draft budget will provide the resources to combat fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1086/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): In the light of the similarities between questions 1 and 6, and if the Deputy Speaker is content, I will answer them together.

Under the proposed allocations in the draft Budget, my Department faces a shortfall in funding of between £100 million and £150 million across all social-housing programmes over the next three years. Existing commitments that will be carried forward into next year mean that the proposed capital allocations may not allow for any new starts next year.

The housing budget faces a significant shortfall in capital, and the Executive's commitment to provide 10,000 new starts over the next five years may not be achievable. However, I am busily exploring the leveraging-in of private finance, including through land sales. It is vital that, if I sell land, I can retain the receipts for the house-building programme.

I have commissioned Baroness Ford to investigate leveraging in private finance, and she will report to me later this month. However, I must make the House aware that that will take two or three years to become fact, and, therefore, many problems and challenges remain. The one thing that I learnt from my visit to London last week was that public-sector housing requires public-sector investment.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister explain how the Executive's draft Budget will provide the resources to combat fuel poverty in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ritchie: Despite my Department's success in reducing fuel poverty and improving energy efficiency in thousands of homes, the budgets for the warm homes and fuel poverty schemes may, unfortunately, have to be reduced. That will directly affect the most vulnerable in society, such as children and elderly people. I am determined to champion the needs of the vulnerable and those living in poverty. I will continue to seek additional resources, and I need the support of all my ministerial colleagues to achieve that. The warm homes scheme has been highly successful and I want to be able to continue to fund it, but I need everyone's support to do so.

That is why I need a full return on capital receipts and I must be able, with my ministerial colleagues, Mrs Foster and Mr Murphy, to pursue the implementation of article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, which deals with private-developer contributions. To tackle long waiting lists and the high level of homelessness, mixed-tenure housing, with a 20% social-housing provision, must be introduced to private developments.

Mr Ford: I never mind giving way to a lady, even if we were called in the wrong order. Also, I must emphasise that I am not related to Baroness Ford.

The House will be concerned at the Minister's suggestion that there is a shortfall of at least £100 million in her capital budget. She talked about the importance of retaining asset sales. Has she received any assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel or the Executive collectively that asset sales from surplus land held by her Department, in particular, will be retained for use in the social housing budget and warm homes scheme?

Ms Ritchie: I am actively pursuing that issue with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I need to retain the full receipts in order to construct the social housing building programme that the people of Northern Ireland require over the next three years. I want to meet the needs of the people, and I want to champion the needs of those who are deprived and disadvantaged. Above all, I want to meet the needs of all those who are on the housing waiting list.

I will continue to pursue the matter with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Suffice it to say that it has been factored into the investment strategy for Northern Ireland as a priority. I have also raised the matter with the Committee for Social Development, which I hope will flag it up as an important issue when it responds to the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. One of the Minister's colleagues stated that due to the way in which the Minister has arranged her budget, she will not be in a position to build a single social house in 2008. How does that tie in with her stated objective of placing social and affordable housing as her number one priority? Furthermore, how does it tie in with her stated objective of building 10,000 new social homes over the next five years?

With hindsight, does the Minister agree that her myopic budgetary bids aimed at alleviating the social housing crisis were devoid of a plan A, never mind a plan B, and that they have done nothing to help solve the problem and, in fact, have only worsened it?

Ms Ritchie: There seems to be great confusion over the matter. I reiterate that the housing budget faces a shortfall in capital. It is the Executive's — that is, the Cabinet's — commitment to provide 10,000 new social homes over the next five years. That may not be achievable. However, I am honouring the fact that social housing must be the number one priority, because there is a clearly defined identified need among the greater public in Northern Ireland.

Housing was also identified as a number one priority in a recent 'Belfast Telegraph' poll, along with the issue of health. Therefore, I must address that. As the issue is so important, I am investigating other areas in which to lever in private finance, hence the revision of Planning Policy Statement 12 relating to mixed-tenure housing, which will mean a policy change. That is why I have commissioned Baroness Ford to carry out financial modelling exercises on the need to investigate all the issues to do with housing associations and land assets.

This is a problem for the Assembly and for all of my ministerial colleagues. I am seeking the support of all of them to achieve the budget that the people of Northern Ireland deserve in order that the social housing development programme may be provided.

I read some comments last week relating to the Department for Social Development and the budget, and there is definitely some confusion. It was stated that I could do something with the Department's land assets and that I had plenty of money in the budget. Then it was stated that I do not have plenty of money in the budget. Let us be real and let us get together and champion the people who need houses in the social-rented sector.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister confirm that the issues in her budget relate to capital spend? What steps has she taken to realise capitalisation of assets in her Department? If all those assets were capitalised, would they meet her required budget, or would she also need capitalisation from other Departments?

Ms Ritchie: I would welcome the support of Mr Craig and his colleagues on the Committee for Social Development in my quest to obtain the proper and adequate budget to deliver a social-housing development programme. It is important that I receive a guarantee that, if and when I sell land, I will get a full return on the receipts. Above all else, I want to deliver the social-housing development programme, and I need the support of my ministerial colleagues to do that. The housing crisis is so great that there are 36,000 people on waiting lists and 21,000 homeless people, and the onus is on all Members to deliver that programme.

Dunclug Action Plan

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the Dunclug action plan. (AQO 1071/08)

Ms Ritchie: I visited the Dunclug estate on 26 September, and I had a constructive meeting on 12 November with Declan O'Loan, Daithí McKay and Mervyn Storey about the Dunclug area. There has been significant progress in the implementation of the 22 actions contained in the Dunclug action plan: eight have been delivered; five are on track for delivery; and the final nine will be delivered with some delays. I have asked officials to seek to overcome the delays, keep me abreast of progress, involve me directly and, if necessary, overcome any issues leading to delays. I have also placed a full update on the implementation of the Dunclug action plan in the Assembly Library. I assure Members — particularly those who represent the constituency of North Antrim — that when I visited the Dunclug estate, I was fully persuaded of the need for social and economic improvements to improve the life opportunities of the people who reside in the estate.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her dependence on the four-party mandatory coalition that she has continually referred to today. It seems as though the SDLP has undergone a sea change from wanting to opt out of the Executive to wanting to be included in it. However, that is the nature of the politics in which the SDLP engages.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please ask a question.

Mr A Maginness: Ask a question.

Mr Storey: Without any prompting from the Member for North Belfast, I will ask the Minister a question. I

welcome the Minister's input and her interest in Dunclug, but can she assure me that she will not accept the delay in the implementation of the action plan? There is a start date of November 2008, but the Housing Executive has dragged its feet on that. Furthermore, some matters — on which we are awaiting delivery — could urgently be taken to the board of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I am sad to say that the action plan bears little satisfaction in the Dunclug area because of those delays.

Ms Ritchie: I thank Mr Storey for his support on this matter. As I told the three North Antrim MLAs with whom I met in November, I have impressed on the Housing Executive that I want to see an early start date to the work at the Dunclug estate, because I was appalled to see the degradation and deprivation that exists there. It is unacceptable that people should have to live in such conditions.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for her answer and for the support that she has given to the scheme through her visit to Dunclug, her recent meeting with MLAs and the follow-up I meetings that I know she has held. Does she agree that there are many good and hard-working residents in Dunclug who are only trying to do the best for their families? Does she also agree that it is important that confidence be given to those people so that they will remain in the estate and contribute to the social solution of its many problems?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with my colleague Mr O'Loan. On my visit to the Dunclug estate on 26 September, I could only be impressed by the contribution, determination, zeal and commitment of those people who had an earnest desire to have the area improved.

I can only concur with their viewpoint and hope that the Housing Executive, along with other agencies, will be able to deliver what is required.

I have also been pursuing the Chief Constable on that particular matter, and an additional police officer has now been appointed. I asked the police to pursue the issue of part-time community officers, and I was told just today that the business plan for that has now been cleared. I have asked the Chief Constable to include that as a matter of urgency in his budget priorities.

All the issues in housing estates can be tackled as long as I have the support of all my ministerial colleagues in the Executive on Budget priorities and an adequate budget allocation. I have never wavered from that standpoint, because I believe earnestly that there must be ministerial collectiveness in tackling deprivation and disadvantage.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister satisfied with the performance of the Housing Executive in implementing the action plan to date? Will she also provide a guaranteed timescale for the full implementation of the action plan? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I have told the Housing Executive on many occasions, before and after my visit on 26 September, and before and after my meeting with MLAs in November, that I wanted urgent action and the implementation of its particular aspects of the strategy as quickly as possible.

I am aware that the demolition of Flaxton House is part of the first phase of the estate strategy, and interviews have commenced with the nine remaining residents about rehousing. I have urged my officials in the Housing Executive to ensure that those interviews are expedited as quickly as possible to ensure that those residents are rehoused in circumstances suitable for them and their families; then demolition can take place. So, at long last, the residents of Dunclug can see things happening that will make their lives better.

Communication with MP for West Belfast

3.45 pm

3. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what communication she has had with the MP for West Belfast since she came into office. (AQO 1143/08)

Ms Ritchie: In addition to the opportunities provided by debate and through questions in the House, my records show that the MP for West Belfast has raised two constituency matters with me since I took office. We have exchanged letters, spoken by telephone and met on two occasions on those issues. Indeed, my next meeting with the MP for West Belfast is scheduled for tomorrow.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she confirm that the MP for West Belfast first wrote to her regarding her decision on the site of the old Andersonstown RUC barracks on 26 July, and that over a three-month period she gave no written response, except to confirm that the Carvill Group had withdrawn its application and that the Department gave no proper consideration to gift-aiding the site to the local community for community, social or public use? Will she advise the Assembly of the reasons why she, as Minister, has dismissed that option, despite the precedent having been set already with former barracks sites at Fort Jericho, Henry Taggart and the Springfield Road?

Ms Ritchie: I note that the Member of Parliament for West Belfast is not in his place at the moment and has another Member from that constituency asking the question.

My records indicate that Mr Adams formally raised two constituency issues with me. He wrote to me on 26 July, 10 August and 26 September regarding the Andersonstown police station site. I spoke to him by telephone on 7 August, and met with him on 8 August

in Cloonagh House. We met again on 3 September, and I wrote to him on 3 October. He tabled a question in relation to that issue on 5 November, to which I provided a written response. As I outlined then, I am not gift-aiding the site, because the objective of its redevelopment remains to shape and attract investment and add value to West Belfast and its community while ensuring sustainability without looking to the public purse.

I also recognise that the community in the vicinity of the former Andersonstown barracks site has concerns that it will wish to voice; its views are extremely important in considering the way forward. My Department has been in contact with local community and public representatives to see how best that can be achieved.

Mr Maskey referred to other sites in West Belfast, but he is slightly misrepresenting the situation in respect of gift aid.

Mr McCausland: The MP for Belfast West does not take his seat at Westminster, nor does he play an active role in the Assembly. The greater Shankill area is a significant part of the West Belfast constituency. Does the Minister agree that the unionist people of the greater Shankill area do not look to Mr Adams as their political representative? Will she, therefore, commit herself to taking all adequate and appropriate measures to engage with the unionist political representatives of the Shankill area in making decisions for that constituency?

Ms Ritchie: I will be delighted to engage with Mr McCausland and his colleagues on that issue.

Mr A Maginness: I note the Minister's response in relation to Mr Adams. I find it bizarre that question 3 was asked by another Member from West Belfast rather than by Mr Adams himself. The Minister has spoon-fed Mr Adams about the situation in West Belfast.

There is another pressing matter in West Belfast: does the Minister propose to deal with the crisis in Ballymurphy? I know that the Minister is interested in the situation and has tried to help. Is there anything else that the Minister can do about that tragic situation?

Ms Ritchie: In relation to the Ballymurphy feud, I have decided to extend funding to enable the continuance of intervention measures in the area. That incorporates support for developing community capacity, health, education and community-safety measures. The additional £120,000 brings my Department's total financial contribution to almost £400,000 since February 2006. My Department will be represented on the project board set up to develop the extended schools initiative, which was announced by the Minister of Education over a week ago. I have written to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the issue.

Furthermore, I have had discussions with the Gaelic Athletic Association about its contribution to community

development in marginalised communities. I was, therefore, pleased to announce that the GAA is to fund two community-focused posts that will centre its activities in the Ballymurphy area. I understand that the GAA is also exploring the possibility of developing a sports facility in the area. I welcome all those developments, and I congratulate all involved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has ruled that question 4 in the name of Mr Gregory Campbell may not be put on the grounds that the matter is sub judice.

Bass Ireland Brewery Site

5. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Social Development whether her Department had an interest in the former Bass Ireland Brewery site; and to detail the capacity of her Department to purchase part or all of the site, and any plans for the Glenmona, Brewery, and other Glen Road lands. (AQO 1083/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood has written two separate letters to me on the issue, and I am looking into it. My Department's ability to purchase the site in whole or in part is influenced by budgetary constraints and the task of prioritising resources targeted at neighbourhood renewal areas of the city. I stress, yet again, that I am seeking the support of ministerial colleagues to achieve an enhanced budget to tackle deprivation and disadvantage, as well as exploring all possible avenues of leveraging in private finance.

I met Mr Attwood and a delegation of local representatives earlier this year to discuss the potential of the Glenmona site.

My officials and the Housing Executive have been working with the diocese of Down and Connor. My Department has supported a change to the current zoning arrangements in order to facilitate a mixed-use development that will incorporate mixed-tenure housing, and I am hopeful that my Department will work in partnership with the diocese on the development and implementation of an agreed master plan for the site.

As for other Department-owned land in the vicinity, the Department is seeking to sustainably develop the site of the former Andersonstown police station.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for, as she put it, giving voice to the community immediately adjacent to the Andersonstown barracks site. There must be an intensive, dedicated consultation process and, whatever else happens in the lower Andersonstown area concerning commercial development, the community's needs in relation to the Andersonstown barracks site must have primacy.

I have two questions for the Minister. Given that the Glen Road lands, incorporating Hannahstown, Glenmona

and the Bass brewery, comprise the single biggest land bank that is open to development in Belfast, will the Minister ask her officials to consider how the brewery site might be integrated with other nearby sites? Will she also ascertain whether her Department has the means to purchase any of that site for social development? Whatever happens, will she ensure that a situation does not arise whereby there is a bidding war for the 20-acre site on the Glen Road, so that the public interest does not go to the wall?

Ms Ritchie: I thank my colleague Mr Attwood for his supplementary questions, and I agree that an intensive, dedicated consultation process with the residents in close proximity to the Andersonstown police station site is required. I intend for such a consultation process to take place. In this instance, those people's views are paramount.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive supports the development of social housing on the Bass Ireland brewery site as part of a mixed-use scheme. The InBev brewery site would, of course, be of interest to my Department for the provision of social housing. However, in addition to my pursuit of private-sector finance, my major problem is that I require the support of my ministerial colleagues in order to lever in an adequate budget, and I must be guaranteed that I will be able to retain the full capital receipts from the project.

I fully recognise the significance of the Glenmona lands for west Belfast, and I have had discussions with Mr Attwood about the site's potential for development and, subsequently, my officials met Mr Attwood and representatives from the diocese of Down and Connor. I am concerned by this matter, and I will ask my officials to reconsider, because every aspect must be investigated to ensure that the needs of west Belfast residents come first.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am someone who resides in west Belfast, close to the Andersonstown barracks — unlike the person who asked the question. Does the Minister acknowledge that some of the areas that were mentioned in the question have not even been put up for sale? Perhaps if the Member who submitted the question had attended some of the relevant meetings, he would have found out about that.

This matter is important because the combined potential site will be bigger than the Titanic Quarter. Therefore, a good mixed-use project that offers social housing and employment must be developed. I agree that other Departments could be involved, and I know that the MP for the area, Gerry Adams, has organised a meeting with stakeholders in the near future. Does the Minister agree that a co-ordinated approach is required and that a master plan not only for the Glenmona site but for the whole area would be useful?

4.00 pm

Ms Ritchie: The Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood is the only Member who has written to me on that issue. As I said, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive supports the development of social housing on that site as part of a mixed-use scheme. My officials and I look forward to further examining that issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Gallagher is not in the Chamber to ask question 7, so I call Mr Cobain.

Fuel Poverty

8. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Social Development to give an assessment of progress regarding the achievement of eradicating fuel poverty by 2016.

(AQO 1081/08)

Ms Ritchie: Much has been achieved on alleviating fuel poverty. For example, 97% of properties in Northern Ireland now have some form of central heating. Research published by my Department last month in the report 'Fuel Poverty, Climate and Mortality in Northern Ireland 1980-2006' also indicated that there has been a considerable drop in the number of deaths linked to cold weather in recent years.

However, with fuel prices likely to remain high for some time, it will be extremely difficult to achieve the current fuel poverty targets. Add to that the capital budget proposed in the draft investment strategy, and the fuel poverty targets could be impossible to achieve. However, I assure Mr Cobain and the House that I am determined to act as a champion for those who are elderly or vulnerable by continuing to seek additional resources, and I would appreciate the support of all my ministerial colleagues in achieving that.

Fuel poverty is measured as a percentage of a person's net income, and it is difficult when that has to be measured against fuel prices, which have risen exponentially in recent months.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends Question Time.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Health Service Reform

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward a Health and Social Services Reform Bill, as a matter of urgency, for consideration by the Assembly.

Mr Buchanan: In 2002 the then Minister for Health, Mr Shaun Woodward, set out his plans for the restructuring of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. At that time, Mr Woodward said:

“the current organisation of health and social services in Northern Ireland is too cumbersome, too bureaucratic, and inefficient.” [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Buchanan: It produced inequalities and unacceptable delays in treatment. He began a rapid programme of reform and modernisation. I met him several times, and, although I never agreed with his continuation of his predecessor's plans for service delivery in the south-west quarter of Northern Ireland, which are still fundamentally flawed, I commend him on his vision and enthusiasm for the modernisation of the entire health structure across the Province.

The new structures were specifically designed to address efficiency and quality by having a smaller number of organisations and a more effective, accountable framework. The establishment of a single health and social services authority to produce regional standards and targets would ensure greater equality and improved consistency in service provision across Northern Ireland. It was envisaged that those structures would be in place by April 2008.

However, it is a matter of grave concern to health professionals, the British Medical Association and those who care about a Health Service that is professionally led and patient centred, that Mr Woodward's vision is lost on the current Health Minister, who has neither the vision nor the will to complete the reform. Rather, he has chosen to delay the entire process, and the services are ebbing back to the dark days of five years ago, when we had the longest waiting lists in Europe.

Such actions by any Minister are indefensible. This motion is before the House that we might impress upon the Minister not only his neglect of duty, but the detrimental consequences that the delay in introducing a health and social services reform Bill are having on service delivery.

Services are already being removed or withheld as a result of the delay. For example, as was mentioned earlier, according to one health trust, the provision of cognitive behavioural therapy is being suspended due

to the uncertainty and is virtually non-existent. How is that in keeping with the Minister's pledge to make mental-health services a priority?

After meeting the Minister on Thursday 11 October 2007, the chairperson of the BMA in Northern Ireland, Dr Brian Patterson, said:

“We were exceedingly alarmed when we first learned of the Minister's decision to delay the changes to the NHS proposed under the Review of Public Administration. However, we are even more concerned because after our meeting today we believe that another 18 months at least may well pass before much needed reforms are put in place.

We were very disappointed that the Minister was unable to identify for us his specific problems with the RPA process, bearing in mind that this review received public consultation twice over the past few years.

We advised Minister McGimpsey and his officials that the stalling in setting up of the commissioning process has serious ramifications for the future of patient care.”

What were those ramifications? An article in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ on Friday 23 November 2007 quoted Mr Andrew Dougal, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke Association, voicing his concern that David Sissling's resignation from Northern Ireland's stalled new health authority could spell:

“a black day for the future of the Health Service”.

The article went on to say that:

“The HSSA was planned as part of sweeping reforms of how the Health Service is run and was at a well-advanced stage when the minister called a halt.”

Mr Dougal is reported as having said that Mr Sissling's departure is:

“likely to mean going back to the old way of doing things, which is not in the best interests of patients or the Health Service”.

Medical professionals and Members who contributed to the debate expressed grave concerns about the detrimental consequences that the Minister's decision to delay the implementation of RPA will have. I want to touch on some of those concerns.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: Certainly not; I do not have much time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mrs Robinson — whose untiring work on behalf of the Health Service I commend — pointed out that fundamental change is essential for the delivery of efficient services in Northern Ireland. She referred to the underachievement in the Health Service and said that too much time was being lost due to the delay in creating one authority. She also highlighted the lack of Health Service productivity in Northern Ireland.

Members of Sinn Féin expressed their concern at the continuing delays in reform; the effect that delays in establishing a single authority and commissioning groups — the main drivers for change — will have; and the need for the Minister to embrace the challenges that

reform presents. It appears that the Minister is unwilling to take on those reforms.

Robert Coulter agreed that reforms are necessary, but back-pedalled on comments by his party leader since Mr McGimpsey took responsibility for health. I have to ask whether that is good for the Health Service of Northern Ireland.

Carmel Hanna and Tommy Gallagher expressed their concern at the delay and said that reform was urgent. They also made a noteworthy point that an excellent Health Service is the hallmark of any decent society. I ask the Minister to take that on board.

Stephen Farry gets everything wrong, and he got it wrong today. He said that this was a row between two parties. Irrespective of who the Health Minister is, the DUP is consistent in its commitment to ensure that patient care comes first. I wish that all parties in the Chamber were as consistent.

Alex Easton outlined measures that the Minister could take to enable him to get on with the job of providing a more streamlined and effective Health Service. Simon Hamilton urged the Minister to be responsible and to do the job rather than being a constant roadblock to the delivery of proper healthcare services in Northern Ireland.

John McCallister sought to quote from the DUP manifesto, but failed to realise that the underfunding has been addressed in the draft Budget, with the Health Service receiving 48% of the block grant and 51% or more of the overall spend.

That sees the health budget double in size, but very little in return.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: No; my time is almost up. The Member has had his opportunity to speak.

George Robinson and Jim Shannon both made the relevant points that for every pound spent, a greater return is required. However, we currently see no dividends from increases in the health budget; therefore, the Minister must tidy up his own house and start to deliver.

The Minister stated the vital need to transform and reform the system, only to make every excuse in the book for delay. That is causing mayhem in the health system.

However, I commend the Minister for adopting the DUP manifesto slogan of "Getting it right". Obviously, the Ulster Unionist Party is beginning to learn something. He stated that current structures have been in place since 1972, and it takes time to get it right. I asked him whether the passage of 35 years was not a reason for moving forward quickly. He also stated that the establishment of local commissioning groups had been delayed because the number of councils had not been confirmed. There is no reason why the process should not commence

and then the commissioning groups be rearranged in order to fit in with the number of councils.

The Minister and his colleagues, who welcomed the new health and social care authority, now call it the "mother of all quangos". That will not be the type of body to which the Minister simply appoints. It will be composed of professional people, who will go through a recruitment process and be appointed on merit. The Minister cannot seek to micromanage every aspect of the Health Service across the Province, and he would be very foolish to try to do so. In manifesto after manifesto, the UUP has supported those reforms. It is time for the Minister to get on with implementing those reforms. It is time that he began to deliver a proper Health Service for the people of Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward a Health and Social Services Reform Bill, as a matter of urgency, for consideration by the Assembly.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Midnight Soccer in West Belfast

Ms J McCann: I am glad to have this opportunity to speak about a project in West Belfast. Midnight soccer is a community football project for young people that was originally set up in north Belfast but has grown so that midnight soccer leagues have been organised in nine different areas across the North of Ireland, four of them in Belfast. To date, more than 1,000 young people have participated in the locally based leagues, whose winners then go forward to the midnight soccer finals, which are to be held in Dundalk. The project initially received funding from the then Sports Council, the Big Lottery Fund and the Youth Justice Agency. Recently, Sport Relief has provided funds to ensure its expansion.

Midnight soccer is about much more than young people simply playing football. It encourages personal development and team-building among participants, and it provides opportunities for them to realise their potential. Some projects, although not all, provide opportunities for participants to avail themselves of accredited coaching training. Midnight soccer provides an alternative for young people, who may instead have spent late evenings at weekends on the street, perhaps even becoming involved in antisocial activity.

Several such projects currently operate in West Belfast, but, as with all positive activities, we could do much more. Some of the projects are partly funded by Belfast City Council and Lisburn City Council, but others, which receive no funding, are almost totally dependent on volunteers. All the projects take hundreds of young people off the streets on Friday nights and encourage them to take part in a sport that is healthy and beneficial, both to themselves and to the wider community.

In the Colin area of West Belfast, which I represent, midnight soccer is a success story that is overlooked by those who continually portray the negative aspects of a small number of young people rather than celebrate the positive achievements of the majority.

The organisers of the projects in our area undertook research, for which participants in midnight soccer were interviewed. Sixty two per cent of the young people involved were not members of a youth club, nor had they previously taken part in any youth club activity. That is evidence that midnight soccer engages with those young people who are difficult to reach, or

who do not engage with other community-based projects. The research showed that 77% of the young people interviewed said that they would have been on the streets drinking alcohol, and 21% said that they would have been misusing drugs on the streets, if they had not been coming to the project every Friday evening.

4.15 pm

Midnight soccer provides a facility whereby a young person has a choice not to walk the streets, vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse or antisocial activity — activities that Members know only too well can have devastating long-term effects on both the young person and members of the local community.

The organisers of many of the midnight soccer projects must be commended for giving up their Friday evenings. In particular, I commend those groups and individuals who do so in a voluntary capacity. Participants in the West Belfast midnight football projects are mostly male. There is an effort to get young females involved in soccer, or a similar sport of their choice. Midnight soccer is one of the most successful projects that there is in West Belfast; the positive impact on the wider community cannot be overemphasised, and there is a real need to expand the service. I hope that funding will be available to that end.

I will conclude by congratulating a local team, Sally Gardens A, who recently won the Colin tournament. I wish them, and the three other teams from Colin, the best of luck in the national finals in Dundalk on 15 December. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the debate, and congratulate Ms McCann on bringing the matter to the Chamber.

To begin with, I will reiterate some of the statistics that Jennifer McCann outlined, and add to them in terms of the success of the project. The evidence of the survey undertaken by Lisburn City Council and other representative groups in West Belfast confirms that 83% of those involved in the midnight soccer scheme say that they would otherwise be walking the streets. Not many projects have that level of uptake from people who would otherwise not be involved in any other youth activity, although I will name other examples later. As the figures also confirm, 62% of those who are involved in the scheme suggested that they would not or had not been involved in one of the local youth clubs. That level of uptake by people who might otherwise be involved in drugs, drink or antisocial activity is a measure of how successful the scheme has been.

Those involved in the midnight soccer scheme would acknowledge that there are a vast array of other youth providers in West Belfast who provide a high level of support to young people who might not otherwise be involved in creative activities, particularly in critical instances and around difficult issues. There are too

many to name, but there are two that I want to name in the context of this debate, the first of which is Corpus Christi Youth Club. As questions to the Minister indicated a short while ago, Ballymurphy has been the centre of difficulties and turbulence over the last 18 months.

Many organisations have provided stability in that area, but one of the main providers of youth facilities has been Corpus Christi Youth Club, which has kept its doors open to all parts of the Ballymurphy community, despite the tensions and difficulties that have existed between some elements of that community.

On the opposite side, there is Gleann Amateur Boxing Club — a boxing club in upper Lenadoon, which I have no doubt that the Maskey family are aware of. Despite being open for only the last six-and-a-half years, and despite having limited funds, the club has nonetheless provided boxing and other facilities to over 100 young people in upper Lenadoon and the Glen Road area. The club has had disproportionate success in boxing competitions — which I highlight particularly because the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is present, and there are ongoing discussions about attempts to provide more stable funding and capital investment in respect of the club.

Therefore, the Corpus Christi Youth Centre, the Gleann Amateur Boxing Club, the midnight street soccer league and interventions by many other youth organisations in West Belfast direct young people on a much more constructive and positive path. All that must be acknowledged and welcomed.

That said, however, there is clearly a need for much wider approaches to be taken to deal with young people who are involved in wrongdoing. Although that leads us somewhat beyond the issue that has been brought to the Floor, all the organisations that provide youth facilities would concur that, unless such activity by young people is dealt with in a wider environment, the good work that is being undertaken by those projects will end up being frustrated. That is why new strategies are needed whereby those who are persistent and habitual offenders are penalised properly for their criminal activities.

It must be acknowledged that many of the children who are involved in those schemes come from backgrounds where there are learning difficulties, addiction problems, broken homes and — as was indicated in a earlier question to the Minister — mental-health problems. It must be acknowledged that, as the Children's Commissioner recently outlined, the percentage of spending on personal and social services for young people in the North is barely 14%. In England and Wales, it is 24%. Clearly, there are funding issues about support and protection for young people, especially those who come from vulnerable backgrounds. The debate confirms that — particularly in West Belfast, where economic and social indicators are so poor — investment in

appropriate leisure and school facilities is needed so that the young people who attend Corpus Christi Youth Centre, the Gleann Amateur Boxing Club or the midnight street soccer league have other opportunities to direct their energy towards more positive outcomes.

Therefore, I welcome the debate and recognise what the midnight street soccer league has achieved in West Belfast and in other parts of the city and the countryside — as Jennifer McCann has outlined — and that there are many other good projects that also deserve recognition. However, structural issues about general youth provision must be dealt with if the midnight street soccer league's good work is to be built on and exploited.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At the outset, I want to place on record the fact that my colleagues and I are in no doubt about the work of many groups in the community and voluntary sector that provide excellent services for children and young people up to the age of around 22 or 23. Without those groups, there would be thousands more young people on the streets every day. Therefore, having taken on board Mr Attwood's comments, I want to take the opportunity to commend those groups for the excellent services that they provide.

The focus of the Adjournment debate, however, is on the midnight street soccer league. I congratulate Jennifer McCann for ensuring that the subject was brought to the Floor of the House. I welcome the Minister to the debate. It is helpful when a Minister listens to Members' comments and provides feedback. The Minister will be aware of the positive work that the midnight street soccer league does. Indeed, it is not so much "midnight" soccer, because some of the groups have been so inundated with young people who want to be involved that they have had to drop their start times in order to accommodate them.

I recall that, shortly after Mr Poots became Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, he was interviewed on television to highlight the positive work that is being done in north Belfast. As one colleague to another, I believe that he needs some extra coaching on his football skills. However, he is aware of that good work, and I hope that he does not show any red cards in his role as Minister.

The majority of debates in the Assembly seem to arise out of the Members' needs to highlight issues in their communities, whether injustice; a lack of facilities; a lack of resources; or lengthy waiting lists. I do not propose changing that because we are in the mouth of Christmas. There are realities that must come to the fore around the issue of midnight soccer, which is one of the good news stories.

As Jennifer McCann has said, more than 1,000 young people take part in midnight soccer every week. That means that over 1,000 young people are off the streets

and taking part in a positive, worthwhile project. It means that 1,000 young people are taking part in sport which will help to ensure that they have a good start to a healthy lifestyle. Everyone will agree that sport can play a positive role in our communities, and has an important role to play in addressing many social issues. Statistics in England, as well as here, have shown that it can help to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour.

Mr F McCann: Does the Member agree that, on many occasions, when such groups get off the ground and start to do excellent work, even the minimal funding that they receive becomes a target for Departments, Councils and other funding agencies? It is seen as an easy way to gather money in for their coffers at a time of cuts in funding.

Does the Member also agree that many sectors—such as youth clubs and outreach youth workers—have come together on an area-wide basis to tackle antisocial activity, and that one of the ways they do that is through midnight soccer and other forms of sport and external activity?

Ms S Ramsey: I concur absolutely with all that the Member has said. Undoubtedly, he looked over Jennifer McCann's shoulder and saw that my next point — *[Interruption.]*

Mr F McCann: I could play football too.

Ms S Ramsey: I think that you should start playing football. Since we are talking about a healthy lifestyle, perhaps we should all play football again. As I said earlier, midnight soccer has a positive aspect, and an impact at community level, for the family unit, and for the individual. I take this opportunity to commend the sports lottery fund, because we must give credit where credit is due. I take on board the point that Mr McCann made.

The sports lottery fund, individuals in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — prior to the Minister's taking up office — and people in the Big Lottery Fund have, with the help of others, played a positive role. They had the foresight to see that it could work in constituencies. Members always talk about providing activities for children and young people. However, we never ask what those children and young people want. Midnight soccer is probably one of the few examples of people in authority, statutory agencies and the local community getting together to provide what is needed.

However, I am concerned about funding, and I return to Fra McCann's point. I have several times raised the concern that moneys are being lost from the Minister's Department, and from organisations that are closely associated with the Minister, to fund the Olympic Games. That has a negative impact on ensuring that midnight soccer, and sports facilities in general, move forward.

A project that was headed up by the Lenadoon Forum, in my constituency of West Belfast, went through all of the hoops and jumped all of the barriers. The project got through every stage except the final one, at which point they should have received their letter of offer, when the carpet was pulled from under them. The reason given to them was that money was being lost to the Olympic Games. Therefore, we need to examine the matter

The main focus of that project was to upgrade facilities and to ensure that they were the best. I do not detract from the good and positive work that is done, mostly by volunteers. The project leaders envisaged bringing the facility into the twenty-first century to ensure that more young people would become involved and healthy, and that, eventually, they would get them off the streets and turn those young people into model citizens of tomorrow. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I welcome the debate on the issue of midnight soccer in West Belfast. At the outset, it is appropriate to consider midnight soccer in its wider context.

I made a statement in the House on 9 October on the introduction of a draft Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation 2007-17. On that occasion, I sought to set out the role of sport in society, tracing participation in sport and physical recreation at all levels, from grass-roots community level to achievement at the highest level. In my statement, I also sought to highlight the value of sport. Taking part in sport is fun, fulfilling and is of value in its own right.

4.30 pm

Equally, sport has the potential to deliver other significant benefits. It can play a vital role in improving public health; contribute to our children's improved academic performance and self-esteem; and Members have outlined how young people were participating in something positive when they may have otherwise been involved in drug-taking or underage drinking.

Sport can be a valuable tool in promoting neighbourhood renewal. Ms Ramsey was right when she said that I had visited north Belfast. In fact, I visited the Waterworks on my first official day in office. I met some of the young lads who were taking part in midnight street soccer. They thoroughly enjoyed participating in a sport that they found fulfilling.

Obviously, sport can touch on TSN issues, social deprivation and a range of areas; and the Department and the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have often put forward that argument. This debate will help to highlight the value of sport at street level, and midnight street soccer is an excellent example of how to bring sport to people who are vulnerable and most in need.

I applaud the midnight street soccer project for its innovative and flexible approach, which brings positive

activity to many young people at the time when they are most susceptible to negative influences. It is important to recognise the foresight of the North Belfast Play Forum, which introduced this concept to Belfast in such a structured manner. Midnight street soccer is more than simply a football project. It incorporates the midnight street soccer championships, aimed at young people between 14 to 17 years of age, and offers five-a-side football in the heart of the community from 9.00 pm to midnight on Saturday nights.

It has introduced the midnight street soccer football club, which offers opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds and communities to participate in leagues, competitions and education programmes. Young people are also provided with opportunities to acquire the skills and qualifications to become football coaches through the midnight street soccer coach education programme. That approach delivers participation, team-building and aspiration, and also provides opportunities for the transfer of coaching skills. Thus, it offers personal development and the potential for long-term community benefit.

Midnight street soccer has established itself in a relatively short period and is quickly becoming a model of best practice in demonstrating the positive impact of sport in addressing social issues. It is currently available at Avoniel Leisure Centre in east Belfast; Brook Activity Centre in the Lisburn City Council area; Brownlow Campus Sports Trust in Craigavon; Cregagh Community Centre, Castlereagh; Paisley Park on the Shankill Road; Olympia Leisure Centre in south Belfast; Shantallow MUGA in Londonderry; the Waterworks Sports Facility in north Belfast; and the Valley Leisure Centre in Newtownabbey.

Although it is still in its infancy, the project in West Belfast has shown encouraging signs. The benefits emerging from it include the provision of opportunities for young people who would not traditionally take part in sport. Those opportunities are available to young people who live in communities that are vulnerable to antisocial behaviour, and the project provides a basis for the development of effective partnerships with local community and voluntary organisations and sports clubs.

So far, midnight soccer has provided important opportunities for local people to gain training and progress into employment. It supports the effective use of council and community facilities at a time when they would otherwise be disused. I encourage the maximum usage of facilities, and I trust that, in future, we will engage more closely with the Department of Education to ensure that the many good facilities that exist can be fully used — and perhaps enhanced as a consequence of that increased usage.

It is an important development in the context of the new draft strategy, which places priority on increasing participation in sport and physical recreation.

Midnight soccer will help to deliver that objective, not just for those who currently take part; it will also create the habit of involvement that can be handed down to succeeding generations.

I concur with those who have expressed concerns about funding. We have lost funding as a result of the diversion of resources to the London Olympics in 2012, and we must examine ways to address that matter. We have sought more funding through the comprehensive spending review and have been successful to an extent. However, the Department would always welcome more financial support so that it can carry out good initiatives such as midnight soccer.

I warmly welcome the support of the House for the midnight soccer initiative in West Belfast. It is a fine example of how local needs can be addressed through the medium of sport and physical recreation. I hope that the project will go from strength to strength and encourage other innovative approaches to further promote participation and involvement.

Adjourned at 4.35 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

7 November 2007

DORMANT BANK AND BUILDING SOCIETY ACCOUNTS BILL: LEGISLATIVE CONSENT BRIEFING

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Mervyn Storey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

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| Mr Neil Lambe | } Department of Finance and Personnel |
| Mrs Agnes Lennon | |

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): The Committee is joined by Agnes Lennon from the central expenditure division of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and Neil Lambe, the principal legal officer of the Departmental Solicitor's Office of DFP, who has been here before.

You are very welcome this morning. You have come to brief the Committee on the legislative consent motion for the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill. Will you share your wisdom and thoughts with the Committee?

Mrs Agnes Lennon (Department of Finance and Personnel): If the Committee considers it useful, we will recap on the scheme. It was as early as 2005 that it was first announced officially that the Government were considering working with the banking industry to develop a scheme to allow dormant accounts that are on the balance sheets of banks and building societies to be reinvested in local communities.

For a couple of years, the Government engaged with the banking industry, and two public consultation exercises were carried out earlier this year. As a result, the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts

Bill is being introduced in Westminster, and our latest information is that that will happen today.

However, I must point out that given that banking and financial services is a reserved matter, the Northern Ireland Assembly cannot legislate on it. Nevertheless, in the spirit of devolution, the Government decided to make provision in the Bill for the devolved Administrations to set the spending priorities and to have some input into the distribution in their jurisdictions.

That brings us full circle to explaining the reason that the Committee is discussing the Bill today. The Bill confers new functions on the Department of Finance and Personnel and, therefore, the Assembly must pass a legislative consent motion. The current plan is that that will happen later this month, possibly on 20 November.

The first stage of the scheme will be a reuniting exercise, as was discussed at the previous Committee meeting. The exercise is already under way, and some members noticed advertisements for it in the press. The exercise aims to reunite customers with their dormant accounts if at all possible.

The scheme is voluntary and will remain in the banking and financial services sector. Government will not seize assets: the scheme does not come under the remit of Government budgets or the Northern Ireland Budget. The Government's role has been to introduce the enabling legislation for the scheme.

The Bill defines a dormant account as one in which there has been no customer-initiated activity in the past 15 years. It has been mentioned publicly that the current value of existing dormant accounts could amount to as much as £500 million across the United Kingdom, but others feel that that is a conservative estimate. Furthermore, tens of millions of pounds recur thereafter. The Bill would ensure that Northern Ireland would receive its population share of the figure, which could initially amount to between £10 million and £20 million, with hundreds of thousands of pounds recurrently being dispersed each year thereafter.

If the Assembly agreed the legislative consent notion, the idea is that the Bill would allow the proceeds of dormant accounts to be transferred into a reclaim fund, which would be set up in the banking sector independently of the industry and of Government. The fund would be regulated by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). To digress, because there was some discussion of the issue in the previous Committee meeting, the Bill also provides an alternative option for smaller banks and building societies. They will be permitted to deposit an agreed portion of the dormant accounts into the reclaim fund — an amount that the fund determined would be sufficient to meet the reclaim risk — and, if they

wish, they can pay the remainder to charities that are local to the bank branch or to those that have a special connection to the building society.

The reclaim fund will invest those proceeds. It will be the duty of the fund to make a prudent assessment of the reclaim risk and keep that amount invested. The remainder will be available for distribution. The distribution vehicle that is set out in the Bill is the Big Lottery Fund (BIG), which was chosen in the interests of efficiency because it already has a UK-wide structure as well as experience of distributing funds efficiently across the UK. I recognise that that gives rise to ethical concerns in Northern Ireland, and the Minister is aware of those concerns. We have worked with the Treasury to address some of those issues.

The Assembly will be able to set and agree Northern Ireland's priorities. The Department of Finance and Personnel will consult with other Departments and key stakeholders and will take the matter out to public consultation. The Committee will also have a role to play, and an Order that is subject to affirmative resolution will be laid before the Assembly, setting those priorities for Northern Ireland. The role of the Assembly therefore brings us full circle to the reason that we are discussing the matter today.

The Chairperson: OK. Mr Lambe, do you wish to add anything?

Mr Neil Lambe (Department of Finance and Personnel): No, Chairperson. However, I am willing to answer questions.

The Chairperson: Members will note the response that we received to last week's discussion, a copy of which is in the members' pack.

Mr Storey: Once the Bill is enacted, will protocols or a consultation process be established for the distribution of the reclaim fund, or will the mechanism be set out in the legislation itself? For example, if a building society deposits x thousands of pounds into the reclaim fund, someone will have to arbitrate or decide on which needy cause the money will be allocated to. How will that work in practice?

Mrs Lennon: The reclaim fund will invest the money that it receives. For example, the Assembly will set the priorities for how that money is spent in Northern Ireland and give direction to BIG as to how it should be spent. As and when the money is required, BIG will withdraw it from the reclaim fund. Does that answer your question, or am I missing the point?

Mr Storey: I am still unsure as to what rules will govern the reclaim fund on practical issues. What guidance will there be?

Mr Lambe: Not all the details will be spelt out in the legislation. The Treasury's approach is what it calls a "light regulatory touch". The success of the scheme

relies to a large extent on agency arrangements between participating banks and building societies in their dealings with the reclaim fund and how identified dormant accounts will be transferred to the central reclaim fund. The fund will have a separate agency agreement with the Big Lottery Fund, and they will agree how the amount that needs to be retained by the central reclaim fund and the amount that is then passed on to the Big Lottery Fund for distribution across the United Kingdom.

The Chairperson: Is your question related to that, Simon?

Mr Hamilton: It is. I thank Agnes for her summary. It is no reflection on her, but I remain to be convinced about the Bill in general, not least because her summary mentioned the huge bureaucracy that will be involved in the scheme. For example, there will be a reclaim fund with various rules attached, and there will be protocols with the Big Lottery Fund and so on. Dormant things should perhaps be left dormant.

However, I am convinced that if we do not get on board with the scheme, we may lose out significantly. My question concerns the directions that the Northern Ireland Executive can give to the Big Lottery Fund as to where the money should be distributed. How specific can those directions be? Can matters such as roads be considered as a general theme, or would particular types of roads have to be specified? Can the scheme relate broadly to education, or would it have to concern certain elements in schools or colleges? Would the direction concern general or specific matters?

Mrs Lennon: Guidance can be specific. As we consult and develop the priorities, I would expect them to be fairly specific.

The Chairperson: My question is related to that topic, but approaches it from a different angle. It is stated in your submission that clarifies matters that were raised previously in the Committee that: "The Executive and the Assembly will have the final agreement on the priorities."

How does that process work? How do we get to the point of making that decision?

Mr Lambe: The Bill confers executive functions on the Department of Finance and Personnel. That process identifies which Department in the Northern Ireland Executive is taking the lead. The legislation specifies that the priorities for Northern Ireland, which DFP as the lead Department will determine initially, will be contained in a draft affirmative Order that will then be laid before the Assembly.

Once the officials have done their work and there is broad agreement at Executive level as to what the spending priorities will be for Northern Ireland, the Minister will lay a draft Order for debate in and

affirmation by the Assembly. If the Assembly does not affirm the motion on the draft Order, no spending priorities for Northern Ireland will be set through that mechanism. That is the reason that we say that the Assembly and the Executive have ultimate control. If the Assembly decides not to affirm the motion, we are back to reworking and re-identifying suitable priorities for Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Do members have any questions that are related to that?

Mr F McCann: The Chairperson has touched on part of my question already. As someone has said, the scheme seems to be an administrative nightmare that is waiting to hit us. Obviously, the banks are in control of all the accounts at present. Are banks or building societies compensated in any way for the administration that they have to provide?

Mr Lambe: There is no provision in the Bill for the recoupment of the expenses or costs that are incurred by the financial institutions. The scheme has the support of the banking and building societies. They will simply incur their own costs.

Mr F McCann: I have not yet come across a bank or building society that is willing to do something for nothing.

Mr Lambe: The financial sector is taking the view that it is not their money — it is the customers' money that is simply sitting on their balance sheet. When the money is transferred to the reclaim fund, those amounts fall off the individual financial institution's balance sheets in accordance with international accounting rules. Primary legislation is therefore required to deal with the extinguishment of the individual building society's liability — to the customer — and the transfer of that liability to the central reclaim fund, which then owes the customer the money, should they seek repayment.

Mr Beggs: Smaller banks are defined as those that have an assets base that has less than £7 billion. Most people do not have a clue what £7 billion looks like; certainly I do not.

The Chairperson: Are you declaring an interest?

Mr Beggs: Are the banks in Northern Ireland above or below that threshold?

Mrs Lennon: Across the UK, a small number of banks fall within that threshold. However, out of 60 building societies in the UK, approximately 52 fall within that threshold. In Northern Ireland specifically, the Progressive Building Society and the City of Derry Building Society fall within that category.

Mr Lambe: To clarify, the individual banks that operate in Northern Ireland are unlikely to fall under the £7 billion-asset level because banks are assessed

on a group asset level, not as individual, identifiable brands.

Mr Beggs: Simon Hamilton the direction that would be given on matters such as roads and education. I thought that the scheme was designed to be open to applications from the voluntary sector. Is it the case that it is not being directed towards Departments? Can the Government set the wider framework to enable people to apply for schemes that affect the environment, children and young people? Is that the role that the Department of Finance and Personnel may have?

Mrs Lennon: Yes. The Department of Finance and Personnel will set the criteria for the applications for the spending in Northern Ireland. The Government will not take any of the money; it is not part of our Budget, or our in-year monitoring rounds. The money that is involved is separate and sits in the banking sector.

Mr Beggs: Many organisations have sensitivities about the lottery, and owing to reasons of conscience, they have not applied to it for funding. You said that the Treasury would adopt a light regulatory touch that would allow for some flexibility. I am aware that the Big Lottery Fund will be handling the money, but can a certain amount be directed towards an organisation that is not necessarily connected to the lottery, for example NICVA? Is there a process through which further distance can be put between the Big Lottery Fund and the money? The scheme will undoubtedly be tainted if the Big Lottery Fund is handling the money.

Mr Lambe: The Bill contains a provision that allows the Treasury to appoint alternative distributors. However, the Bill itself identifies BIG as the distributor.

Dr Farry: I apologise for being late. A question was asked about the type of formula that is being used to distribute the funds across the UK, but the answer was not clear. Will the money be distributed on a population basis, or will it be based on relative need as is the case with the Barnett formula? Population- and relative need-based schemes are fundamentally different and produce radically different funding results.

Mrs Lennon: Although people refer to the distribution of the scheme as per the Barnett formula, strictly speaking, it is based on population share. Therefore, Northern Ireland would get its population share of the total sum. At the moment, that is around 2·8%, and it will be revised each year according to the population share.

Dr Farry: Is the Northern Ireland block grant not based on population share?

Mrs Lennon: No; that is totally different.

Dr Farry: I appreciate that they are different concepts, but I am trying to clarify that money coming to Northern Ireland is based on population share rather than on the needs assessment that is behind the Barnett

formula. Therefore, compared to what we receive from formal tax revenue, we will not get less.

Mrs Lennon: That depends.

Dr Farry: Why?

Mr Lambe: The population-share formula was simply regarded as the most equitable. It is not Government spend; it is money that belongs to bank and building society customers across the UK. To keep the formula simple, a straightforward population-share allocation is used. That allocation applies to the main scheme. Given that the conditions of the smaller scheme mean that those banks and building societies that have an assets base of less than £7 billion decide where the money will go, it is likely that all the dormant account money in the Progressive Building Society, for example, will be allocated to charitable purposes in Northern Ireland. I do not know whether that institution has a branch network outside of Northern Ireland, but I doubt it.

Dr Farry: Money for good causes is not distributed across the UK based on how the population lives; it is skewed in proportion to relative need. The money may be raised on an equitable or a population basis across the UK, but if you try to direct spending to good causes, you will find that some regions of the UK will be in greater need than others such as those that are in the south-east of England.

Mr Lambe: That is a fair criticism of the formula that has been adopted. It is not a needs-based approach to distribution between the four jurisdictions, but that is the formula that the Treasury has adopted.

The Chairperson: Does the formula take account of the dispersal, location, or reasons for locations of building society branches or banks, which, to put it crudely, tend to follow the money thus allowing areas of exceptional need to fall through the net?

Mr Lambe: The formula is straightforward: x% goes to England and y% goes to Scotland and so on. Those percentages on a year-on-year basis will be set out in an Order that is made by Treasury.

Mr Weir: Stephen is being hard on distressed stockbrokers who have fallen on hard times, many of whom live in the south-east of England. Charities of that nature are worthy of support.

The Chairperson: I am sure that a few stockbrokers live in his constituency.

Mr Weir: The flip side of the small scheme is that local branches of banks and building societies may distribute their own assets. Probably not a great deal can be done about this, but there is a danger that some of the smaller banks and building societies will try to do some reconciliation across the UK, and the money may end up in one or two central funds. Therefore, the

amount of assets realised by a building society across the UK may amount to £100,000, but the building society may make a decision about £200 that has been found in an account in a branch in Ballymena — although I suspect that if £200 were found in an account in Ballymena, long-dead people would race in to claim the money.

Rather than the money going to local charities, those banks and building societies may want to make a grand gesture even if there are local implications. A bank that finds that it has £100,000 across its branches may make a big issue of giving that £100,000 to the Save the Children fund. Are the regulations for the distribution of grants under which the Big Lottery Fund operates restricted to those charities, or good causes, that will spend the money in the UK? Does the Big Lottery Fund have the option to make a donation to a charity that is involved in, for example, aid to Africa?

Mrs Lennon: The Big Lottery Fund does not decide on the priorities; the Department will set the criteria.

Mr Weir: What would happen if the Executive did not want to be too prescriptive in their criteria and said that out of £10 million that has been allocated to Northern Ireland and that will be handled by the Big Lottery Fund, £2 million should be spent on children's issues? Can the Big Lottery Fund give any money, restricted or not, to charities or worthy causes that operate outside the UK, such as a disaster fund?

Mrs Lennon: That would still be subject to the criteria that we set.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that there would be an opportunity for further restriction. I appreciate that we can put whatever restrictions we like on the Big Lottery Fund. However, is it normally restrained by its own general criteria that allow it to give money only to charities that operate, and spend their donations, in the UK?

Mr Lambe: I am not sure whether such restrictions apply in its distribution of lottery money. There is nothing in the Bill that will restrict the Big Lottery Fund's giving grants to individual organisations. If the Department does not want the money to be used outside this jurisdiction, it would have to specify that in the priorities or in the further directions that it issues to BIG. I imagine that BIG's approach, even where distribution of lottery funding is concerned, would be that there would have to be good reasons for giving a grant or a loan to an organisation that operates outside the jurisdiction.

Mr Weir: At the other extreme, it is clear that the intention is to provide criteria and a framework to which BIG can work. Taking into account what is permissible under the legislation, does the Executive have any discretion to say that a percentage of the money that is allocated to Northern Ireland that was due to go to a certain fund can be held back? Can the

Executive direct that if, for example, £10 million is allocated, 10% should be taken for a certain purpose? That direction may be that a separate fund should be set up that cannot be distributed by any group that is connected to the lottery. What level of discretion is there to set definitive criteria that effectively remove some of BIG's spending power?

Mrs Lennon: The Bill leaves it open for Northern Ireland to set its own criteria and give directions to BIG. Those directions can be as tight, or as loose, as the Executive and the Assembly wish.

Mr Weir: Is the Executive in a position to take money directly off BIG and state that it should be spent differently?

Many of us may not be too keen on this option, but if, for the sake of argument, the Executive were to decide that some of that money should go to a particular road programme, for instance, and they gave a critical direction that £2 million of the BIG money should be allocated to that road programme, would BIG just become a channel through which that directly operates?

Mr Lambe: In relation to what is, I think, the more important question, BIG is the distributor of those funds, and it would distribute the funds under the direction of the Department and in accordance with the framework established. The Executive would not have power to divert a percentage of the Northern Ireland portion away from BIG to be used for other purposes. All of the money must go to BIG under the framework, and it will make the individual funding decisions, but within the framework of priorities.

Mr Beggs: Did you not say that there was an option for appointing someone other than BIG?

Mr Lambe: That option is a power that is vested in the Treasury. There is no devolved power for the different jurisdictions.

Mr F McCann: How can you guarantee that the money is additional and not just from the Big Lottery Fund's general fund?

Mrs Lennon: There will be quite separate accounting and management for that strand of money. That is all provided for in the Bill. After the Department of Finance and Personnel has given directions, it can ask the Big Lottery Fund to set out a strategic plan for how it will deliver those directions. That plan can be laid in the Assembly. BIG also has to produce an annual report that will be laid in the Assembly. It will also have to produce an annual statement of accounts that will be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and that will also be laid in the Assembly.

Mr Storey: Will the money be clearly identified as coming from that fund?

Mrs Lennon: That fund will be totally separate. It must be borne in mind that the origins of the money for the fund will not be from gambling.

The Chairperson: Will the dispersal and accessing of the funds be reviewed and assessed annually?

Mr Lambe: The legislation does not require any periodic review of the particular spending priorities that will apply to any one jurisdiction. The Department could make a fresh order, setting fresh priorities every year if it wished. However, I imagine that it would want to leave at least a couple of years after it has first set the priorities, just to ensure that there is a process of funding, rather than giving away all of the money today and having to think up a new set of priorities for next year.

The Chairperson: That would be for the Department, with the agreement of the Executive, to decide. I am just considering some of the concerns around the table about how the money will be categorised and about the Big Lottery Fund's involvement. Would there be a process where people could amend or deal with those concerns, based on experience? What is the vision? Presumably people will come up with responses to some of the problems that may emerge.

Mr Lambe: I imagine that there will have to be a period of review to examine how BIG is distributing the money in Northern Ireland and how successful the channelling of fresh funds to the voluntary and community sector has been. There will inevitably have to be a period of time before which a proper assessment can be made of how worthwhile the new funding stream has been.

Mrs Lennon: As Neil pointed out earlier, the Bill is quite light touch, so all of those matters are in the gift of the Assembly and the Department to set.

Mr Storey: My question goes back to the beginning of the process. The scheme is voluntary, and it will obviously depend on the goodwill of the banks and building societies. What protection will they have, because there is the issue of confidentiality in customer relationships? Is there a specified time that the money must have lain dormant?

Mrs Lennon: The accounts must be dormant for 15 years, without any customer-initiated activity.

Mr Storey: Is there any possibility that at some stage someone would challenge the decision of the bank and actually divert x number of pounds into the fund. How transparent is that process? Does the bank have to make a declaration? Suppose an uncle who had £20,000 in the bank 30 years ago passed away and left no will, and all of a sudden the money is transferred from his account to that fund. How is the bank protected against someone making even a spurious claim?

Mr Lambe: The banks and building societies have undertaken to retain customer records in perpetuity. When money is transferred to the reclaim fund, the names of the participating financial institutions will be published, along with the amount of money that has been transferred. However, as individual financial institutions retain the records, they will know that on a certain date Mr X's bank account was identified as being dormant and the money transferred.

Mrs Lennon: The onus is on the reclaim fund to keep a prudent amount back against the risk of reclaim in the future. That is part of its duties.

Mr McQuillan: So the reclaim fund is liable if the money has to be paid back?

Mrs Lennon: Ultimately, it is the reclaim fund. The customer will go to the bank. The bank will pay the money and then reclaim it.

The Chairperson: I presume that there is a formula that defines a "prudent amount" — that could vary from bank to bank. There must be a formula that will establish a threshold percentage to be retained for reinvestment to cover reclaims.

Mrs Lennon: That is right, and it is part of the Financial Services Authority's remit to oversee that.

Mr Lambe: There will be no formula in the Bill that establishes, for example, what percentage —

The Chairperson: The regulatory authority would negotiate and stand over that percentage.

Mr Lambe: The Bill's regulatory approach imposes an obligation of prudence on the reclaim fund.

The Chairperson: But it would not be prescriptive, which would allow for fluctuations in investment rates, and so on.

Mr Lambe: It is also likely perhaps that in the initial years of the scheme the reclaim fund will hold back a larger amount than it actually needs to meet reclaim risk.

The Chairperson: Agnes and Neil, thank you very much. That was very helpful.

Members, if there are no other comments, I shall put the question to the Committee that it agrees the following motion:

"That the Committee for Finance and Personnel supports the Department of Finance and Personnel in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill to Northern Ireland."

Members indicated assent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE ARTS AND LEISURE

Thursday 8 November 2007

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McNarry): I advise members that this session will be reported by Hansard. The Bill Clerk is also in attendance; once again, he is very welcome.

The Committee put a range of questions and suggestions to the Minister following his evidence session and the Committee's subsequent discussions. His response on costs has been received, and responses on the other issues are due by 14 November. The outstanding issues are set out in the members' packs. Members should bear in mind that responses are due by 14 November and that we will continue to chase them up.

The Committee asked the Minister to provide more concrete figures on start-up costs for the proposed library authority: originally, those costs were estimated at £670,000. However, because the start date has been deferred until 1 April 2009, start-up costs will now be — would you believe it? — as follows: £350,000 until the end of March 2008, and £825,000 for 2008-09. That is a total of £1.175 million. Furthermore, start-up costs for the provision of corporate services, which the Minister dealt with separately, are estimated to be £1 million. That money will be spent during 2008-09. Therefore, even allowing for an estimate — and we should use the word "estimate" — we now have a total start-up cost figure of £2.175 million.

Members will recall that the Committee asked the Minister if he would be prepared to amend the start-up costs that are stated in the explanatory and financial memorandum. The Minister has explained that when the Bill is enacted, the accompanying explanatory and financial memorandum will not include a section on financial implications, and that the costs provided in the memorandum have been included primarily to assist us and our MLA colleagues when scrutinising the Bill.

However, we now have it in writing from the Minister that the anticipated start-up costs are significantly higher — the word "significantly" being a bit of an understatement — than he originally estimated. The Minister's letter will be included in the Committee's report and will form part of the public record. The Committee has, therefore, effectively persuaded the Department to accept that it originally underestimated the start-up costs for the new library authority. Well done, Committee. I think we have made our point. At times, it might have been like pulling teeth, but fair play to the Minister; he has realised the facts.

Mr P Ramsey: I take the point that it has been difficult to obtain the figures, but I still do not believe that they represent the true costs involved. The Committee Clerk tabled several questions to the Minister on branding, redundancies and other matters, and it is clear that the figures will be revised continuously. The Minister confirmed that Deloitte will be coming on board to examine those costs. The figures before us today may be more representative than those produced by the education and library boards, but they are still low. I believe that costs will be much higher due to branding, redundancies, establishing a new headquarters and, perhaps, a subregional office. As you have said, Mr Deputy Chairperson, all we can do is wait until 14 November for a response.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are members content to note the Minister's response, perhaps including Pat Ramsey's caveat that we note it with caution?

Mr K Robinson: I suggest that we note the Minister's comments but continue to monitor the situation.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Committee has a proposal from Ken and Pat to note and continue to monitor the Minister's comments. Is the Committee content?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Minister said that the case for redundancies will be considered in light of the fact that, in conjunction with senior library staff, the chief executive designate is working on the organisational structure. Is the Committee content to note the Minister's response?

Mr Shannon: Will the Committee receive early information on the details of redundancies? I would like to think that we would not find out from someone else, which happens all the time.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is an excellent point. Previously, the Committee indicated that it was probing — and would continue to probe — for information, and, as the situation unfolds, I am sure that the unions will have something to say on those matters. Do members agree that the Committee should write to the Minister to inform him that it is content with his response but wishes to be continuously informed?

Mr Shannon: The Committee wants to be kept informed. It is frustrating to get third-hand information from unions or from those who are directly affected by decisions. The Committee must be kept up to speed with what is happening. The Deputy Chairperson's previous comments are correct. It is due to the Committee's efforts that it now has a more representative figure for start-up costs. The Committee has a responsibility in these matters and deserves to be kept informed.

The Deputy Chairperson: Does the Committee agree to pursue the information as proposed by Jim Shannon and seconded by Pat Ramsey?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: The Minister has also provided a synopsis of the Deloitte report on corporate services for the proposed library authority.

Mr K Robinson: The synopsis includes a phrase that the Committee Clerk should note for future reference. It states that the efficient solution should provide the appropriate level of functioning without being "administration rich". That is a lovely phrase; it should be put to greater use.

The Deputy Chairperson: We must take note of that and use it in future.

Mr K Robinson: It would go down well in a party manifesto. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Ramsey: We are administration poor: we are fighting for Hansard to cover our meetings.

Mr McCausland: The Deloitte report proposes options for finance systems. Option 5B is:

"the Library Authority extending (or sharing) systems currently used by other DCAL NDPBs, with in-house provision of transaction services in relation to finance, procurement and payroll."

How many non-departmental public bodies are there? Is there currently any sharing of systems? Is it the intention that they will all share one system? If, in the end, that were to happen, how would it be implemented, and would bodies such as OSNI or the museums be included? Can we ask for a better picture because the synopsis is not clear on those points?

The Deputy Chairperson: Do members agree that we need that information, and do we support Mr McCausland's request write to ascertain it?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: Members should consider the Department's conclusion, which is marvellously written — we should get hold of some of the scriptwriters — and we may wish to come back to it at a later date. I believe that it covers some of the points on service sharing that Nelson McCausland referred to: "the exercise has helped identify the difficulties finding suitable sharing partners in the time needed for setting up such arrangements. In particular, maintaining shared arrangements with education beyond the end of the Education and Library Board is not the automatic solution it might appear".

That does not appear to be a conclusion to me: it seems to say that that is a problem for the future, and that it will be up to someone else to sort it out. Should we draw the Minister's attention to the conclusion and ask him to explain it — or can somebody explain it now?

Mr McCausland: The conclusion states that: "the exercise has helped identify the difficulties of finding suitable sharing partners".

Was it not also said that the sharing partners would be the other NDPBs?

The Deputy Chairperson: That sentence jumped out at me because it was under the heading "Conclusion": it does not look like one.

Mr McCausland: It is more like confusion than conclusion.

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes; confusion rather than conclusion. Is the Committee content to write to the Minister to ask for clarification?

Mr Shannon: Would it qualify for a "gobbledegook of the year" award?

The Deputy Chairperson: As Chairperson, I am prohibited from using such words. However, thank you very much for allowing me to say that I welcome your use of the word gobbledegook. *[Laughter.]*

Is the Committee content to write to the Minister to ask for clarification?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: I refer Members to the Minister's response dated 1 November to the Committee's proposed rewording of clause 6 — I apologise that members are only reading it now. The Minister has explained that not all borrowing and information access is free of charge. Consequently, the Committee's proposed wording would not reflect current practice. He also points out that the Committee's wording is not sufficiently specific

in legal terms. The Minister states that he will consider any further form of words suggested by the Committee. Do Members wish to pursue the rewording of clause 6? If so — and without putting words in the mouths of members — would the Committee be minded to ask the Bill Office to provide further guidance and to clarify the Minister's point that the Committee's wording is not sufficiently specific in legal terms?

Mr McCausland: Having only just seen the response, that would make sense.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is the Committee content?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is another job for the Bill Clerk.

Regarding discussions between DCAL and the Department of Education about the education and skills authority, the Minister's response, dated 29 October, states that both Departments are meeting regularly to ensure that there will be a common approach on staff transfers so that there will be equal treatment of all staff. Are Members content to note the Minister's response?

Mr K Robinson: I have a general comment, which is not specifically about the Minister's response. The education and library boards have built up an experienced body of staff over the years who are not necessarily qualified to the same level as more recent recruits. I am concerned that their experience, which in some cases has held the boards together during difficult days, will be sidetracked in the new terms and conditions introduced under the new regime, meaning that the dedication, loyalty and expertise of those staff will not be fully recognised. There is unease among some members of staff.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do you want the Committee to flag that up?

Mr K Robinson: I would welcome the Committee drawing attention to that because there is unease and uncertainty; those members of staff have served through very difficult times. I will not go any further as Hansard is reporting the meeting.

The Deputy Chairperson: We have heard Ken Robinson's view — are Members in favour of raising the issue?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McCausland: At what point was recruitment undertaken for the post of chief executive designate?

The Deputy Chairperson: My recollection is that the Assembly was just back in business. The Minister asked the Committee Chairman and me to visit him. I mentioned appointments with the Minister at that point — to be fair to him, he was only in post. When I asked

him about the chief executive designate, he said that he did not know that the post had been advertised. He was corrected by his officials, who said that the post had been advertised. Therefore, we could look back to that point. The post was advertised, but not by him.

Mr McCausland: That is the point. We are being told that if the legislation proceeds, the new library authority will not come into being until a later date. Therefore, there will be a longer period during which the chief executive designate — and others — will be paid. That will be happening because of a decision taken by a Minister and civil servants under direct rule and before the Committee had an opportunity to consider the legislation. The costs attached to that decision have now increased, and it would be helpful if the Committee could have a timeline indicating at what point, under direct rule, recruitment for the post of chief executive was started. The recruitment process would have taken quite a while.

The Deputy Chairperson: We should bear in mind that the recruitment of the chief executive designate was on a secondment basis, which probably made it easier to fast-track the process. We have continually questioned the Minister about that. Should we enter into that process, or do members want to leave it until they see the outcome?

Mr McCausland: Yes. I just want to see the timeline for the whole process.

The Deputy Chairperson: I can anticipate the issue that you are going to raise. Perhaps, the Committee should wait until it has received the information first.

The Committee Clerk: The Department may say that it cannot produce documents or give evidence pertaining to an earlier mandate.

The Deputy Chairperson: That may be the case. However, we are dealing with a situation in which the chief executive designate was seconded rather than appointed. The Committee has met her successor who is chief executive designate of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The answer can be obtained by discovering when he entered into the secondment process and what advertisement he responded to, because the post had to be advertised.

Mr McCausland: I attended a meeting in Scotland last week at which there was talk about the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The Scottish official who is in charge of freedom of information requests there stated that gaining access to documentation from previous administrations is not an issue. If a person asks for information, they can get it under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The official also made the point that because a document has the word "draft" written on it does not preclude it from being accessed under the Freedom of Information Act 2000; something

which is sometimes used as an excuse for not releasing information.

The Bill Clerk: The use of the word “draft” would only apply if the refusal to provide information were on the basis that the document would be published. If it were not going to be published, then there would be no defence for not disclosing it on the basis that it is in draft format.

The Deputy Chairperson: We can progress the matter on the basis that it is a genuine request. Why should the Committee not be given the information? A refusal to provide the information will serve to increase our suspicions on the matter, and that should not be done.

The Minister responded on 29 October about the schools’ library service. That response has only just arrived, which is why members are just receiving it now. The delay has been due to others collating the information.

The Minister states that the chief librarians are working on how the schools’ library service and the new library authority might best work together. That is very good news. The two Departments will then have to consider any new arrangements before an appropriate service level agreement can be drawn up.

The Minister states that it is not yet clear whether other service level agreements will be required between the library authority and the education and skills authority. I do not want to put words in members’ mouths, but if it does become clear that other agreements will be required, we would like to know about them. Are members content to note the Minister’s response?

Members indicated assent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

8 November 2007

PENSIONS BILL: ACCELERATED PASSAGE REQUEST

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Gregory Campbell (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Jonathan Craig
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Ms Margaret Ritchie | } Minister for Social Development |
| Mr Gerry McCann | } Department for Social Development |
| Mr John O'Neill | } |

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): Minister, you are welcome. I understand that you have a strict time limit.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): That is right.

The Chairperson: We are going to do our best, not least because I have a similar time limit. We will endeavour to keep to those time restrictions.

You are here in relation to the Pensions Bill and a request for accelerated passage. Would you and your officials like to outline the case for that?

Ms Ritchie: That is what I would like to do, Chairman. I am conscious that the Committee has already had two briefings on the Bill from my officials, one in June and another in October. I will briefly refer to the content of the Bill and the equality impact assessment, and then go on to the reasons for accelerated passage, if you are content.

I am pleased to be here and to continue my engagement with the Committee. It is essential that the Pensions Bill should be subject to accelerated

passage. It is not something that I do lightly. There are various reasons for it; all of this is underpinned by the principle of parity, so there is little option in this.

Members will recall that my officials provided briefings on the proposals in June and again in October. Nevertheless, it might be helpful if I explained some of the background.

The Pensions Bill mirrors the provisions of the Westminster Pensions Act 2007, which received Royal Assent on 26 July. It contains a package of reforms in a number of areas. Its reforms to the state pension will particularly benefit women and carers and will make the system fairer by reducing the number of qualifying years required for a full state pension to 30 for both men and women. Currently, only 40% of women in Northern Ireland are entitled to a full category A pension. Under the proposals, it is anticipated that, in 2010, 75% of women reaching state pension age will be entitled to a full pension — rising to 90% by 2025. Category B pensions — based on a spouse's National Insurance record — will cease to be conditional on the spouse's claiming their pension. Category B pensions will be available to married men and civil partners from 2010.

A new credit-based system will be introduced for parents and carers. The Bill will provide for the basic state pension to be uprated in line with earnings rather than prices, and will ensure that the standard minimum guarantee element of pension credit will also be uprated annually in line with earnings. The Bill reforms and simplifies the state second pension, abolishes adult dependency increases in category A and C retirement pensions, and puts protections in place for the small number of people — 1,100 at September 2006 — affected by that change.

The reality of an ageing population is confronted by ensuring a sustainable future for the state pension scheme: by increasing the state pension age from 65 to 68 years of age, over a 30-year period, but with protections for those unable to work between the ages of 65 and 68 through a corresponding extension in availability of working-age benefits.

The Bill also simplifies private pension arrangements, encourages saving for retirement, and provides for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority, in preparation for the introduction of a personal account system to enable people to save for retirement. Members will be aware that another pensions Bill was mentioned in the Queen's Speech two days ago; it will deal with the mechanisms of that.

With your indulgence, Chairperson, and that of your Committee, I will now move on to the equality impact assessment. This Bill has been subjected to a full equality impact assessment. One response was

received, from Disability Action, which pointed out that 2·2 million pensioners were living in poverty in the UK. The equality impact assessment identified a number of differential impacts, mostly beneficial, on the groups set out in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Some of the impacts are unintentional and, indeed, incidental, given the population breakdown. Where there is an identifiable adverse impact, for example, in relation to the abolition of adult dependency increases and increases in state pension age, there are mitigating factors.

I will now turn to the issue of accelerated passage, and the reasons why it is necessary to seek accelerated passage for this Bill. The Committee is aware that social security and pensions are policy areas in which there has been a long-standing principle of parity with Great Britain. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on me, and on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, to seek to maintain single systems of social security and pensions in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Members are also aware of the constraints of parity, both in terms of what is operationally possible given common computer systems, and, crucially, the very substantial funding that we receive from the Treasury to pay benefits here. All members are aware of annually managed expenditure, which is currently around £2·4 billion a year. Members know that that funding is predicated on the maintenance of parity. To put that in context, the amount received from the Treasury in 2004-05 to fund our benefits exceeded the total amount of income tax raised in Northern Ireland. Parity is underpinned by sound economic imperatives.

Planning for retirement is a long-term process, and the rationale for commencing the provisions of the Pensions Act 2007 in this way was to allow people to plan with certainty for retirement. We are already finding that this is causing operational difficulties, for example, in relation to retirement pension forecasting. If this Bill were to be subject to the full legislative procedure, people here would be disadvantaged for some months to come, in that they would be unable to plan with any certainty.

Furthermore, until now, the standard minimum guarantee of pension credit has been uprated purely at the discretion of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The purpose of the standard minimum guarantee, which is currently £119·05 for a single person and £181·70 for a couple, is to ensure that no pensioner has to live on less than the guarantee. The Pensions Act 2007 places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to uprate the standard minimum guarantee of pension credit annually in line with earnings. That takes effect from the uprating in April 2008.

My Department has no power to uprate benefits unilaterally in Northern Ireland, but the Pensions Bill will empower the Department to make an Order to uprate the standard minimum guarantee in Northern Ireland to the same rate. As the Committee knows, the Pensions Act 2007 received Royal Assent on 26 July, and the majority of the provisions in that Act were brought into force about two months thereafter, even though most of the provisions will have no practical effect until 2010 onwards.

If the Pensions Bill is to be subject to the full procedure, there could be no guarantee of its receiving Royal Assent in time to allow the necessary Order to be made. The Department, therefore, would have no power to uprate the standard minimum guarantee in Northern Ireland, and claimants here would remain entitled to the 2007-08 rate. Therefore, they would be at a severe financial disadvantage, and no one wants that to happen.

The practical impact of that is perhaps the starkest reason why the use of accelerated passage procedure is justified. Without an uprate in the standard minimum guarantee, pensioners in Northern Ireland would not be entitled to receive the new higher rate from April. In bald terms, that would mean that pensioners in Northern Ireland would be entitled to only £119·05, while their counterparts in GB would be entitled to £124·05. A couple here would be entitled to only £181·70, rather than £189·35. I trust that the Committee agrees with me that people in Northern Ireland should be entitled to receive the new higher rate from April in the same way as people in Great Britain.

As I said at the outset, I respect and value the Committee's role and contribution, and I do not take the use of accelerated passage lightly, nor do I view this instance as setting a precedent. I trust that I have adequately outlined what the Bill does and why the accelerated passage procedure is necessary. I hope that the Committee will be able to support my request.

I apologise for going on a bit, but there are good reasons behind the request.

The Chairperson: I understand that, Minister.

Before I ask members for their questions, I remind them to speak directly into the microphones, as we are still having recording difficulties.

Minister, we understand the issue of parity, and no one wants anyone to be disadvantaged by the Bill's progress through the Assembly. However, at the start of your remarks, you mentioned category A pensions, and I think that you said that there was a 40% take-up by women?

Ms Ritchie: That is right.

The Chairperson: You said that, under the provisions of the Bill, that should increase to 75% within a couple

of years, but that it would be about 15 years before the take-up rate would increase to 90%, is that right?

Ms Ritchie: Yes.

The Chairperson: Why is there such a significant gap before achieving that extra 15%?

Mr Gerry McCann (Department for Social Development): I am sorry, but I cannot answer that question. I do not know why there is such a gap. I would have to examine the figures.

The Chairperson: In two years, the take-up rate will increase from 40% to 75%, but it will take 15 years to rise by another 15%.

Ms Ritchie: It might be helpful, Chairperson, if my officials were to research that matter, and I provided the Committee with a written explanation.

The Chairperson: That is fine.

Mr Brady: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation. You said that you were reluctant to ask for accelerated passage, but this is the second or third piece of legislation for which accelerated passage has been requested. Is it likely that accelerated passage will be requested for all parity legislation? You mentioned that the main provisions of this Bill will not come into effect until 2010, so —

Ms Ritchie: I imagine that there will be quite a number of provisions to put in place. In fact, as I am sure that all members are aware, Standing Order 40 recognises that certain Bills may require accelerated passage through the Assembly. It makes provision for that through omission of the Committee Stage. I do not want or like to have to do that. However, I am bound by the principle of parity. The procedure is designed to cover several circumstances. The long-standing principle of parity must be upheld, whereby Northern Ireland's legislation on pensions and social security matches that of GB, not only in its content but in the timing of its implementation. Provision is made for that in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which followed the Good Friday Agreement. The Bill must correspond with legislation from the Department for Work and Pensions.

Mr Brady: The parity issue does not necessarily preclude the Committee from scrutinising the legislation. My point is that the legislation can be scrutinised and still be parity legislation. It seems to me that if accelerated passage is going to be requested for all parity legislation, there is not much point in the Committee's dealing with it at all.

The Chairperson: It is really a matter of timing.

Ms Ritchie: It is a timing factor. The most pressing reason is that the Westminster Act now places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to uprate annually the standard minimum

guarantee of pension credit in line with earnings with effect from April 2008.

Each Bill is considered on its own merits. There are various other pieces of legislation that could be subject to parity. Obviously, I would bring those to the Committee and to the Executive. As I explained, where there are issues that relate to finance and upratings that are forthcoming in April, I do not want single pensioners and couples to be without that necessary uprate. We all appreciate that that money is extremely important to pensioners.

Mr Brady: I certainly accept that. However, each piece of legislation should be judged on its merits. By definition, if it is scrutinised then it is being better judged on its merits than if it is put through by accelerated passage.

The Chairperson: The point that Mr Brady is making, Minister — which is one that, I imagine, is shared by the Committee — is that we do not want accelerated passage to become a routine measure.

Mr F McCann: I appreciate that the Minister is present to discuss the Bill. However, every time that the Committee has to deal with accelerated passage for a parity Bill, it on the back of our being told that if we do not pass it, that will impact greatly on people further down the line.

I cast my mind back to the Welfare Reform Bill, about which the same thing was said at this Committee. However, when the Committee raised the matter on the Floor of the Assembly, it was castigated for trying to stop the Bill's passage. The Committee is reluctant to accept that. One of the Committee's main purposes is to scrutinise legislation. However, after being told that, the last thing in the world that it wants to do is to stop any legislation going through. It seems that when accelerated passage is proposed, the point is always made about how it will affect people in one, two or six months' time. However, that removes the Committee's obligation to scrutinise legislation.

Ms Ritchie: Obviously, this is a difficult issue. However, there are many reasons why, in this instance, parity cannot be broken. For me, the most important of those is to ensure that people receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

With regard to the particular issue that Mr McCann raised, I remind him that all Members are free to table amendments. It is worth noting that the First Stage will take place on Monday 12 November. The Second Stage will be on Monday 26 November, followed by Consideration Stage on 4 December and Further Consideration Stage on 10 and 11 December.

If my memory serves me, amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill were tabled during its Consideration Stage on 18 June. Members did get

a little opportunity — I appreciate that it was not a full line-by-line examination, but nonetheless it did happen. It is a matter for the Assembly, the Business Committee and the Speaker to decide whether it accepts amendments, and I am sure that Members will argue their cases robustly, as they did before, and as I would expect them to do.

Mr Brady: Could the Assembly not better decide if the legislation had been scrutinised?

Ms Ritchie: That is a matter for the Assembly.

Mr Brady: We were told initially that accelerated passage was a rare thing, but I am finding out that it is not that rare.

The Committee Clerk: The Bill falls within section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and, as the Minister said, its objective is to maintain a single system for social security, child support and pensions. The Assembly will decide whether to grant accelerated passage. If the Committee did not support the Minister's request for accelerated passage and the Assembly then decided that the Bill required a Committee Stage, what could the Committee do? The Committee can scrutinise the Bill and propose amendments, but if any amendments are accepted that affect the single system, the required money will come out of the Northern Ireland block.

The Chairperson: Members are endeavouring to steer a middle course. Nobody wants to disadvantage those who are entitled under the parity system to an increase in their benefits — in this case, we are talking about their pensions. Neither does the Committee want the Department to routinely propose measures by using that possible disadvantage as a reason to reduce scrutiny, if not avoid it.

Ms Ritchie: I take that on board. As someone who is involved in the process, I would prefer it if the Committee were to deal with the Bill line by line — and I think that I said as much on the Floor in respect of the Welfare Reform Bill. However, the Committee Clerk has clearly outlined why we are prohibited and constrained in this instance, and that is why it is important that the Committee give its full consideration to the accelerated passage of the Bill today and within the template that is available in the Chamber.

The Chairperson: Can we leave it that, following your presentation today and whatever the Committee decides to do beyond that, you will consult intensely within the Department as to how future parity measures are dealt with and brought before the Committee?

Ms Ritchie: Yes. I have no problem with that, because I fully understand. I am aware that in many instances it is difficult to understand the parity issue,

but we do not want to see people in the community being penalised.

The Chairperson: I thank you and your officials for attending; I think that we have managed to keep you on time.

Ms Ritchie: Thank you.

The Chairperson: You have heard the Minister's explanation; you have heard the questions. I think that we have a caveated approach. The Minister cannot be unaware of the reservations that we have about the principle of introducing consecutive Bills, albeit that they are parity Bills, without the full line-by-line scrutiny. You heard what she said towards the end. With that caveat, are members content to support the Minister's request? Remember, this is not the Committee's request; the Minister has requested that we give our support to her request to seek accelerated passage on the Floor of the Assembly.

Mr F McCann: It is our duty to scrutinise. There are groups who deal with the elderly and with other sections of the public. Many of them may have difficulties with elements of pensions Bills or other benefit issues. I agree that we will accept accelerated passage for this Bill, but at some stage we need to consider how to widen the process to get the opinions of those people. If we do not, we will not be listening to a wide section of the public. We have already heard that 22,000 people with disabilities, or their representatives, have difficulties with aspects of it. There are a whole raft of people out there who may feel the same, and we have a duty to listen to their opinions when Bills like this are going through.

The Chairperson: I was somewhat concerned that officials did not appear to have done sufficient research to answer my question. It seems a bit odd that, in two years, they can almost double the number of women claiming category A pensions, but that to get it up even marginally beyond that is going to take another 15 years. There did not seem to be a ready response to that, but hopefully we will get it in writing. Are we agreed that we proceed on the basis that we have outlined, with the Minister having heard our concerns clearly expressed?

Members indicated assent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

8 November 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 Trevor Clarke
Mr David Ford
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

| | | |
|------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Mr Bill Laverty | } | Department of the Environment |
| Mr John McMullan | | |

The Chairperson (Mr McGlone): The Committee Clerk will outline the details of clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Taxis Bill. As no one has any interest to declare, we will move to the task of agreeing the clauses. The Bill Clerk is in attendance, and he will provide procedural advice if necessary. We will suspend proceedings soon to allow members to attend the service of remembrance in the Senate Chamber.

The Committee Clerk: In order to conduct the clause-by-clause analysis, you will need three documents from your packs. I suggest that you remove them from your folders and place them in front of you. The first document is the Bill. The second document is the clause-by-clause briefing paper; it has been divided it into the 58 clauses and three schedules, and the Chairperson and officials from the Department of the Environment will take you through each of those.

For the initial stages, you can ignore the small italicised writing at the end of every clause, because that will be dealt with at the end of the meeting. If you come to any box containing bold type, that means that either an amendment has to be agreed or that there was an issue with it. At that stage, the Chairperson will engage the departmental officials, Mr John McMullan

and Mr Bill Laverty, who will take the Committee through the departmental comments or the responses, or refer members to the amendments, which will have to be agreed.

The third document is the departmental response, which is divided into two halves. The first half contains comments from the Department on outstanding matters. The Chairperson will introduce those comments and ask the departmental officials to comment on them. You will be directed to those comments. The second half of the document contains amendments supplied by legislative counsel that members will have to agree as we go through the clauses. Overall, members must agree to two matters: they must agree the individual clauses and the amendments.

The Chairperson: If members agree to them?

The Committee Clerk: Yes, if they are agreed to.

The Chairperson: It will be difficult for members to focus on the document and to get their heads around it. Therefore, I suggest that we suspend and reconvene at 11.20 am.

The Committee was suspended.

On resuming —

The Chairperson: The Committee will go through the clause-by-clause analysis of the Bill with the departmental officials.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Operator's licences)

Mr John McMullan (Department of the Environment): Clause 2 has an amendment, which concerns the two-tier appeal system; that issue affects several clauses. We agreed that it was useful to have a two-tier appeal system. Instead of drivers and operators going directly to the court, they could appeal in the first instance to the Department; that is what this amendment does. I will outline it briefly.

The amendment takes out the first reference to “a court of summary jurisdiction” — the Magistrate's Court — as opposed to the Department. The appeal is firstly to the Department. It then sets out the time limit for that appeal, which is 21 days. It sets out what the Department can do on appeal: it can confirm, reverse or vary a decision, or it can approve, revoke or vary the condition on a licence. The Department is required to give the appellant notice of the decision, and if the appellant is still aggrieved, he or she can appeal to the Magistrate's Court. That is how we achieve the two-tier appeal system.

There are six other instances in the Bill where that appeal system arises, and I do not know if there is any point in explaining it six times when we come to it later on. However, that is how we propose to bring in the two-tier system.

Mr Weir: Will the two-tier appeal system be outlined in more detail in the subsequent regulations? I am assuming — but I am not 100% clear — that the appeal to the Department is a written appeal. If that were the case, it would need to be spelt out.

Mr McMullan: Yes, it would be a written appeal. The Department can handle the administration of that. The Department will give the appellant notice of the decision and the grounds of that decision. In doing that, the Department will also state the appeal rights — the time limit for appeals, and so forth — and invite the appellant to write to the Department.

Mr Bill Lavery (Department of the Environment): It is intended to add a new clause 35A — Regulations in respect of appeals.

The Chairperson: We will come to that proposed new clause later.

Mr Ford: I am not entirely satisfied that a written appeal meets the Committee's concerns. The written appeal would give people the right to something more informal than going straight to the Magistrate's Court, but, to some extent, they should be given their day in

court rather than simply submitting another written appeal against a decision that has been considered on the basis of a written application and refused. If we are trying to get to the point where we will circumvent the need to go to the Magistrates' Court, we may need to have an appeal procedure that allows people the right to a hearing.

I am concerned that the Department's intention to draft regulations will simply lead to another paper exercise. That will not solve the problem.

Mr McMullan: At present, there is an internal system for appeals regarding other forms of transport. Three senior officers convene a hearing, and, very often, the appellant attends the hearing and has legal representation. That is the way in which the Department proposes to operate taxi appeals. Therefore, it will not be a paper exercise.

Mr Ford: I thought that you said that it would be a paper exercise.

Mr McMullan: The paper exercise would be regarding the person initiating an appeal.

Mr Gardiner: I am glad that the Committee has received clarification that people have a right to present their own point of view during any appeal.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 2, line 30, leave out

“a court of summary jurisdiction” and insert “the Department”.
— [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 2, line 38, at end insert

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to —

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars on the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, *put and agreed to*.

Clause 2, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 3 (Duties of licensed operators, etc.)

Mr McMullan: Clause 3(9) concerns complaints made about a licensed operator. The Consumer Council felt that it could play a role in the complaints procedure. As was discussed at a previous Committee meeting, the Department thinks that that could be useful.

Legislative counsel has proposed that the clause be amended as follows: at the end of subsection (9) insert:

“(and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, regulations may include provision for the involvement of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland in relation to any such complaints)”.

Therefore, it will be included in the Bill that the Consumer Council may have a role. The Department does not yet know exactly what that role will be. However, that will be worked out in regulations with the Consumer Council, and, eventually, with the Committee as well.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that the regulations may include provisions for the involvement of the Consumer Council. From my recollection of a previous Committee meeting, that was subject to the Department putting out feelers to the Consumer Council to ascertain whether it was content with a level of involvement in the complaints process. Since that Committee meeting, the Department has met representatives from the Consumer Council. It might be useful for members to get a flavour of what went on at that meeting.

Mr McMullan: The Consumer Council felt that it could play a useful role in three areas: complaints, fares and public information. The Consumer Council has considerable experience of dealing with complaints in other transport areas, and other areas of work. The Department outlined what involvement it felt that the council should have.

Dealing with complaints can be a resource issue for the Consumer Council, and, therefore, it did not want to be the main body to which any complaint about licensed operators would go. However, it was content that the Department can work out, through regulations, what its involvement should entail. It was left fairly flexible that we can come back and discuss any further issues with the Consumer Council and also with the Committee.

The Chairperson: Do members have any queries on that issue?

Mr T Clarke: I am not sure about the issue of the Consumer Council's involvement. It seems that it will be involved but will not have a definitive role.

The Chairperson: What John is saying is that the Department has agreed that the Consumer Council will be part of the complaints process, and the further detail can be worked out through regulations.

Mr T Clarke: If the role of the Consumer Council was outlined now, the Committee may not agree with that role. By saying that the details can be worked out later, is that simply a way to get the council in through the back door?

Mr McMullan: When the Department produces the regulations, an SL1 will be given to the Committee outlining what it proposes to do. The Committee has already shown that it is prepared to annul regulations. Therefore, if the Committee is unhappy with the role of the Consumer Council, it will have the opportunity to pray against that.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 4, line 3, at end insert

“(and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, regulations may include provision for the involvement of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland in relation to any such complaints)”. — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to*.

Clause 3, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (Hiring of taxis at separate fares – General)

The Chairperson: The Committee was to consider the related departmental written response. There was some confusion about sample fares; it would be useful if John took us through the details.

Mr McMullan: Members have copies of an example conversion table for use in calculating shared taxi fares, which should make the issue slightly clearer than it was at the last meeting. The first column sets out the fares that would be displayed on the meter and the other columns show the number of passengers that may be sharing the taxi. Mr Ford asked what happens when passengers get out at different destinations. The working example is four passengers sharing a taxi: the first passenger gets out when the meter shows £3 and pays a discounted fare of £1.40; if the second passenger gets out when the meter shows £5, he or she will pay £2.30; the third passenger gets out when the

meter shows £7 and pays £3·20; the final passenger gets out when the meter shows £9 and pays £4·10.

The passengers get a good deal because they pay 46% of the metered fare. In that scenario, the driver does not do as well and makes £11 for a £9 fare. However, there are permutations that show that the driver can get a good deal. For example, if the first passenger stayed in the taxi to the end of the journey, the driver would get two fares of £4·10, one of £3·20 and one of £2·30, which would be £13·70 for a £9 fare. Also, if the four passengers stay to the end of the journey —

Mr T Clarke: There is no point in going any further, because the explanation is as clear as the muddiest water in the bottom of the lough.

The Chairperson: Please let John finish.

Mr T Clarke: The process is absolute nonsense. How is that going to work out?

The Chairperson: Can you park your concerns for the present, and we will come back to you. John, please continue. Is it time for the Prozac, Trevor?
[Laughter.]

Mr McMullan: If the four passengers continue for the full journey, the taxi driver will get £16·40 for a £9 fare. That illustrates that it is a win-win situation for the passenger and the driver. The driver receives more than is shown on the meter, and the passenger is charged less.

The Chairperson: We asked for this detail last week. Is there anything further that you wish to add?

Mr McMullan: The fare system will come before the Committee again as a set of regulations. The ratio may not be correct. It is possible that the discount could be less for the passenger and more for the driver. That is something that must be worked out. Nevertheless, it is an illustration that the passenger will pay less and the driver will receive more.

Mr T Clarke: Will we set a minimum qualification of a maths degree for taxi drivers so that they can work out the fares? That is the most complicated system for fares that I have ever seen. It is supposed to be clearer than the earlier table, but it is getting muddier.

The Chairperson: An average punter might step into a taxi with two or three people in it, and the taxi driver would have to try to work out how much to charge those passengers. Can that be built into a metering system, or how would that work in practice?

Mr Lavery: A fares table in the vehicle would reflect the fares. That fares table would also be displayed at the authorised starting point of that taxi-sharing scheme so that customers would be able to see what fare they will have to pay. The meter would be running from the moment that the taxi leaves the

authorised point, and the fares table would reflect what individual passengers would pay.

The Chairperson: Surely the fare would have to reflect a distance, whether that be 10, 15, 20 or 30 miles. How could the various computations of distance and number of passengers be crammed into a chart with a sliding scale in the back of a taxi? A person who stepped into a taxi — whether as the driver or a passenger — would have to work out the mathematics of the fare. In practice, how would that work?

Mr Lavery: A taxi-sharing scheme would involve a designated fare for a particular route. It would have a fixed pick-up point, and the scheme would provide for taxi-sharing from that point to, for example, Glengormley.

The Chairperson: If, for example, the destination were Antrim, the taxi drivers might all pick up at a point inside a zoned area, but they would be going to different destinations.

Mr T Clarke: When people go on a foreign holiday, they often have a calculator to convert currency. Passengers in taxis will need calculators to work out the fares.

Mr McMullan: Neither the passenger nor the driver would need to work anything out. The taximeter would show, at every point where the taxi stops, what the metered fare is. Perhaps on the back of the seat, a conversion table, similar to the one that members have in front of them, will show that if, for example, a £3 fare is displayed on the meter, the fare will be £1·40 for each passenger if four passengers were to share the taxi.

The Chairperson: I understand that, but I just wanted some clarity on how that would work in practice. The meter would show a fare, and the table that is displayed in the taxi would show the rates that lead from the fare on the meter.

Mr Ford: Although I may be about to disagree with clause 6, I am satisfied that the Committee has been given a sensible worked example. At least we know how fares under the taxi-sharing scheme would operate.

Mr I McCrea: Perhaps that system of charging passengers works in theory, but I cannot see how it will work properly in practice. I cannot see that passengers can be confident that they are being charged the proper fare or that drivers can be confident that they are charging the proper fare. The blame lies with the driver if there is a dispute; it is a nearly an argument over who gets in first and who gets out last.

Regardless of sharing, if four people were to get out at the same the same destination, it would be wrong if the driver were to charge each passenger a fare of £4·10 separately, resulting in a charge of £16·40 for what should have been a £9 fare. That might not happen on every occasion, but that would be unfair to

the passengers. The taxi driver would be rubbing his hands at such a situation, as he would have made a profit of around £7. It may be easy to put up a sign or a table, but I certainly have doubts about whether the scheme could work in practice.

Mr McMullan: At the same time, the passenger is paying only £4.10 for a £9 fare, so should be happy with that. Similar taxi-sharing schemes operate in parts of GB, and this example is based on taxi-sharing fares in London. I am not saying that the ratio is the same —

Mr T Clarke: Two wrongs do not make a right.

Mr Weir: To be fair, let us imagine the slightly unusual situation whereby four people get into a taxi at a fixed point and all four get out at a particular point. If the fare is set at £9 — no matter how many people are in the taxi — if I were a taxi driver, I would not give myself the additional hassle of carrying two or three extra passengers. My thought would be, why not pick up the single passenger — there would be less chance of that passenger jumping out without paying or throwing up in the back seat or whatever. From a taxi driver's point of view, more passengers mean additional hassle.

There is another matter that slightly confuses me. I agree that there is a great deal of logic in designating a particular starting point. However, I am not sure how workable particular routes might be. That slightly negates the arrangement. A group of three or four friends sharing a taxi could be travelling in roughly the same direction, but there may be different drop-off points. It may be that three people want to travel to Glengormley, and a fourth passenger wants to be dropped off in Antrim. There must be some flexibility as far as the destination is concerned.

The Chairperson: We have heard all the views. Is the Committee content with clause 5 as drafted?

Mr T Clarke: No.

The Chairperson: I would never have guessed. I want to ask Kevin Shiels to comment on this.

The Bill Clerk: I remind the Committee that if it does not agree a clause, it can oppose it at Consideration Stage. If a member — or members — disagree with a clause, they can propose an amendment to a clause or vote against it at Consideration Stage.

I will try to allay some of the members' concerns; I know that Mr Trevor Clarke has some particular concerns. If we turn to the example that the Department has given, a quick calculation shows that the distance travelled is seven miles. Mr Clarke's concern was about whether the driver would be able to benefit from the scheme. If, as Mr Weir suggested, a driver were to transport each passenger individually from the same starting point, he would end up

travelling some 34 miles backwards and forwards. Thus, the journeys would take roughly five times as long and the mileage would be five times greater — instead of travelling seven miles, he would travel 34 miles. By my calculations, the total fare for the shared journey would be £11, whereas the combined fare for the separate journeys would be £24.

Mr T Clarke: I would rather get £24. The distance is seven miles — the average car does 30-plus miles to the gallon.

The Bill Clerk: My point is that the driver would get £24, but he would have to travel five times as many miles. If I were a taxi driver, I would prefer the shared scheme.

I want to touch on another point. The Committee is being asked to agree the framework for the principle of a shared scheme. My understanding — and I hope that John can confirm this — is that the scheme would be piloted, and more detail would emerge when the regulations come back to the Committee.

The Chairperson: That is correct, and that should clarify the matter for members. Thank you for that.

There is disagreement on the clause. Can we perhaps hear the mind of other members without having to put the clause to a vote? Is there general agreement on the concept of taxi-sharing?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Gardiner: Yes.

Mr I McCrea: Yes. I agree with the principle of the scheme, it is the workings of it that I am concerned about.

Mr Weir: That is a yes.

Mr T Clarke: Have you joined the Alliance Party?

[Laughter.]

The Chairperson: We will come to the workings of it later on.

From your own point of view, Trevor, do you want to place officially on record your opposition to this scheme?

Mr T Clarke: Yes.

The Chairperson: The Committee has agreed clause 5 as drafted, with one objection from Mr Clarke.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Compliance with a departmental taxi-sharing scheme)

Mr McMullan: There is an issue relating to taxi marshals, which is linked to clause 6. Normally, we argue about taxi marshals towards the end of the Bill, around clauses 20 and 42. The first mention of taxi

marshals appears in clause 6(2)(e), under the regulatory power to establish taxi marshals. The Committee is unhappy with powers given in clause 6(2)(e) and with: “regulating the use of such authorised places”.

The Chairperson: There is a proposed amendment to clause 6 to insert the words: “providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of such authorised places;”.

Mr McMullan: The point is that taxi marshals had no enforcement or management role. That was put to our legislative counsel, and the proposal suggests leaving clause 6(2)(e): “enforcing order at and regulating the use of such authorised places,”

and creating a new paragraph for taxi marshals. The amendment allows the Department to make provision for:

“providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of such authorised places;”

as referred to in clause 6(1)(a) — namely, taxi ranks. “Providing for persons to manage” defines the role of the taxi marshal as a management one. The Department can regulate the management of that and, therefore, the performance of the management role. The wording has been changed from “enforcement” to “management”.

The Bill Clerk: For clarification, a new paragraph (f) will be inserted after clause 6(2)(e).

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 5, line 33, at end insert

“(ea) providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of such authorised places;”. — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question. That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 6, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 7 (Advance booking)

Mr McMullan: Again, it is with some trepidation that I wish to make a point. At a previous meeting, we suggested that there should be a taxi-sharing immediate-hire scheme, where people boarding a taxi agree to share it. That happens legally at the moment, and it can continue to happen under the Bill. For example, Bill and I could have decided this morning to hail a taxi and share it to Stormont. There may have been a £10 metered fare for that journey. I would have paid the driver £10 and then would have tried to get £5 from Bill, which might be the more difficult part of it.

When I say that is a form of taxi sharing, the driver does not actually get anything extra — he gets the metered fare — and the consumer is in control in that case, because he has decided to share the taxi. The wider question is why we should not introduce a graduated fare system so that the driver gets something as well.

There are a number of reasons for that. It is all right for Bill and me to get a taxi on the street in Belfast in broad daylight because we know the law, but there is less accountability when someone tries to do that late at night, and certainly less than in advanced booking, for example. A monetary incentive is also created for the driver, because why would he ever drive off with one fare when he can make more money by putting lots of people in his taxi? Our fear is that that could lead to drivers coercing passengers to share rather than them consenting, and that impinges on a fundamental principle in taxiing, which is that the person hiring the taxi has an exclusive right to it. That is the principle in Northern Ireland, and in the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and in any other countries that we have considered in the development of a taxi policy.

More importantly, taxi sharing impinges on safety. The main users of taxis in Northern Ireland are young girls between the ages of 16 and 24, and the taxi industry does a great job in getting those young people home safely at night. If enforced taxi sharing on the street is introduced, or drivers can stop for other fares, a situation could occur where a young girl going home could find herself in a taxi with two young fellows the worse for drink, who decide that they will get out when she gets out. The Department is not comfortable with that.

Taxi sharing has a role to play, but it has to be controlled, and the Department is not really prepared to go to immediate hiring and sharing, other than friends sharing or people who are going to the same area. We do not want to create an incentive for the driver to increase his money in that way.

Mr Ford: I take many of those points on board. However, in some clauses, the Department appears to agree to promoting sharing in order to clear the streets quickly and in others to disagree that we should do it in the way that has just been outlined.

I am still unclear whether the Department regards the amendment to clause 6 on the role of taxi marshals as constituting a sharing scheme, or whether a sharing scheme has to be more organised than that. The streets can be cleared as fast as possible with proper taxi marshals ensuring that the arrangements for sharing are reasonable. In other words, the young girl would not have several drunken young men imposed on her. However, there must be some way of providing the incentive to ensure that taxis operate in a way

that clears the streets as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

The role of taxi marshals as envisaged in the amendment to clause 6 is fair enough, but I am not sure that we have agreed that at this stage.

Mr McMullan: The role of taxi marshals is to manage the situation and match the person to the vehicle. When a young girl waiting for a taxi sees a couple of young fellows getting into taxi, she can say that she does not want to share that taxi, and she can wait for the next one. An environment controlled by taxi marshals will provide a safer service.

Mr T Clarke: That is very sexist. What about the young man with three women getting into a taxi?

Mr Weir: You would be safe, Trevor.

The Chairperson: The issue of public safety has been raised, particularly that of vulnerable young females. How would you envisage a taxi marshal operating in a situation where a young female is, perhaps, on her own and is particularly vulnerable because of an excess of drink or drugs? In other words, although it may be considered relatively safe for her to get into a taxi with two or three young fellows, she might not be fully compos mentis because of drink or drugs.

Mr McMullan: The taxi marshal would use his common sense. If lads behaved rowdily or badly, they would be put into a taxi and sent off. That is the way in which that would operate.

Mr Lavery: Taxi marshals would operate at busy ranks. From my observation, the police are relatively close by. If there was a problem, the taxi marshal could ask for police assistance.

The Chairperson: That is also an advantage of the scheme. Thank you for making that point.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clauses 8 to 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 (Appeals in relation to operator's licence authorising separate fares)

Mr McMullan: The amendment on clause 11 is described as a "knock-on" amendment — where a change to the appeal system is provided for in the Bill. In the original draft Bill, clause 11 was the only clause in which we have the two-tier appeal system. If we make amendments to that clause, there will be a knock-on effect on other clauses. The clause merely inserts a couple of legislative references and takes some words out. It is an attempt to make it all fit into the appeal amendment. It does not do anything of substance.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 7, line 24, after "2(8)" insert "or (12)". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 7, line 27, leave out "in writing". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 7, line 42, leave out "in writing". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 8, line 1, after "2(8)" insert "or (12)". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 8, line 4, leave out subsection (6). — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 11, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Taxi licences)

The Chairperson: The Committee sought amendments to clause 13(8) that would provide for an appeal to the Department.

Mr McMullan: The amendments address the two-tier appeal system.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 9, line 7, leave out "a court of summary jurisdiction" and insert "the Department". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 9, line 13, at end insert

“(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to –

- (a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or
- (b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,
- (as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendments, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 13, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clauses 14 and 15 agreed to.

Clause 16 (Regulation of fares, etc)

Mr McMullan: Two issues arose when the Committee considered clause 16. The Committee was concerned with the wording. We have explained that, when talking about maximum fares, we are not talking about a single maximum fare.

Rather, the clause refers to maximum fares for the initial hire of a vehicle, for the combination of time and distance of the journey, for working unsociable hours, for working on Christmas Day, and so forth. However, because of the Committee’s concern, we asked our legislative counsel to ensure that the clause contains adequate provision.

Legislative counsel assured us that we can regulate for a range of fares under clause 16. I want to highlight that clause 16 is not outward facing, in that it does not put a requirement on operators or drivers. It enables the Department to make regulations, and we are content that we can make the regulations for which clause 16 provides.

An amendment to the clause has been proposed. The Consumer Council thought it could have input by making recommendations on fares to the Department. The amendment suggests:

“Before the Department makes any regulation under this section, it shall take into consideration any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.”

The crucial wording in the proposed amendment is “take into consideration”. That wording does not bind the Department to accept the Consumer Council’s recommendations.

The Chairperson: Proposed new subsection (2A) specifies the Consumer Council, but, in practice, how does that differ from the clause’s stating that the Department will take into consideration any organisation’s views?

Mr McMullan: Legislative counsel told the Department that it would be good to amend the Bill as such, because it would demonstrate a consumer focus and take into account the Consumer Council’s oral evidence to the Committee. However, we could have proceeded without proposing such an amendment, with regulations being drafted after a consultation process.

The Chairperson: For clarity, does the proposed amendment accord the Consumer Council any more or less weight than any other opinion that it may express to the Department?

Mr McMullan: No; not really.

The Chairperson: It is simply titular. OK, I understand.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 10, line 26, at end insert

“(2A) Before the Department makes any regulations under this section, it shall take into consideration any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.” — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 16, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 17 (Display and publication, etc. of fares)

Mr McMullan: Clause 17 is connected to clause 16. If there were to be a change to clause 16, clause 17 might have to change, too. However, as the Committee is content with clause 16, subject to its proposed amendment, it should also be content with clause 17.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 17 agreed to.

Clauses 18 and 19 agreed to.

Clause 20 (Regulations concerning taxis or use of taxis)

The Chairperson: The Committee has sought a possible amendment to clause 20.

Mr McMullan: We dealt with clause 20 when dealing with clause 6, because, for both clauses, the proposed amendments provide for persons to manage the use of authorised places. Exactly the same amend-

ment that has been proposed to clause 6 has been proposed to clause 20.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 12, line 19, at end insert

“(ca) providing for persons to manage, and regulating the management of, the use of places referred to in paragraph (a);”.
— [The Chairperson.]

Question put and agreed to.

Question. That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 20, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendment, agreed to.

Clause 21 (Orders concerning taxis, taxi stands etc.)

Mr McMullan: Clause 21 will allow the Department for Regional Department to make taxi regulation orders. The clause moves the responsibility to regulate taxi ranks from DOE to DRD. At the Committee meeting on 23 October, we decided that it would be useful for traffic attendants to be able to enforce any parking infringement at ranks, or at areas around ranks. That will require a slight amendment to a piece of DRD legislation, The Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Legislative counsel has provided a proposed amendment, which would be inserted into schedule 2 to the Bill. The proposed amendment to schedule 2 simply connects the 1997 Order to The Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, in order to allow traffic attendants to carry out the aforementioned enforcement.

The Chairperson: Otherwise, we are broadly content with clause 21.

Question. That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 21 agreed to.

Clause 22 agreed to.

Clause 23 (Taxi drivers’ licences)

Mr McMullan: Mr Gallagher asked in Committee on 23 October whether the Department’s criminal-record checks extend to the Republic of Ireland. We checked, and they do not at present. The issue is particularly important in border areas. On a wider point, given that there are now so many different nationalities residing in Northern Ireland, an issue arises concerning information being shared among EU member states. The Department must do some more research in that area.

However, an amendment to that effect to clause 23 is not necessary, because the clause states that the Department merely must be satisfied that an applicant

is a “fit and proper person” — all investigative checks happen in the background. I would be loath to propose an amendment to the clause in case it did not comply with European legislation, but the Department does undertake to look at criminal-record checks when the Taxis Bill becomes law. It is important enough for the Department to mention the issue in the recommendations so that it is not forgotten in the discussion of the Bill.

The Chairperson: That is very important. You propose to mention the issue?

Mr McMullan: An amendment is not required, because the clause already states that the Department only must be satisfied that a driver is a “fit and proper person”. All the administrative checks on how the Department would be satisfied are never included in a Bill. The Committee’s making a recommendation that it is a very important point for the Department to consider is sufficient.

Mr T Clarke: Does that not leave the legislation a bit loose? Unless checks are put in place to ensure that taxi drivers are fit and proper people, the clause does not go far enough. To assume is all very well. I might assume that the Chairperson were a fit and proper person, and I am sure that he is —

Mr Weir: Keep the faith.

Mr T Clarke: However, unless a check were carried out, there would be no way of knowing whether he was.

Reference has been made to young girls travelling in taxis. I am not saying that all of them are the same, but a reputation has been attached to taxi drivers. If checks are not carried out on prospective drivers, regardless of where they come from, it unfair to assume that an individual is OK.

Mr McMullan: I accept that point; it is right that we should not assume that.

The Chairperson: An assumption is one thing, but how the checks are conducted is another. Many checks are dependent on external agencies. That is the main point to make. In many instances, it could be a policing matter or — by extension — a social services matter. Can you explain to the Committee how checks are conducted?

Mr Laverty: The term “fit and proper person” implies that the Department must be satisfied that an applicant is of good repute and medically fit. In the current process, every applicant for a taxi-driver’s licence must undergo a Criminal Records Office check for any previous convictions, and they must demonstrate that they are medically fit. The Department uses guidelines that it has drawn up to determine good repute, and the courts have access to those guidelines when they deal with appeals. Therefore, quite a

thorough check is carried out on applicants for a taxi-driver's licence, and that check is repeated every three years with the Criminal Records Office.

The Chairperson: However, the nature of any check is determined not by the Department but by external agencies. How comprehensive are those checks? In other words, you ask the police to determine whether an individual is a "fit and proper person". Issues that have arisen, including Tommy Gallagher's point about whether checks extend to the Republic of Ireland, clearly mean that liaison between the PSNI and Garda Síochána is required. I presume that the Department cannot legislate on those issues, so, to return to John's point, the Committee must include them in its report.

Mr T Clarke: If a requirement of obtaining a licence is that a background check must be performed, were prospective taxi drivers from the Republic of Ireland, they should assist our people by going to the Garda Síochána to ask whether they are permitted to do the job.

The situation is not right. It is like the problems in the classroom. Proper background checks cannot be performed on foreign nationals who come here, yet they are allowed to be employed in our schools. However, if someone from Northern Ireland wants to apply for a job in a school, he or she must have a background check performed. There, we have a two-tier system. The same is true of taxiing. Border towns have been mentioned. If we are to say that people from the Republic of Ireland can come here to work on good name only, without the Garda Síochána's having performed a background check on them in the country where they reside —

The Chairperson: Or vice versa.

Mr T Clarke: Or vice versa: I am not discriminating one way or the other.

If our intention is to run a robust taxi industry, we must have parity and consistency.

The Chairperson: However, all that the Committee can do is to flag that matter up in its report. The Department will take further action with those external agencies.

Mr McMullan: I agree totally with what Mr Clarke has said. He has raised an important point. It is one that we must explore, so we intend to look at it. It is a wider issue, and not one that is confined to prospective drivers from the Republic of Ireland. Many different nationalities work in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: That is correct.

Mr T Clarke: I take on board what you have said, Chairman. However, background checks should be in place before anyone gets a taxi licence. Regardless of

what country the driver comes from, that check should be conducted. If we do not do that, we will be creating a monster. In fact, we are discriminating against the people of Northern Ireland who have to undergo that check.

Mr Ford: That is not entirely so. In his comments, Trevor has not covered those people from Northern Ireland who commit motoring or other offences outside Northern Ireland. Those offences do not appear in a criminal-record check here. However, I agree that we cannot include such a measure in the Bill, because the situation is changing. Harmonisation of penalty points will start to make a difference in the coming years. All that we can do is note the point and hope that the regulations will be kept up to date.

Mr Boylan: [*Inaudible.*] being from a border town. However, we will keep an eye on them anyway, just in case.

The Chairperson: The Committee will include the whole issue of background checks in its report.

Mr McMullan: An amendment to introduce appeal to the Department has also been proposed.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 16, line 32, leave out

"a court of summary jurisdiction" and insert "the Department".
— [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 16, line 36, at end insert

"(9A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(9B) On an appeal under subsection (9), the Department may decide to—

(a) confirm, reverse or vary the decision; or

(b) approve, revoke or vary the condition,

(as the case may be) as it thinks fit.

(9C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (9B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the ground of the decision.

(9D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (9B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision." — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question. That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 23, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 24 (Issue of driver's badges etc.)

Mr Ford: We have already passed over the issues of vehicle identification, but one point that was made by some of the drivers was that of driver identification. If we are seeking to ensure that people are properly badged, whether on their vehicle or individually, we must ensure that the Department issues those badges efficiently; otherwise, we will be encouraging drivers to drive illegally.

Given some of the complaints that drivers made, that is something that the Committee might report.

The Chairperson: That is a fair point, but it is one that the Committee cannot deal with except to include it in our report.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 24 agreed to.

Clauses 25 and 26 agreed to.

Clause 27 (Suspension, revocation and curtailment under section 26: procedure etc.)

Mr McMullan: Clauses 27 to 29 are all subject to the same appeals process. The proposed amendments to those three clauses all follow the same format.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 19, leave out lines 1 to 8 and insert

"(b) (subject to section 35), it shall direct in the notice when the suspension, revocation or curtailment is to take effect." — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 19, line 13, leave out "a court of summary jurisdiction" and insert "the Department". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 19, line 14, at end insert

"(4A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(4B) On an appeal under subsection (4), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(4C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (4B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(4D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (4B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision." — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 27, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 28 (Variation of licence on request)

Mr McMullan: Two amendments are proposed to clause 28.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 19, line 41, leave out "a court of summary jurisdiction" and insert "the Department". — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 19, line 42, at end insert

"(9) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(10) On an appeal under subsection (8), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(11) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (10), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(12) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (10) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision." — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 28, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 29 (Variation of operator's licence by Department)

Mr McMullan: Three amendments are proposed to clause 29.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 20, leave out lines 15 to 20 and insert

"(b) (subject to section 35), it shall direct in the notice when the decision is to take effect."

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 20, line 21, leave out “a court of summary jurisdiction” and insert “the Department”. — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 20, line 22, at end insert

“(4A) The time within which a person may bring such an appeal is 21 days from the date on which the notice of the decision appealed against is served on the person.

(4B) On an appeal under subsection (4), the Department may decide to confirm, reverse or vary the decision as it thinks fit.

(4C) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (4B), give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(4D) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (4B) may appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction against any such decision.” — [*The Chairperson.*]

Question put and agreed to.

Question. That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendments, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 29, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clause 30 (Fees)

Mr McMullan: Legislative counsel suggests a small amendment to clause 30, as a result of an increase in the number of appeals to the Department. It suggests that the Bill should contain a power to charge a fee for an appeal. The Department had no intention of charging a fee, as most internal appeals to the Department are free at source, but I am content to hear the Committee’s opinion on the proposed amendment.

In three or four years, there may be a benefit to including such a measure if the level of appeals was such that we were forced to impose a fee. The only way in which to create extra resources may be if we had the power to charge a fee to bring an appeal. We did not come up with that measure, but we accept that there may be merit in keeping the appeals process efficient. We do not want to be unable to resource it, but if we not take advantage of the proposed power, perhaps the powers that be [*Inaudible.*].

Mr Ford: Is that provision included in legislation pertaining to buses?

Mr McMullan: There is no charge for fees included in buses legislation.

Mr Ford: Taxi drivers may think that they are being discriminated against if that provision were to be

included in the Bill, even if the Department does not intend to charge fees. I am concerned that the Bill should not give the impression that taxi drivers are being treated worse, given the concerns that many taxi drivers have already.

The Chairperson: Were the concept of fees introduced, the question of whether there would be charges would come back to us. The Department is unlikely to introduce charges quickly.

Mr McMullan: It may be included in the Bill but never used. It could be there for a rainy day.

Mr Ford: Until Peter Robinson notices it.

Mr Gardiner: What is the history of the volume of appeals?

Mr McMullan: Our agency said that it did not have any concerns about the volume of appeals. I do not know the exact figures, but the volume does not seem —

Mr Gardiner: You do not have the figures?

Mr McMullan: No.

Mr Ford: I am not happy with the proposed amendment. The Department may not intend to use the power, but it is something that taxi drivers may perceive as being another rod to beat them with. I am not sure that the Committee should endorse that.

The Chairperson: The timing of the provision is wrong.

Mr Weir: Irrespective of whether provision for fees is included in the legislation now, would the power be there to introduce fees at a later stage?

Mr McMullan: No, not unless that power were included in clause 30.

The Chairperson: Does the Committee disagree with the proposed amendment?

The Bill Clerk: John can correct me if I am wrong, but provision would exist, in the future, for the Department to introduce a Bill to amend the legislation to give it the enabling power to make regulations. If the Committee is not content with the proposed amendment to charge for appeals, it should express its discontent. However, if the Minister decides to table such an amendment to the Taxis Bill, the Committee may raise its concerns at Consideration Stage. In the past, however, the Committee [*Inaudible.*]

The Chairperson: Is it the mood of the Committee not to agree to the proposed amendment to clause 30? I believe that, were we to agree to it, that would send out the wrong message about the Taxis Bill. The story would become about money and charging rather than about regulating taxi operators, taxis and taxi drivers.

Mr Weir: We must make it clear that we are concerned about the amendment, not the actual drafting of clause 30.

The Chairperson: Clause 30 deals with fees.

Mr Weir: Yes, but some of us are slightly concerned about including an appeals function in clause 30.

The Committee Clerk: Members have no difficulty with clause 30 as it stands. The difficulty is with the extension that legislative counsel proposes. Members appear to be saying that the proposed amendment is not required, but they are content with the general departmental powers for which the clause provides.

Mr McMullan: The Department did not devise the amendment. However, I sense the Committee's discontent with it, so I am prepared to withdraw it.

The Chairperson: That might resolve some of the issues.

Mr T Clarke: I must leave the meeting shortly. Before I go, I want to return to the example conversion table for use in calculating shared taxi fares. It was only presented to the Committee today, and we have not had time to study the passenger-fare proposals. The example of a £9 fare was discussed earlier. In the four-passengers column, the shaded areas of the table read £1·40, £2·30, £3·20 and £4·10 respectively. Is that the fare that each of those passengers would pay? That would earn the taxi driver £11.

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr T Clarke: I thought that that was what had been done.

Let us look at the example of a £10 fare for four passengers. If the first passenger were dropped off at 50p, the second at 90p, the third at £1·40 and the final one at £4·50, the taxi driver would get only £7·30.

Mr McMullan: No.

Mr T Clarke: That is not how you have —

Mr McMullan: If we move to the five-passengers column —

Mr T Clarke: I am sorry; I said four passengers and a £10 fare. I will make it even easier by using the example of a £3 fare for two passengers. If the first passenger were dropped off at 70p and the second at £2, the taxi driver would get £2·70 rather than the £3 fare that would be shown on the meter. That is what we have agreed to in clause 5.

The Chairperson: Run that past me again, Trevor.

Mr T Clarke: It was said earlier that, if the meter showed £3 and there were two passengers in the taxi, the first to get out would pay 70p and the second would pay £2. That would mean that the taxi driver

would receive £2·70 instead of £3. The example given in the shaded areas of the conversion table —

The Chairperson: We are not bound by that conversion table. The Department still has to come back to the Committee with the statute.

Mr T Clarke: The Committee is, however, accepting the conversion table in principle.

Mr McMullan: Mr Clarke has made a fair point. I do not have a particular answer, but the conversion table is merely illustrative. We are trying to arrive at a win-win situation in which the taxi driver gets more and the passenger pays less. However, I understand exactly what Trevor is saying.

Mr T Clarke: Do you understand why I am saying it? I do not mean to be rude, but the table has been presented to make it look as if the taxi driver is doing well — that he would get £11 for a £9 fare. However, instances in which he would get only £2·70 for a £3 fare, or £7·30 for a £10 fare, are ignored.

Mr McMullan: The Committee has not agreed to that table. It is important to ensure that, when regulations are introduced, the driver does not receive less than the fare displayed on the meter.

Mr T Clarke: You can see why I was concerned, Chairman.

The Chairperson: You could start up a consultancy business, Trevor, and perhaps head over to the DOE for a day or two. Are you happy enough with Mr McMullan's answer, Trevor?

Mr T Clarke: I was never happy with the clause, but that is OK.

The Chairperson: To return to clause 30, the mood of the Committee was not to agree to the Department's proposed amendment and that it should be withdrawn.

The Committee is happy with the original wording of clause 30 and accepts the withdrawal of the Department's proposed amendment.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 30 agreed to.

Clauses 31 to 34 agreed to.

Clause 35 (Effect of appeal on decision appealed against)

Mr McMullan: There is no amendment proposed to clause 35. There is however, a proposed amendment to insert a new clause after clause 35. The amendment is drafted at present as clause 35A, but, if approved, it would appear in the Bill as clause 36.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 35 agreed to.

Proposed new clause

Mr McMullan: Proposed new clause 35 is a knock-on amendment, which has been caused by the appeals system. In reality, it is a relocation of the subsection that currently appears at 11(6), which the Committee has recommended be left out, because it is peculiar to the two-tier pay system under clause 11. It is now more appropriate that it appear after the clauses on appeals. The effect of the proposed new clause would be to allow the Department to make regulations on appeals under the Act rather than under section 11 — clause 11 as it stands. It would not change the Bill, other than by relocating existing clause 11(6) to new clause 35A.

Mr Ford: I have one point to make on terminology. Each clause stands alone; for example, clause 34 refers to appeals only from the point at which they reach the legal system. However, we are now talking about clause 35 and proposed new clause 35A covering the informal departmental appeal as well. We may not be able to do anything about the terminology used, but, the way in which those clauses would be grouped leads me to suspect that people would misread them.

Mr Weir: Is David suggesting that we should reverse the order of the clauses?

Mr Ford: I am not sure. In dealing specifically with the legal aspect of appeals, the way that they would appear in the Act as sections 34, 35 and 35A — or section 36 — might be confusing. The best way in which to deal with that may be to reverse the order. General appeals would be covered before specific appeals to the legal system.

The Chairperson: Does the first of those clauses deal with appeals or reviews?

Mr McMullan: Mr Ford is correct when he says that clause 34 deals with appeals to the courts, and it must appear in the legislation in order to —

Mr Ford: I am not saying that clause 34 should not be in the Bill I am simply saying that, because it deals specifically with the legal aspect of the appeals process, logically and chronologically, it should appear after references to general aspects of appeals.

Mr McMullan: If that is preferable, we do not have a problem with that sequence.

The Chairperson: Following on from that, will you outline your proposal to the Committee, John?

Mr McMullan: As drafted, clause 34 deals with appeals to the courts. General appeal issues will be covered by the current clause 35, which deals with the effect of appeal on decision appealed against, and the proposed new clause 35A, which would deal with regulations in respect of appeals. The current running

order is to make provision for appeals to the courts, followed by general aspects of appeals.

The order of that does not particularly matter.

The Chairperson: Therefore, the sequence is not a big issue.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the following clause be inserted: After clause 35 insert

“Regulations in respect of appeals

35A. The Department may by regulations make such further provision in respect of appeals under this Act as it considers necessary or expedient.” — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 36 (Enforcement notices)

Mr McMullan: The amendments concern appeals. They have the same format as the amendments to clause 6.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 24, line 14, leave out

“a court of summary jurisdiction” and insert “the Department”. — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 24, line 14, at end insert

“(6A) On an appeal under this section, the Department may either cancel or affirm the notice, and if it affirms it, it may do so either in its original form or with such modifications as the Department may in the circumstances think fit.

(6B) The Department shall, on making a decision under subsection (6A) give notice of the decision to the appellant including particulars of the grounds of the decision.

(6C) A person who is aggrieved by a decision of the Department under subsection (6A) may within 21 days of the notice being served under subsection (6B), appeal to a court of summary jurisdiction.” — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the clause be amended as follows: In page 24, line 18, leave out “or with such” and insert

“, in its form as modified by the Department under subsection (6A) or with such other”. — *[The Chairperson.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee’s proposed amendments, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 36, subject to the Committee's proposed amendments, agreed to.

Clauses 37 to 41 agreed to.

Clause 42 (Taxi touts)

Mr McMullan: It is fair to say that the Committee has had robust discussion on taxi touts. The role of marshals has now been clarified, so the Committee has taken the steam out of that discussion slightly. The outstanding matter is whether marshals should be exempt from the general offence of soliciting. It is a legal nicety. The people who will have responsibility for prosecutions for taxi touting will be the enforcement officers and the police. There is no chance that they will ever pursue marshals who are in their uniforms and who are entitled to be there to match people to their taxis.

Convention generally maintains that if an offence is created to trap people, an exemption must also be provided to allow them to get out of it. Clause 42 provides that exemption. Taxi marshals are there to match people to taxis. Touts do the same thing. However, marshals are legally allowed to do so. Counsel has suggested to the Department that there should be a general exemption: any person who is permitted under regulations should be exempt from the offence. The question remains for the Committee as to whether the provision should be more specific in how it relates to marshals and soliciting. Clause 42 simply provides an exemption to the offence.

Mr T Clarke: Therefore, why call them taxi touts instead of marshals? Why not refer to touts as marshals, as they all carry out that specific role? That would get rid of confusion and a grey area.

Mr McMullan: Taxi touts are those drivers who shout out for business. That can affect other taxi drivers, who see that guy as stealing their business. That is why it is an offence. The marshal does not commit any offence because he is legally allowed to match people to taxis.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 42 agreed to.

Clauses 43 to 48 agreed to.

Proposed new clause

Mr McMullan: New clause 48A emanated from one of the Consumer Council's proposals, that information should be made available to taxi users. Legislative counsel has provided an amendment of that nature to come in as a new clause after clause 48. The clause is important for people who want to make a complaint. They need to know their rights, and the publication of information states what their rights are when hiring a taxi.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the following clause be inserted: After clause 48 insert

"Publication of information

48A. (1) The Department may publish, in such form and manner as it thinks appropriate, information in connection with the provisions of this Act.

(2) Before the Department publishes any such information under subsection (1), it shall take into consideration any recommendations made by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland." — [The Chairperson.]

Question put and agreed to.

Clauses 49 to 58 agreed to.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Minor and consequential amendments)

Mr McMullan: Schedule 2 was previously dealt when we discussed clause 21, which is to ensure that traffic attendants can enforce all taxi-parking infringements.

Question proposed:

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the schedule be amended as follows: In page 39, line 29, after "penalty charges)," insert

"—

(a) after the paragraph beginning 'An offence under Article 19(1) or (3)' insert — 'An offence under Article 27A(2).'; and

(b)". — [The Chairperson.]

Question put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 2, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, agreed to.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: There are other departmental amendments. Is the Committee content with the proposed list of departmental technical amendments as discussed with the Committee on 11 October 2007?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee agreed all 44 proposed departmental amendments, apart from the one that related to the powers of marshals.

The Chairperson: The Committee is now content with the Department's amendment.

Question, That the Committee is content with the proposed list of departmental technical amendments as discussed with the Committee on 11 October 2007, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: Are there any further recommendations to be made in the report? There were

issues concerning the Bill's impact on persons with a disability, which were picked up during the consultation process. The question of enforcement and resources came up again and again. Today's issues related to people with criminal convictions coming here from other jurisdictions to seek work as taxi drivers. Mr Ford also raised the issue of badging. Those matters should be included in the Committee's report.

Thank you all very much; we have covered a lot of ground.

The Bill Clerk: The Committee has now finished its long session on the Taxis Bill. Congratulations on that. There will be over 70 amendments at Consideration Stage, which, you will be glad to hear, is more amendments than any previous Bill in the Assembly. When the Bill comes to Consideration Stage, I am happy to brief the Committee on the procedure and how it will be handled. The good thing is that most of the amendments will be non-contentious. It bodes well for the Department, now and for the future, that the Committee has agreed those amendments. I am happy to come back to Committee members before Consideration Stage, which will probably be in January 2008, to talk you through what will happen. There are likely to be six or seven mini-debates as we go through the Bill, which will be quite difficult to follow.

The Committee Clerk: The first draft of the Taxis Bill report will be available for the Committee next week. That will have to be agreed next week so that it is with the printers in time for publication on 7 December 2007.

The Chairperson: Thank you to Bill Lavery, John McMullan and Kevin Shiels, and to Adele Watters, who is not here today, for their help and guidance. It was new territory for many of us, and it was useful to work with you to tease out the issues. Thank you for your time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

15 November 2007

PUBLIC HEALTH (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 8/07)

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
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Witnesses:

| | | |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Mr Seamus Camplisson | } | Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety |
| Mr Andrew Elliott | | |

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome Andrew Elliott, the director of the population health directorate, and Seamus Camplisson from the health protection branch. You are both very welcome. I apologise for keeping you waiting. The Committee is dealing with the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, and this has been its first major opportunity to pick the brains of the departmental officials.

The Minister has advised the Committee that he intends to introduce a Public Health (Amendment) Bill shortly. Officials will brief us on the background and purpose of the Bill, and there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Andrew Elliott (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you very much. Members will have noticed that the Bill is rather short, and I am hoping that my comments can be equally short to reflect that.

The Chairperson: Your comments will be welcome.

Mr A Elliott: The Bill is a fairly technical piece of work. The World Health Organization introduced new

international health regulations that place a requirement on all national Governments to introduce domestic legislation to reflect that. The main purpose of the regulations is to improve and modernise the way in which we can perform checks on ships at ports. When the Department started to examine the legislation in Northern Ireland, it realised that our existing primary legislation was slightly weak. Our legal advice was that the legislation should be amended to ensure that it has clear reference to contamination as well as to infection, and that can pick up a range of modern issues relating to chemical pollution or potentially radioactive material that could be on board a vessel.

We sought to include the relevant legislation in a Bill at Westminster before the restoration of devolution. Unfortunately, that Bill was withdrawn at the last minute and the issue has not been progressed. We had no choice but to introduce it as a separate piece of legislation, and that is why the draft Bill is before the Committee today.

The Chairperson: Basically, the legislation is tightening up an issue that was not properly dealt with in the past.

Mr A Elliott: Once this legislation is in place, we will then proceed to make the regulations that will fulfil the requirements of the World Health Organization.

The Chairperson: Have members any comments to make? No comments — after all that waiting. I thank Andrew and Seamus for attending. We note your comments. The legislation will come before the Assembly in due course. Thank you very much.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE ARTS AND LEISURE

22 November 2007

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)

Mr Francie Brolly

Lord Browne

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Mr Ken Robinson

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): I refer members to the correspondence from the Minister and to the guidance received from the Bill Office regarding clause 6 of the Libraries Bill. The Bill Office has suggested that it may not be wise or possible to be prescriptive in the legislation about what is classified as a free service. The Bill Office has pointed to the fact that the Committee has a written ministerial assurance, which will form part of the public record, that there is no intention to introduce charging for core services. The Bill Office has suggested that the Committee write to the Minister seeking his assurance that the Department would consult with the Committee before introducing any changes to its charging policy. Are members in agreement with that course of action?

Members indicated assent.

I refer members to the response from the Minister, dated 16 November 2007, to a range of issues that were raised by the Committee. The Committee had asked the Minister to consider adding a general phrase to clause 2 of the Libraries Bill to make reference to the fact that the library authority should have a duty to collect material relevant to the region. The Minister has replied that the libraries' stock policy, including that on reference collections, is covered by clause 2(2) (a). He has said that he expects the library authority to develop a collection policy to enable access to local historical research material. However, the Minister is of the view that making it a legislative requirement that the authority must collect all material pertaining

to the region is too great a burden for the public library service. It may unbalance the book-purchase budget as well as open the authority to litigation should anything be missed. Are members content with the Minister's response?

Mr K Robinson: Yes, we have flagged up our concerns on both of those issues.

The Chairperson: Yes, and we can return to them individually if we so wish.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Clause 6(2) refers to charges. The Committee asked the Minister if he was sure that under the law the library authority would be permitted to make different charges to people of different ages. The Minister has advised that different charges for older people or children are justifiable on the grounds of the policy objective of encouraging children to read, and because senior citizens may be less able to pay. The Minister also advised that the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 covers the fields of employment and vocational training in relation to colleges, but does not impact on the Libraries Bill.

Are members content with the Minister's response?

Mr McCarthy: That response refers to different persons. We were worried that there could be different charges for different localities.

The Chairperson: OK. Do we want to anything about that?

Mr McCarthy: Clarify it.

The Chairperson: OK, we will seek further clarification regarding different charges for different localities.

That brings me to NIPSA's proposed amendments to schedule 2. The Committee had asked that the Department's solicitors meet with NIPSA's solicitors to discuss the issues. The Minister has advised that on 9 October 2007, the permanent secretary wrote to NIPSA requesting a meeting between the two legal advisers. NIPSA has agreed to a meeting at senior counsel level. However, DCAL is advised by the Departmental Solicitor's Office, not senior counsel. DCAL is pursuing the possibility of a meeting with NIPSA and its legal service. DCAL officials have advised that the Department is trying to set up a meeting with NIPSA and will keep the Committee updated. Do members agree that the Committee should write to the Minister asking him to advise it of the date for such a meeting, and to inform it when the outcome is known?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee asked the Minister if the Department has any plans to carry out equality impact assessments (EQIAs) on any aspects of the implementation of the Libraries Bill. The Minister has advised that an EQIA

will be carried out in respect of the location of the new headquarters and that advice will be sought from the Equality Commission on whether other EQIAs are required. Are members content to note the Minister's response?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee asked the Minister who will be responsible for drawing up the rules of operation of the library authority. We were concerned about schedule 1(3), regarding the tenure of the chair. The Minister has advised that the rules of operation will be set out in detail in the management statement and financial memorandum, which is drawn up by the Department and agreed with the library authority.

The Minister also points to schedule 1(11), which states that the authority will be required to draw up standing orders. The Department will draw up the terms and conditions for the appointment of the board, which will include a maximum tenure of two terms of office for the chair. That is a key assurance. NIPSA had raised a concern that the chair should serve only two terms. The Committee now has it in writing from the Minister that that will be the case. Therefore, the Committee should be content that we have effected an outcome.

The Committee asked the Minister a number of further questions regarding elements of the start-up costs and redundancies. The Minister has advised that no additional funding is currently available for a redundancy scheme and that the case for making a bid for redundancies will be considered in light of the operational design being drawn up by the chief executive designate.

In relation to the cost of branding the new library authority, the Minister has advised that a design firm will be engaged to consider a new logo. That cost has been covered in the new estimates of start-up costs, which were previously sent to the Committee, and which are now sitting at £2.175 million. The cost of new signage has not yet been calculated.

Mr K Robinson: How can money be set aside for the rebranding of libraries, vans and so on, yet not be set aside for redundancy or potential redundancy of staff? That seems to be a glaring omission.

The Chairperson: Do you want the Committee to write to the Minister asking for a response to that question?

Mr K Robinson: The redundancy situation will occur; it is not going to be avoided. Some people will want to move. We should write to the Minister to ask why even a nominal sum not been set aside.

The Chairperson: We will ask that question, Ken.

The next paragraph of the Minister's response deals with the new headquarters for the authority. He states:

"In terms of permanent headquarters, no work has yet been done on the eventual location of the Library Authority".

However, he goes on to confirm:

"The cost of fitting out of the temporary premises in Lisburn is included in the new estimate for start-up costs".

Related to that is the nature of the sub-regional structure, on which the Minister says:

"Until the work on the organisational design is complete, the nature of any sub-regional structure will not be known, but it is envisaged that corporate services not located with the headquarters will be in current library service buildings."

On how the libraries budget will be split, the Minister states:

"Until the organisational design work is complete, the proposed budget split between frontline services and administrative functions is not identifiable".

When that work is complete, the Department:

"will assess the balance between frontline and administrative functions."

The Minister advises that a regional funding formula "will not be needed". However, he:

"will also seek to see in the Authority's funding practice recognition of the priorities for TSN and rural areas... and other social groups specified for targeted action in 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries'".

On external funding he advises:

"existing library staff already have experience of sourcing external funding, and will employ this expertise on transfer to the Library Authority."

Are Members content to note those responses from the Minister?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Brolly: Can we ask the Minister whether there is any intention to solicit outside funding? I assume that outside funding refers to libraries that have been sponsored in the past under a certain name, such as Carnegie Library. Sponsorship could be a source of substantial funding.

The Chairperson: We will include that question in the same correspondence.

The next paragraph in the Minister's response considers the new authority's role in early years and literacy development. The Minister states:

"I will expect to see evidence of continued activity in libraries in terms of early years and literacy programmes, and my officials are developing measures to better capture this activity... will expect the Library Authority to demonstrate continued partnership between libraries and education provision, both at regional level... and at local level".

Are Members content to note that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We are nearing the end of the consideration of the Libraries Bill for today. We still await a response from the Minister on five issues: the inclusion of the phrase “comprehensive and efficient” in clause 2; the number of members on the board in schedule 1(2)(1); the make-up of the board in schedule 1(2)(2); the operational structure of the authority, and progress on the meeting with NIPSA. I advise members that the Department has indicated that a response is expected on those issues by 23 November 2007.

The agenda for next week’s meeting is clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. Members should prepare for that meeting by reading the Bill in detail and noting any clauses on which they require further clarification or about which they have concerns. Officials from DCAL will be in attendance to advise on, and explain, clauses as necessary.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Thursday 29 November 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
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

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| Ms Irene Armstrong | } Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure |
| Mr Colin Jack | |
| Ms Julie Mapstone | |

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): We now turn to clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Libraries Bill, except for schedule 2. Schedule 2, which relates to staff transfers, will be dealt with at next week's meeting, when the departmental solicitor's office will be available to provide clarification, if required.

Clause-by-clause scrutiny allows members the opportunity to raise any concerns about — or suggest any amendments to — the Bill. Members should read the relevant clauses in the Bill, along with the related commentary in the explanatory and financial memorandum.

I invite the senior Departmental officials to the table. They are Mr Colin Jack, Ms Julie Mapstone and Ms Irene Armstrong.

The Bill has 13 clauses. Each clause, including any subsections of those clauses, must be considered in turn. The Committee has three options: it can agree that the clause should stand part of the Bill, it can

agree on any proposed amendments, or it can refer the clause for further consideration.

If members are content, we shall proceed to the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. I did not ask Mr Jack whether he wished to make an introductory statement.

Mr Colin Jack (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I do not wish to make an introductory statement. I am happy to comment or take questions as the Committee considers each clause of the Bill.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Duty of Authority to provide library service)

The Chairperson: This clause requires the library authority to provide a public library service for people living, working or studying in Northern Ireland. It goes on to list the specific duties of the library authority and enables the library authority to work with other bodies. It also enables the authority to provide library services to visitors.

Members have raised some issues about this clause. The Committee queried whether the performance standards for the library authority should have to be approved by the Assembly. However, after hearing the Minister's evidence, we decided on 25 October that we were content that the Minister would monitor standards and report to the Committee. We wrote to the Minister, requesting that he include the term "comprehensive and efficient" in the clause. The Minister's response has not yet been received. Would it be sensible to defer final consideration of this clause until we meet on 6 December?

Mr Jack: The Minister plans to respond to the Committee on that point soon, and he is sympathetic to the point that the Committee has raised.

In respect of the finalisation of the detail of the clause, the process, as we understand it, is that the Committee will publish its report, in light of which we will take further advice from the legislative draftsmen about how to factor the considerations of the Committee into the Bill as it goes forward for Consideration Stage. I expect that the Committee will have a response from the Minister by next week's meeting. I am not sure that we are in a position to sign off on the wording of clauses today.

The Chairperson: We also asked the Minister to include a general phrase in clause 2 to make it the duty of the library authority to collect and protect material of regional importance. That was a point that Nelson McCausland felt strongly about. The Minister's response was that the libraries' stock policy, including that on reference collections, is covered by clause 2(2)(a).

Clause 2 referred for further consideration.

Clause 3 (Ancillary powers of Authority)

The Chairperson: This clause sets out the additional powers of the authority in relation to carrying out its functions. There were concerns about whether the clause permitted the library authority to co-operate with other bodies, in particular the Linenhall Library. The Department has clarified that the clause does permit the library authority to make partnership arrangements as it sees fit. At the Committee meeting of 11 October, members agreed that we were content with that response.

Mr Shannon: In respect of clause 3(2)(e), on the acceptance of gifts, are the gifts in question above board and documented? I want to know whether a donation is always documented.

Mr Jack: The Department expects that the library authority would have guidance on gifts and hospitality, as any public-sector organisation would. The intention behind the provision in the Bill is primarily concerned with the acceptance of gifts of books, or collections of books. Conceivably, someone might make a donation to the library authority in order to buy new books, and the Department would expect that to be open and above board.

Mr Shannon: I want to see a very transparent exercise.

Mr K Robinson: Would that cover a situation whereby someone felt inspired to bequest money to a particular library?

Mr Jack: Yes; it would cover that.

The Chairperson: Is that understood, or will it be specified in a memorandum?

Mr Jack: The Department understands that it does need not be specified because it covered legally by the term “gifts”.

The Chairperson: Are members satisfied with that?

Mr K Robinson: The reason that I raised the point — and Nelson will understand this — is that some of the schools in Belfast still receive bequest money from former linen mill owners. Although those sums are miniscule these days, a bequest could be a significant sum when it is initially made, and presumably that will carry on into the future.

Mr Jack: We expect that there will more detail on those types of issues in the financial memorandum management statement that the library authority will be required to have.

Mr McCausland: On occasions, in some libraries, bequests were made of books that were to be retained in perpetuity, but the library decided to sell the books. In one case, a library had to buy the books back.

Mr K Robinson: Members will know of one site in the north of the city that has caused the board, and the

authority before it, problems. Historically, that library is there for a particular reason, although it sits on a prime site.

Mr McCausland: How the books were received by the library is not a legislative issue, but, in practice, the library should be careful about how they receive books and under what conditions.

Mr Jack: The Bill states that the authority may accept gifts. I suppose that it is implicit in that that there could be circumstances in which the authority might decide not to accept gifts.

Mr Bradley: I believe my question has already been answered: does the Bill allow a library to refuse gifts that would be a burden on it, rather than an advantage to it?

The Chairperson: There could be such a gift.

Mr Jack: Yes; that is covered by the Bill.

Mr Shannon: Can you explain what is meant by the Bill stating that the authority may “invest money”? We always hear how tight the budget is, so I am keen to know what that means. I have asked my two party colleagues, and they do not know.

Ms Irene Armstrong (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): That is a standard provision. I suspect that the authority will not be equipped to invest a public grant, but it might have a bequeathal that was worth investing. It is not something that has been thought through in detail.

Mr Shannon: The library authority would hardly be buying stocks and shares.

Ms Armstrong: No.

Mr Shannon: That is what I thought. That is OK.

Mr Jack: The Department is advised that that is a standard provision for a non-departmental public body. There might be a situation in which there has been a bequest or a donation and it might be prudent to invest for a return.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Power of Authority to undertake commercial activities)

The Chairperson: There was concern that this clause implied that libraries could be judged on their commercial success. The Department has clarified that libraries will not be measured according to their commercial activities and that this clause is designed to allow libraries to carry out such activities as selling local books and running coffee shops. At its meeting on 11 October 2007, the Committee agreed that it was

content with that response. Having established that the Committee is content with clause 4(1), we shall proceed.

Mr McCausland: The power to carry out those activities is given to the library authority. How does that devolve down to an individual library?

Mr Jack: The individual library is part of the authority. The level of delegation for those activities would be a management issue for the authority. Any action of an individual library, provided it was properly authorised, would constitute an action of the authority.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Charges for certain library services)

The Chairperson: The explanatory and financial memorandum states that this clause retains the principle of a free public-lending library, and free access to information. Concerns have been expressed that this clause does not guarantee free core services. The Committee asked the Minister to amend the wording of this clause in line with the wording suggested by the Southern Education and Library Board. The Minister responded by explaining that not all book borrowing and information access is free, and, therefore, the Committee's preferred wording would not reflect current practice.

The Assembly Bill Office subsequently advised the Committee that it may not be wise, or possible, to be prescriptive about free services in the legislation. The Bill Office pointed to the fact that we now have a ministerial assurance that there is no intention to introduce charging for core services. The Committee agreed with that advice, and subsequently wrote to the Minister, seeking his assurance that he would consult with the Committee before making any changes to the charging policy. The Minister gave that assurance in his letter of 27 November 2007, which has been tabled today. Therefore, we are content with the current wording of clause 6(1).

The Committee also had a concern about clause 6(2), in that it allows the Department to make different charges to different persons, or in different circumstances or localities. However, after hearing the Minister's evidence, we agreed at the meeting held on 25 October 2007 that we were content with the clause as drafted, because the Minister intended to introduce a standardised set of charges for all libraries. We asked the Minister to clarify whether he had legislative cover to make different charges to senior citizens.

The Minister's response was that different charges for older people are justifiable on the grounds of the

policy objective of encouraging children to read, and because senior citizens may be less able to pay. The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 cover the fields of employment and vocational training in relation to colleges, but do not impact on the Libraries Bill. At our meeting of 22 November, members agreed that they were content with that response.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Byelaws in respect of use of library facilities)

The Chairperson: This clause enables the library authority to make by-laws in relation to conduct in, and use of, library facilities, and enables officers of the authority to remove persons who contravene those by-laws. Contravention of the by-laws creates an offence and a summary conviction, which attracts a fine. Any by-laws that are made must be confirmed by the Department. We had no issues with clause 7.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Grants for or in connection with library services)

The Chairperson: This clause enables the Department to pay grants to persons or bodies other than the library authority for the provision of certain library services. The clause also permits the library authority to make such grants in place of the Department by an Order that will be subject to negative resolution. We had no issues with clause 8.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Directions)

The Chairperson: This clause enables the Department to give directions to the authority. There were no issues with clause 9.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Amendments and repeals)

The Chairperson: This clause refers to the amendments and the repeals of existing legislation as set out in schedules 3 and 4. There were no issues with clause 10.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: This clause defines the terms “authority”, “the Department”, “library material”, “library premises” and “statutory provision”, as used in the Bill. There were no issues with clause 11.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 11 agreed to.

Clause 12 (Commencement)

The Chairperson: This clause specifies which clauses of the Bill come into operation one month after the Bill receives Royal Assent. The other clauses come into force when the Department makes an order to that effect. We know that the Minister intends to establish the library authority on 1 April 2009.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Short title)

The Chairperson: This clause simply states the title of the Bill.

McCausland: We must change the year — it states “2007”.

The Committee Clerk: We can assume that that will happen automatically.

The Chairperson: That is a good legalistic approach from Nelson. We must be exact in these matters.

Mr K Robinson: My disagreement may not concern the title; however, on page 8 of the Bill, which deals with the membership of the authority —

Mr Shannon: We will come to that.

Mr K Robinson: Sorry; it was just in case I lost my place during this gallop through the Bill.

The Chairperson: We are merely dealing with the short title.

Mr D Bradley: I wish to seek clarity on a point concerning clause 12. Will the library authority’s establishment on 1 April 2009 be synchronised with the first education Bill?

Mr Jack: The Minister of Education is planning for the education and skills authority to come into effect from 1 April 2009, and the education Bill will be brought forward on that basis.

Mr D Bradley: The education Bill will come in two stages. Will the first education Bill provide for a schools’ library service?

Mr Jack: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: Does that mean that the establishment of the library authority and the schools’ library service will be synchronised?

Mr Jack: Yes.

Mr McCausland: As I am not a member of the Education Committee, will you clarify for me the impact that two education Bills would have on attempts to synchronise with the Libraries Bill?

Mr D Bradley: That is the point that I am trying to make. The section of the education and skills authority that will deal with library services will be established by the first Bill — at the same time as the library authority. If that were not the case, I would be anxious that schools might be left without a library service.

Mr McCausland: I was thinking more about the deconstruction of the boards into two parts: libraries and education. Will that co-ordinate with the enactment of the Libraries Bill?

Mr Jack: The first education Bill will establish the education and skills authority and will replace the education and library boards, and will therefore make provision for the schools’ library service. The second education Bill will add some additional functions to the education and skills authority.

Mr D Bradley: The second education Bill will deal with sectoral issues.

Mr Jack: Yes.

The Chairperson: We must return to clause 13.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 13 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (The Northern Ireland Library Authority)

The Chairperson: Members should refer to pages 8 to 12 of the Bill, and the bottom paragraph of page 4, continuing to page 5, of the memorandum.

Mr Shannon: I propose that the membership of the authority be changed to include no more than 17 members — consisting of 9 elected members and 8 others — and that the chairperson of the authority should always be an elected member.

The Chairperson: I have noted that. What are members’ opinions? Perhaps the Committee Clerk might suggest options?

The Committee Clerk: We are waiting for the Minister’s response on the question of membership, and the Committee could defer its decision until next week’s meeting.

Mr Shannon: I will seek guidance on the best way to approach that matter. Should we make the Minister aware that that is our intention, in order that he might

respond accordingly? I understand that he may be sympathetic to that proposal.

The Chairperson: We will discuss paragraph 2 of schedule 1 in a moment. Schedule 1 contains 19 paragraphs, and covers the status of the authority, the appointment of board members, the employment of staff, committee proceedings, and accounting arrangements.

Paragraph 1 states that the authority shall not be regarded as an agent of the Crown. No issues have been raised. Are Members content that paragraph 1 stand part of the Bill?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 2 deals with the membership of the board of the authority, the number of members and their experience. Ken Robinson, Jim Shannon and others expressed major concerns about this.

The Bill currently specifies that the board consist of seven to 14 members. The Committee wrote to the Minister and asked that he amend the clause to allow 20 members. Jim Shannon's approach is now slightly different, and he suggests that there be 17 members, nine of whom are elected local authority members, eight others, and that the chairperson be an elected member. As the Committee has not yet received the Minister's response, it is sensible to revisit paragraph 2 at the Committee meeting of 6 December 2007.

Mr McCausland: If the Minister comes back to the Committee with suggestions, one of the difficulties may be that we will still not have a sense of how many local authorities there will be. That will not become clear for some months, so I see some difficulty. What is the final date on which the Committee has to reach a decision on the Bill?

Mr Jack: We hope that the Minister will respond to the Committee's letter in time for next week's meeting, but we understand that the Minister is sympathetic to the general direction of the type of model that you outline. The Department is conscious that the number of local authorities has not been finalised; on that issue and others we need advice from the legislative draftsman about how the wording might accommodate different models. I expect that the Minister would want to sign up to certain principles concerning with the balance of the board and so on.

Mr McCausland: Will the Committee next week agree only broad principles, for instance, the principle that there should be a majority from the elected sector? The fine-tuning of numbers will be impacted on by how many local authorities emerge.

Mr Jack: It may be that some of those issues might need to be tied up in subordinate legislation when the time comes. My suspicion is that the Committee will need to make its view clear in its report on the Bill. We

will take advice on how we can best meet the objectives that the Committee and the Minister want to meet.

Mr K Robinson: The underlying problem is that there is a legacy of distrust from those of us who have served in local government on how, over the years, we have been treated by central authority, whether under direct rule or the current dispensation. That underlines our concern that representation at local level is important for any of these bodies. Since this is the first, we are establishing the principle that we want local government, in its new format, to be able to reflect the wishes of communities and geographical areas. That underlying principle causes our concern.

Mr Shannon: It is also important that the balance is correct and that it lies towards elected representatives where decisions are concerned. A membership of 20 is a suggestion, but it is better to have an uneven number, even if that were to mean one more board member. I agree with Ken Robinson in that I see the proposed library authority as setting a trend, perhaps a precedent, of what is to come after it. Therefore, it is important that it is done correctly. If local councillors are involved, the process will have a responsible accountability, and that is no disrespect to independent members. The elected members represent the people, the community and therefore the balance of power should lie with them.

The Chairperson: Are you prescriptive in your mind that there should be 17 board members?

Mr Shannon: Yes, that is the number I had in my mind. A manageable committee is needed, whether there are 17 members or 19, and it is important that elected representatives make up the majority and that they always hold the chair. That means that the board would be run by members of elected status, and with accountability to the people.

The Chairperson: Does that answer your question about the number of elected representatives, Nelson? A prescriptive figure of 17 or 19 would result in a 9-8 or a 10-9 vote.

Mr McCausland: All of the local authorities should have some input.

Mr K Robinson: When we discussed this matter previously we proposed that an agency might act on behalf of local authorities rather than local councils, although some of us have reservations about that.

The Chairperson: Are we going to revisit that issue? That is the key point.

Mr McCausland: I am quite open about the matter. I sat on the board of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at one time, and have served on others. I remember one individual who had been appointed to a public body who slept through most of the meetings.

Mr K Robinson: Do not point at me. It was not me.

Mr McCausland: It certainly was not you. It is important that we think carefully about that.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that that person did not exercise the challenge function? He slept through the meetings?

Mr McCausland: He did not prolong the meetings. [Laughter.]

The Chairperson: The Committee was also concerned about the makeup of the Board. We wrote to suggest that the authority “shall be representative of the community”. That point was raised by Nelson. That wording follows the example set in Section 73(4) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, concerning the makeup of the Equality Commission. The Minister’s response has not been received, so we must defer that matter as well.

We now proceed to paragraph 3.

Mr K Robinson: Just before you do, Chairperson, paragraph 2(2), on making appointments, states that: “the Department shall so far as practicable secure that each member of the Authority has experience in a field of activity relevant to the discharge of the functions of the Authority.”

In a perfect world I would have no difficulty with that. However, is it not slightly exclusive, in that certain persons, who might bring a lot to a library authority, may be deemed “outside the loop”? I think particularly of someone who could almost represent the users’ interest. That person might not have experience in a relevant field of activity, but could bring something more to the authority. I do not want the authority to become too incestuous; that is my worry. During one of yesterday’s presentations in another place we got a feeling that some groups become very cosy. I do not want this group to be cosy. I want it to be able to represent the public and the best interests of the library authority.

The Chairperson: That concern will have to be reflected in next week’s discussions.

Paragraph 3 deals with tenure of office, and details processes for the removal, resignation or reappointment of authority members. An issue has been raised about whether this paragraph should specify that the Chair can serve for a maximum of two terms. The Minister has advised that the rules of operation will be set out in detail in the management statement and financial memorandum, which is drawn up by the Department and agreed with the library authority.

The Minister also advised that the Department will draw up the terms and conditions for the appointment of the authority, which will include a maximum tenure of two terms of office for the Chair. Therefore, we

have it in writing from the Minister that the Chair will serve a maximum of two terms, and at our meeting of 22 November we agreed that we were content with that. Are Members therefore content with paragraph 3, sub-paragraphs (1), (2), (3) and (4)?

Members indicated assent.

No issues were raised regarding sub-paragraph (5); are members therefore content?

Members indicated assent.

Do Members agree paragraph 3?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 4 concerns remuneration, and states that the Department shall determine how much library authority members will be paid. Again no issues have been expressed. Do Members agree paragraph 4?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 5 deals with the appointment of a chief executive and other staff. No issues were previously expressed; do members have any concerns now? Do members agree paragraph 5?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 6 deals with secondments from the Civil Service. There were concerns that it implies that the only secondments permitted were from the Civil Service. The Department has explained that that is not the case, and that paragraph 5(1)(b) permits the authority to have such employees as it sees fit, which could include, for example, secondments from the education side or from the Schools Library Service, as well as direct recruits. At our meeting on October 11, the Committee agreed that it was content with that clarification. Do Members agree paragraph 6(1)?

Mr McNarry: Why do we not make clear what they have told us?

The Chairperson: Instead of having understandings?

Mr McNarry: Yes. There is a lot of talent out there, and people could be seconded from library boards.

Mr Jack: Following reflection, the thinking that has emerged is that paragraph 6(1) may not be necessary in terms of seconding people from the Civil Service to the library authority, and that paragraph 5(1)(b) may be sufficient to give the authority that power. When we move to a later stage we may propose to remove paragraph 6(1). In that sense it may not be necessary to include the specification of other groups.

Mr McNarry: If we are not going to say what we think I concur that it may be unnecessary to include it at all. Who knows what employment law could subject

it to at some stage? If I am allowed to propose, I propose that it is removed.

Mr Shannon: I second that.

Mr Jack: We would be content if the Committee were to propose that.

Mr McCausland: To return to paragraph 2; does that mean that, at the first meeting of the library authority, the chair would be elected from the membership?

Mr Jack: No, we expect that the chairperson would be appointed by the Minister.

Mr McCausland: Is it not necessary to say that?

Mr Jack: When the legislation says “the Department” the implication is that the Minister will do that.

Mr McCausland: Where does it say that the person who is appointed is the chair of the authority?

Mr Jack: In paragraph 2(1): “The Authority shall consist of —

(a) a Chair; and

(b) not fewer than 7 or more than 14 other members, appointed by the Department.”

Mr McCausland: To take Belfast Education and Library Board as an example, 40% of the members come from the council, but were appointed by the Secretary of State. That does not mean that he chose them, they were chosen by another body, although he formally appointed them. Does paragraph 2(1) need more clarity in that respect? We are examining the issue of membership, so we can come back to that.

The Chairperson: We can revisit that.

Mr McNarry: I did not have the audacity to go back and pick at a point —

The Chairperson: You would never do that.

Mr McNarry: I am glad that Nelson did. If I picked up correctly on what was being said regarding the elected members, and the chair being an elected person, how does the Minister feel about making a political appointment? That is what it would be.

Mr Jack: The Minister will reflect on the whole mechanism for appointing the board and the chairperson in light of the views that expressed by the Committee and others. The answer is that he will have a view on how the chair should be appointed from the membership.

Mr McNarry: The chairperson will hold their position for two terms. Precedent will be set. It will be a political appointment no matter what way you look at it if the Minister accepts the opinion that we have offered because the chairperson will be an elected representative. For public consumption, I would advise

the Minister — whoever he or she may be at that time — to tread cautiously with the political appointment of the library authority. If it is the Minister’s call, it is the Minister’s call, but it must be understood that it is a political appointment.

Mr Jack: This will be discussed in more detail at next week’s Committee meeting, but we would expect the principle of appointment on merit, under the guidance of the office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, to apply to the appointments. There are mechanisms by which that principle could be applied to a pool of nominees who come forward from district councils. Variations on that process would allow the chairperson to be interviewed, even if that person had been initially nominated to the process by a council. An interview process could take place that involved employment on merit.

Mr McNarry: I will not dwell on it, but neither you nor the Bill has gone into the process of appointing board members. You make an assumption that they will be nominated. The process is not dealt with by the Bill. Clarification is needed on the process before you can take that next step.

The Chairperson: It is our intention to revisit that paragraph at next week’s Committee meeting at Belfast Central Library.

Mr McNarry: We just need an answer for clarification

The Chairperson: Do members agree that paragraph 6(1) be deleted on the proposal of David McNarry, seconded by Jim Shannon?

Members indicated assent.

Do members agree paragraph 6 minus subparagraph 1?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 7, entitled “Remuneration, allowances and pensions of employees”, allows the authority to pay its employees salaries, allowances and pension contributions with the approval of the Department. The Committee has not previously expressed any issues with this paragraph. Do members agree paragraph 7?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee has not previously expressed any issues with paragraph 8, entitled “Arrangements for assistance”. Do members agree paragraph 8?

Members indicated assent.

Mr K Robinson: Does that paragraph also include consultants?

Mr Jack: Yes, it does.

Mr K Robinson: I just make the point.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 9 deals with committees and allows the library authority to establish committees, which can have members from

or outside the authority. No issues have previously been expressed by the Committee on paragraph 9. Do members agree paragraph 9?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 10 concerns delegation to committees and staff, and allows the library authority to delegate its function to committees or to staff, and for committees to delegate their functions to staff. Again, no issues were raised.

Mr McNarry: Is it in order to ask if officials are making us aware of anything that we are not picking up and that we should revisit? There was a view about paragraph 6, and officials agreed that subparagraph 1 should be removed. Are we agreeing to anything else that officials identify as having a question mark? Could they tell us?

Mr Jack: Yes. There have not been any others.

Mr McNarry: Are there likely to be?

Mr Jack: There are some issues in schedule 3, but we have not got that far yet.

The Chairperson: Will the information be volunteered prior to completing the section?

Mr Jack: Yes.

The Chairperson: I anticipate agreement regarding paragraph 10. Do Members agree paragraph 10?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraphs 11 and 12 deal with proceedings, and discuss the content of standing orders to be made by the library authority and the validity of proceedings. No issues were expressed. Do Members agree paragraphs 11 and 12?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraphs 13 and 14 concern the application of seal and documents. They are self-explanatory, and no issues have been raised. Do Members agree paragraphs 13 and 14?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 15 deals with premises.

Mr K Robinson: I am happy as long as the headquarters is not based in Omagh.

Mr Shannon: Or Dungiven.

The Chairperson: I will accept Strabane. Paragraph 15 permits library premises to be inspected by the Department. No issues have been expressed. Do Members agree paragraph 15?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 16 concerns finance and allows the Department to make payments to the library authority, and the Department to receive any

money made by the authority. No issues have been expressed. Do members agree paragraph 16?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 17 deals with the accounts that the library authority is required to keep. No issues have previously been raised. Do Members agree paragraph 17?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 18, regarding the annual report, is self-explanatory. If there are no issues, do Members agree paragraph 18?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 19 concerns interpretation, and is straightforward. No issues have been expressed. Do Members agree paragraph 19?

Members indicated assent.

Schedule 1 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 2 (Transfer schemes)

The Chairperson: Schedule 2 will be dealt with at our meeting on 6 December 2007, when officials from the Departmental Solicitor's Office will be present.

Schedule 2 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 3: Amendments

Schedule 4: Repeals

The Chairperson: Schedule 3 sets out the amendments to other legislation as a result of the Bill, and schedule 4 sets out repeals. Members have raised no issues concerning either schedule.

Mr Jack: Since consideration of the Bill commenced, it has emerged that further amendments may be necessary to legislation within the remit of other Departments. We will identify those and bring them to the Committee for discussion as soon as we can before Consideration Stage.

Mr McNarry: The Department should flag those up clearly to the Committee before the Consideration Stage. How soon before Consideration Stage can it do that?

Ms Armstrong: We are working on that at the moment. I hope that that will be done before Christmas and certainly before the Committee is due to report to us.

Mr McNarry: Thank you.

Schedules 3 and 4 referred for further consideration.

The Chairperson: The Committee thanks Colin, Irene and Julie for sitting through the process this morning. Next week, we will revisit other aspects of it.

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.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 9 November 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Public Private Partnerships

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the success of Public Private Partnerships, in relation to creating a positive attitude to projects within the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 757/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): In taking forward the Investment Strategy, our priority must be the delivery of high quality, well maintained assets and facilities which can provide effective services for the public, support positive social change and enhance our environment. People using our services must be our priority and understandably they want the timely delivery of investment projects at the least overall cost to the taxpayer. Public Private Partnerships offer one route to deliver these benefits.

A number of major projects are planned to be taken forward as Public Private Partnerships under the Investment Strategy including:

- a new college for Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education;
- the Alpha drinking water project;
- the Omega waste water project;
- the new hospital project for the South West;
- Road improvements between Beech Hill and Cloughogue which completes dualling of the A1 between Belfast and the border;
- the up-grading of the M1/Westlink; and;
- the Belfast Schools Project.

The financial commitments entered into in a Public Private Partnership provide a physical asset and a

guaranteed service to specified performance levels during the life of the contract. Under conventional procurement the public sector would still have to meet the costs of maintaining the asset and providing the service. The key consideration in deciding how to procure new capital investment in the Investment Strategy is value for money, positive social outcomes and enhancing our environment. Decisions on individual projects are taken on this basis.

Carbon Footprint

Mr Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether or not it has commissioned research on the carbon footprint of those on low incomes, compared to those on high incomes. (AQW 1185/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM has not commissioned research on the carbon footprint of those on low incomes, compared to those on high incomes. Literature reviews relating to behavioural change have been carried out within the department during 2007, and a recent study, *Northern Limits (2004)* suggests that the Ecological Footprint of Northern Ireland residents is approximately 11% below the UK average, with 43% of the footprint being generated through materials and waste.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Fishing Licences

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she will give to the inclusion of blue-fin tuna in fishing licences.

(AQW 1143/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): There is no participation in the targeted fishery for blue-fin tuna by the UK fleet although all UK vessels are permitted to retain a small by-catch of 2 fish per month when the fishery is open. Blue-fin tuna is mainly of interest to the EU countries that border the Mediterranean who between them share some 57 % of the total allowable catch. Stocks of blue-fin tuna are managed by an organisation called the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). The European Commission negotiates on behalf of the EU Member States in ICCAT.

Compensatory Allowances for Tuberculosis and Brucellosis

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to ensure that compensatory allowances for tuberculosis and brucellosis remain in line with the increasing cost to farmers in purchasing dairy cows and replacement stock. (AQW 1161/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Tuberculosis Control Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 and the Brucellosis Control Order (Northern Ireland) 2004, where my Department slaughters or causes an animal to be slaughtered the compensation payable by the Department for the animal shall be the market value of the animal.

The market value of the animal means the price which might have reasonably have been obtained for it at the time of valuation from a purchaser in a market if it had been free from disease. The valuation is not intended to be a replacement value for the animal.

Currently compensation for Brucellosis reactors is paid at either 75% of the DARD valuation or a ceiling value which is based on market reports, whichever is lower. For pedigree animals, the DARD valuation is based on a market value for commercial, non pedigree cattle and the ceiling value based on market reports is increased by £300. For all other animals removed and slaughtered for Tuberculosis or Brucellosis they are paid at an amount equal to their market value as determined by the DARD valuer.

My Department's Livestock Valuation Officers regularly attend livestock sales to record prices and assessment of the quality of the animals passing through these sales. These sales can be locally in the North, or in the South of Ireland or in Britain and this enables a broad spectrum of livestock to be assessed and the market price recorded.

This ongoing updating of knowledge of current market values combined with the Valuation Officers expertise in the field is used to determine a market value for each animal inspected.

Milk Production

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of milk produced in Northern Ireland that is processed in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1162/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The percentage of raw milk produced here and processed locally (including that processed for the liquid market) in 2006 was 68%. The percentage of raw milk produced which was processed here for the

liquid market was 14% while that for manufactured products was 54%.

Locally Produced Food

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to hold discussions with representatives of the Northern Ireland food industry, in relation to the design and wording of labels on locally produced food for display on supermarket shelves. (AQW 1166/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I understand your desire to have locally produced food clearly labelled in supermarkets. However, my Department is only responsible for the labelling of beef and has no influence over the labelling of other food products. DARD inspectors, working with local authority Environmental Health Officers, ensure that all beef on sale is labelled with compulsory country of origin and traceability information. Other terms, such as, "Product of Northern Ireland" or "Northern Irish Reared" may be used voluntarily when labelling beef, provided they have been verified and approved by DARD.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is responsible for general food labelling. Under current legislation, food products do not have to be labelled with the place of origin, unless failure to do so would mislead the customer. The FSA is currently consulting with industry on its revised country of origin labelling guidance which is aimed at helping manufacturers, producers, retailers and caterers to comply with the law and to encourage them to give more voluntary origin information in a helpful and informative way.

A fundamental review of EU labelling legislation is currently taking place which will consider changes to the existing legal requirements for mandatory origin declarations and the controls on how mandatory and voluntary declarations are made. When the European Commission produces its proposals the FSA will consult widely with industry stakeholders. My officials are always available to provide advice to industry about compliance with the Beef Labelling Regulations. Advice on other labelling legislation is available from the Food Standards Agency.

The design and wording of food labels, in compliance with the relevant legislation, is a commercial matter and cannot be dictated by Government.

I am pleased to see that all sectors of the industry are now working together in an exciting new initiative to promote locally produced food under the marketing message – "NI Good Food is in our Nature". This emerged from the work of the Food Strategy Implementation Partnership to develop a co-ordinated domestic marketing campaign which DARD, in

association with DETI/INI, has supported over the last 2½ years.

Chemical Sprays

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the impact of the prohibition of the use of chemical sprays on farmland; and what consideration she has given to whether or not this ban is in keeping with good farming practice. (AQW 1169/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am not aware of any general prohibition on the use of chemical sprays on farmland. However participants in DARD's agri-environment schemes are not permitted to use pesticides on particular habitats to maintain the biodiversity value of these.

Energy Production

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make available her department's assessment of the potential for energy production from farm waste and energy crops. (AQW 1193/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has outlined the assessment of the potential for energy production from farm waste and energy crops in the DARD Renewable Energy Action Plan. The focus of this plan has been to shape a coherent support framework that will enable the land based and rural sectors to realise the potential that renewable energy production presents.

The Department recognise that renewable energy technologies will create opportunities for livestock farmers as assessed and reported by the Expert Group on Alternative Use of Manures (EGAUM) in March 2006.

Work is currently underway to establish a Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence at the AFBI site in Hillsborough. This demonstration and research facility will further identify the potential for energy production from waste and energy crops.

Energy Production

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make available her department's analysis of the most appropriate business models for farm based technologies in relation to energy production from farm waste and energy crops. (AQW 1196/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Currently, my Department is establishing a

Renewable Energy Centre of scientific excellence within the Agri Food and BioSciences Institute at Hillsborough.

This demonstration and research facility, will provide a unique opportunity to obtain an appropriate research and knowledge base in relation to renewable energy technologies. Once established we can then assess the most favourable business models for farm based technologies in relation to energy production from farm waste and energy crops within Northern Ireland.

Focussed on research findings CAFRE will continue to deliver a tailored technology transfer programme, seeking to increase awareness and knowledge of renewable energy deployment.

Energy Production

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to ensure that farmers are provided with the necessary information, training and financial, and non-financial, support for diversification into energy production. (AQW 1197/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department provides information and support for farmers wishing to diversify into energy production through the College of Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and under the NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP). Information is also provided on the DARD website.

CAFRE deliver tailored education, training and technology transfer programmes to those entering and within the industry in the areas of energy efficiency and renewable energy deployment

These programmes are focused on increasing awareness and knowledge of renewable energy issues among the farming and broader rural communities to enhance their capacity to exploit current and future opportunities.

AFBI has a key role to play in the development of a Renewable Energy Centre of scientific excellence at AFBI Hillsborough. The programme of research will support the continued development of renewable energy options appropriate to the land-based sector in the North.

Axes 1 and 3 of the NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007 -2013 include measures aimed at supporting renewable energy products and energy efficient technologies. Detailed information on these measures is currently being developed.

DARD supports the growth of crops for energy under the EU 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.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's expenditure on consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year.
(AQW 1212/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: During the last financial year my Department spent £703,788 on consultancy in the following categories.

| Category | Amount |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| Policy appraisal and review | 137,732.80 |
| Strategic management | 10,480.00 |
| Organisational development | 47,182.00 |
| Economic appraisal | 33,709.52 |
| Feasibility study | 8,291.41 |
| Projects | 450,475.54 |
| Surveys | 8,500.00 |
| Marketing | 2,368.00 |
| Other | 5,049.15 |

Motor Homes in Forest Parks

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's strategy to better promote, and provide enhanced facilities for, motor homes in forest parks.
(AQW 1230/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department, through the Forest Service, is currently reviewing its recreational provision in Forest Parks, including the provision of facilities for motor homes. This will include the preparation of a Recreational Strategy, which will examine a range of issues relating to recreation and will propose options for recreational provision into the future. I hope to agree and publish a Strategy in the next business year. In addition, my Department, in partnership with the Strategic Investment Board, commissioned a feasibility study to identify specific options for recreational development. This study focused on the two most popular forest parks, Tollymore and Castletwellan and was completed in May 2007. My officials are considering the recommendations of this study with a view to securing partnership agreements to develop recreational facilities over the next few years, within the context of the proposed recreational strategy.

All-Ireland Animal Health Strategy

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will confirm that her department plans to ease restrictions in relation to trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the beef industry, as part of the proposed all-Ireland animal health strategy.
(AQW 1236/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I have already announced, the All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy is one of my key priorities. I believe that full co-operation on animal health issues on the Island of Ireland can help facilitate trade and secure a level playing field for trade North and South.

The ultimate objective of the Strategy will be the free movement of animals on the island. This will be achieved by the alignment of policies and controls.

I will be discussing the Strategy with my Ministerial colleague in Dublin, Mary Coughlan TD, at the North South Ministerial Council Agriculture Sectoral meeting, which will take place on 9 November.

Organic Farming Industry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her department is taking to support the organic farming industry in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1237/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, which was approved by the European Commission in July 2007, I hope to offer a new Organic Farming Scheme to assist farmers who wish to convert from conventional to organic production.

The new Scheme should provide increased levels of support for the organic livestock sector, with additional support for the organic cereal and horticulture sectors. DARD proposes to pay the following amounts to farmers to cover the first five years of conversion to organic production:

| | |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Horticulture (including top fruit) | £670 |
| Arable | £570 |
| Other Improved Land | £470 |

These payments are on a 'per hectare' basis, and will be apportioned over the five years.

I also hope to offer an ongoing post-conversion payment of £30 per hectare per year for such land, which is certified organic, under the proposed Organic Option in the new Countryside Management Scheme.

In addition to this, CAFRE (Greenmount Campus) continues to provide education, advice and ongoing support in relation to organic farming. It also develops and tests new technologies appropriate to the local organic sector.

Energy Savings

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's assessment of the potential for energy saving and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from farming and land use; and to make a statement on her department's planned actions and budget allocations in relation to energy and greenhouse gas savings. (AQW 1247/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date, my Department has not formally assessed the potential for energy saving and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from farming and land use. Instead, my Department has focused on exploiting opportunities that renewable energy presents for the land based sector, as outlined in its Renewable Energy Action Plan.

These various activities in relation to renewable energy deployment and energy efficiency initiatives will have a positive impact on energy saving and reduction of greenhouse gases within the agricultural community.

A funding package of £4.2 million has been secured for renewable energy initiatives which include a renewable energy centre of excellence at AFBI Hillsborough and a technology transfer programme through CAFRE. Subject to EU approval, DARD also proposes to introduce an Energy from Agri-Food Waste Challenge fund, providing grant support of £10m for renewable energy projects.

In addition, research by AFBI into pro-active and innovative ways to lower greenhouse gas emissions from farming continues.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any equality impact assessment or rural proofing that has been carried out in relation to proposals to close her department's local offices. (AQW 1262/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department proposes to establish a network of 10 DARD Direct 'one stop shops' across the province, which will increase accessibility to our services and help to standardise the service we provide to our customers by improving the efficiency of transactions.

The Department is just about to initiate a pre-consultation exercise with key stakeholders, which will inform a full EQIA/subsequent consultation exercise.

Job Losses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the location of her department's local offices that are currently being assessed for potential closure; and what is her assessment of any associated job losses. (AQW 1263/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Currently no decisions have been taken on the location of DARD Direct offices across the North, with the exception of Inishkeen House, Enniskillen as it has already been modified to test the DARD Direct service delivery model. It is proposed to have 10 DARD Direct offices strategically located across the North so that the vast majority (90%) of farm businesses are within 16 miles of a 'one stop shop'. My Department will be carrying out a full EQIA/consultation on the proposal. I will make decisions on office locations after I have had time to consider responses to this.

As part of the Budget process all departments, including DARD, will have to make reductions in expenditure on administration and absorb the cost of pay settlements. It is likely that any job reductions which have to be made as part of this process will fall across most areas of my department. However, no decisions about potential job cuts in DARD have been made yet.

Forestry Land

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to convert limited areas of forestry land for the growing of environmentally friendly and cash producing crops, such as willow. (AQW 1269/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have no plans to convert areas of forestry land to Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) willow. My Department's main strategic objective is to expand conventional forestry, through funding provided under the NI Rural Development Programme, to increase the area of land under woodland. However, expansion of more specialist types of plantation, such as SRC willow used to generate renewable energy, will also be eligible for assistance under the Woodland Grant Scheme.

Badger Culling

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to introduce

badger culling to control bovine tuberculosis in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1281/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Badger Stakeholder Group has now agreed to the commissioning of a survey of the badger population in the North. The protocol for the badger population survey is designed to establish their numbers and distribution in the North. It was drawn up in close consultation with EHS officials. It is necessary to collect this information about badger populations to inform any future decisions relating to badgers. The survey field work is commencing this month and the report of the work will be completed by May 2008.

Both Britain and the South are progressing work on developing a vaccine against TB for use in badgers, as a long term strategy, and this is something that we will also need to consider as a long-term option. However, Any agreement to remove or vaccinate badgers in the North would need to be based on science and supported by economic appraisal, and would require the agreement of officials in DOE/EHS, Ministers of both Departments, DARD and DOE Assembly Committees, and possibly also the Executive, as the badger is a protected species.

My Department is current assessing and considering the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government, Sir David King's report, published on the 22 October 2007 which was commissioned by UK Ministers to review the Independent Scientific Group report on Cattle TB.

Farmers have played a crucial role in TB control in the North and have contributed significantly to its decline over the past 4-5 years. They will continue to play a pivotal role in the reduction in cattle-to-cattle transmission. It is also important that they take all reasonable precautions to protect their herds from possible infection by badgers. Herdkeepers are currently advised to take practical steps to reduce badger and cattle contact, for instance by preventing the access of badgers to cattle sheds and feed stores over the winter.

Newtownards Canal

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail which organisation has responsibility for the Newtownards canal, in particular the upkeep of the canal banks; and what responsibility the Rivers Agency has in relation to the cleaning of the canal. (AQW 1282/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A major section of the Newtownards Canal between its outlet at Strangford Lough and a grille just upstream of the Belfast Road is designated within the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973. As such it is maintained by Rivers Agency as necessary to ensure

free flow in the channel. While the upkeep of the bank is the responsibility of adjacent landowners, Rivers Agency removes overhanging trees, and vegetation from the banks if these are causing, or are likely to cause, obstruction to flows in the channel.

Nitrates Directive

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what assistance, financial or otherwise, her department will provide to allow farmers to meet Nitrates Directive targets by 2009. (AQW 1310/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is providing financial assistance through the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme to help farmers invest in improved slurry storage facilities and to meet Nitrates Directive targets by 2009. Budget provision has been secured to fund all valid scheme applications at a grant rate of 60%.

DARD has been highly proactive in its provision of advice and support to farmers. A Guidance booklet and summary A3 poster on the Nitrates Action Programme has been issued to all farm businesses. Numerous meetings have been held with organisations and farming representatives. A significant number of telephone queries have been answered and over 2,700 farmers attended a series of 150 information meetings organised by CAFRE. Since April 2005 Countryside Management Branch have released 43 press articles relating to the Nitrates Directive and a series of press articles on the main elements of the Action Programme is ongoing. Advice on the Nitrates Directive has been and will continue to be a key feature of the DARD display at events such as the Balmoral Show and Winter Fair.

To help farmers comply with the manure storage and nitrogen loading measures of the Action Programme, two calculators are available on the RuralNI website. Three additional nutrient management calculators will be available in early 2008 and CAFRE's ongoing programme of environmental workshops is being extended to include nutrient management planning.

EU approval has been secured for a derogation for individual grassland cattle farms. This will help many intensive dairy farms comply with the Nitrates Directive, by enabling them to maintain higher stocking rates, subject to certain additional nutrient management conditions and an annual application. A programme of CAFRE workshops, a guidance booklet and comprehensive press coverage will be provided to assist farmers who want to avail of the derogation.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sports Council

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the projects in West Tyrone that have been funded by the Northern Ireland Sports Council in 2005, 2006 and 2007. (AQW 268/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on the 1st of October 2007 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

During the financial years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) has provided the following exchequer and lottery funding to projects in West Tyrone:

EXCHEQUER FUNDING

| Year | Applicant Organisation | Project title | Grant Amount (£) |
|---------|---|---|------------------|
| 2004/05 | Omagh District Council, c/o Omagh Leisure Complex, Old Mountfield Road Omagh BT79 7EG | Employment of a Community Sports Development Officer (Year 2 of a 3-year programme) | 8,636 |
| 2005/06 | Omagh District Council, The Grange, Mountjoy Road, Omagh Co Tyrone, BT79 7BL | Employment of a Community Sports Development Officer (Year 3 of a 3-year programme) | 9,142 |

In addition to this, in April 2006, SNI made a three-year commitment to 34 identified Governing Bodies of Sport totalling just under £4.4m for the period April 2006 to 31 March 2009. The investment was made in relation to SNI recognised Governing Bodies of Sport who will have either a Northern Ireland or Ulster remit.

SNI also distributes funding on behalf of DCAL to the Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association. Details of funding are as follows:

| Year | Award Amount (£) |
|--------------|------------------|
| 2005-06 | 200,000 |
| 2006-07 | 600,000 |
| 2007-08 | 600,000 |
| Total | 1,400,000 |

This funding is in relation to the appointment of 29 new posts, seven of which will be dedicated to improving the governance and administration of the

sport (Business Development Manager and six County Administrative Managers – including County Tyrone) with the remaining 22 dedicated to games development at a provincial and county level.

A further grant of £8,284 has been paid to Tyrone GAA County Board in respect of Safety Management.

LOTTERY FUNDING

| Year | Applicant Organisation | Project title | Grant Amount (£) |
|---------|--|---|------------------|
| 2005/06 | Mna Na Deirge, Castlederg | Provision of equipment and coaching for Castlederg Ladies GFC | 2,085 |
| 2005/06 | Dergview Football Club Limited, Castlederg | Development of new junior football team through fun week and year long programme. | 4,592 |
| 2005/06 | Donemana Cricket Club | Development of a plan to develop a community facility in the area. | 5,000 |
| 2005/06 | Omagh District Council | Community Multi-Sport Programme | 92,589 |
| 2005/06 | Youth Sport Omagh Ltd | Funding for a Community Programmes Manager | 66,063 |
| 2006/07 | Strabane Sigersons GAA | Funding for summer coaching camp | 2,000 |
| 2006/07 | Dergview Juniors, Castlederg | Funding to host a multi-sports fun week and attend first aid and child protection course. | 3,986 |
| 2006/07 | Omagh Special Olympics Club | Funding for provision of weekly sessions in football and swimming | 1,500 |

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his department's expenditure on consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year. (AQW 1168/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure incurred expenditure of £1,208,111.24 on consultancy in the financial year 2006/07.

A breakdown of this expenditure by category of consultancy is detailed on the following page.

| Category | Amount |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. policy appraisal and review | £38,248.06 |
| 2. strategic management | £4,000.00 |
| 3. organisational development | £26,400.20 |
| 4. performance management | NIL |
| 5. accountancy | NIL |
| 6. audit | NIL |
| 7. economic appraisal | NIL |
| 8. internal audit | £17,939.29 |
| 9. feasibility study | NIL |
| 10. quality accreditation | £3,046.14 |
| 11. investment appraisal | £93,067.70 |
| 12. corporate governance | £99,822.50 |
| 13. projects | £851,636.45 |
| 14. surveys | NIL |
| 15. marketing | NIL |
| 16. market research | NIL |
| Other | £73,950.90 |
| Total | £1,208,111.24 |

Appointment of the Chairperson of Sport Northern Ireland

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the proposed timetable for the appointment of the chairperson of Sport Northern Ireland. (AQW 1205/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The competition to appoint the Chairperson of Sport Northern Ireland is ongoing. Subject to a successful outcome to the competition the appointment of the Chairperson of Sport Northern Ireland will be made by 1 January 2008.

Irish League Club Grounds

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he will take to encourage Irish League football clubs to share grounds, in order reduce both capital and revenue spend and to help such grounds to meet UEFA standards. (AQW 1207/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Decisions about Irish League football clubs sharing grounds is a matter for the ground owners and clubs, as is responsibility for ensuring such venues meet UEFA standards. However, Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, runs a number of programmes to which any Irish League clubs, with proposals for ground sharing, can apply for assistance. In addition, I have already advised both the Irish

Football Association (IFA) and Irish League clubs that, in my view, ground sharing is an option which some clubs may need to consider in order to help them meet UEFA standards.

Fisheries

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the protection given to fisheries in Fermanagh, taking into account that only one Fisheries Conservancy Board officer is employed to cover Co. Fermanagh. (AQW 1216/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) currently deploys one Conservation and Protection Officer to protect fisheries in Fermanagh. The officer has support and assistance of two FCB Conservation and Protection Officers from Co Tyrone, and the Department's Fisheries Staff stationed at Riversdale, Co Fermanagh have provided additional support during 2007 on request from FCB.

The FCB advise me that in the period 1 January 2007 to 30 September 2007 they conducted the following fisheries conservation and protection work in Fermanagh:

- 188 man hours on EHS agency work including river sampling, pollutions investigation and pollution prosecutions;
- 98.5 man hours on input to various agencies on planning and work proposals, EHS Consent to Discharge and consultation documents in relation to fisheries protection impacts;
- 283 man hours on shore bailiffing patrols / surveillance on an agency basis on DCAL fisheries;
- 399 man hours on shore bailiffing patrols / surveillance on on non-DCAL fisheries; and
- 339.5 man hours on boat bailiffing patrols / surveillance.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will confirm the sea-worthiness of boats owned by the Fisheries Conservancy Board that are currently in commission. (AQW 1217/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) has confirmed the following vessels are sea-worthy:

- 2 x 11 metre rib
- Cygnus Tornado
- 6.1 metre rib
- 2 x Dell Quay Dory
- Dromidair 16 foot fibre glass dinghy

- Pioneer 12 foot PVC
- 2 x 4 metre Honda Inflatable

The FCB have considered that sea-worthy in this case has been taken to mean - fit to operate in the intended environment (which may not necessarily be the marine environment).

The FCB have confirmed the following vessels are not considered sea-worthy:

- Tornado 6 metre rib (Repair to fuel line required)
- Bayliner Trophy (Inspection pending to determine cost-effectiveness of continued operation)
- Orkney 590 TT (Not in commission)
- 14 foot Dory (Not in commission)
- 18 foot Ernecraft (Not in commission)

The following vessels are notionally owned by the FCB but maintained, insured and operated by Clogher & District Angling Club:

- 2 x 19 foot Sheelin GRP boats (acquired under the EU INTERREG funding programme)

The FCB is to be abolished under the Review of Public Administration and its staff, assets and liabilities transferred to DCAL. The Department has commissioned FCB accountants to perform a physical audit check of all assets. Once this has been performed DCAL fisheries officers will ascertain the sea-worthiness of all FCB boats on behalf of the Department.

Junior Soccer

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to ensure that junior soccer is not neglected, generally, and in Comber and Ballygowan, in particular. (AQW 1218/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for ensuring that junior soccer is not neglected, both generally and in Comber and Ballygowan in particular, rests with the governing body for football, the Irish Football Association (IFA). To ensure junior soccer is not neglected, Junior Leagues have been established together with a Committee to oversee these leagues which is affiliated to the IFA.

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail when he intends to revisit the reinstatement of funding to the Ulster-Scots Academy, which was surrendered recently. (AQW 1219/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: All Departmental budgets, including that of the Ulster-Scots

Academy Implementation Group, will be reviewed in the December monitoring round.

MLA Meetings

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of meeting requests received from MLAs; the number of these that were declined; the number that were accepted; and the party affiliation of those MLAs whose meeting requests were declined. (AQW 1241/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A total of 17 meeting requests have been received from MLAs to date; 4 were declined and 13 were accepted. Of those requests that were declined, 2 were from Sinn Féin MLAs and 2 were from DUP MLAs.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the availability of the good practice guidance for civil servants about obligations relating to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 1255/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The "European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages Guidance on meeting the UK Commitments in Respect of Irish and Ulster Scots" as revised in August 2005 is available to the public on the DCAL website (http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/index/languages/charter_guidance_2.htm) in English, Irish or Ulster Scots. Guidance is also available to civil servants on Departmental intranet sites and hard copies may be obtained by contacting Departments

Audiovisual Productions in Irish

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what funding is made available by his department for audiovisual productions in Irish. (AQW 1256/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Northern Ireland Screen on behalf of my Department administers an Irish Language Broadcast Fund which in the current financial year has a budget of £3 million. A number of funding streams in the arts and other areas would also be able to consider applications for audiovisual productions in Irish in competition with other proposals.

Irish Language Provision

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what arrangements are in place for district councils and public bodies to (i) accept submissions from the public in Irish; (ii) to answer correspondence in Irish; and (iii) to encourage the public to submit applications in Irish. (AQW 1258/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Government has ratified provisions under Article 10 of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which require local and regional authorities to ensure that users of Irish are able, and/or are encouraged to submit oral or written applications in this language. There is no obligation under this Charter on bodies to respond in Irish.

Decisions on the practical implications of the Charter are a matter for each district council and public body in its own right, including arrangements to facilitate the obligations above.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is his assessment of the seaworthiness of the Fisheries Conservancy Board boat, which was sent to help patrol the east coast in relation to netting problems. (AQW 1283/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) advises me that a Tornado 6 metre rib was despatched for use if required in the Newcastle / Kilkeel areas but it was found upon inspection to require repair and is not currently seaworthy.

They also advise me that the local Fishery Conservation Officer, who has extensive knowledge and experience of the area, has been conducting extensive mobile patrols in the area and that he is satisfied that these mobile patrols are effective and that boat patrols are not currently required.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following his meeting with the Ulster Angling Federation on 4 September 2007, what action he is taking in relation to problems faced by Lough Neagh fish dealers; and if he will confirm whether or not the Fisheries Conservancy Board has visited fish dealers around Lough Neagh to check stocks of fish being sold. (AQW 1285/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) functions include enforcement of statutory provisions with respect to

salmon and inland fisheries including inland commercial fishing and the sale and movement of fish in Northern Ireland.

The FCB advise me that in the current year officers have conducted surveillance, quay checks, inspection of dealers' premises and dealers' registers to deter and apprehend those involved in the illegal sale of and movement of Lough Neagh fish.

During these operations they apprehended poachers on Lough Neagh, seized illegal nets close to a fish dealer's quay in the Lough Neagh area, confiscated trout nets from a supplier to a fish dealer, seized 1,000 yards of nets from a boat of a supplier to a fish dealer, seized 500 yards of illegal nets which are believed to be associated with a Lough Neagh fish dealer and lifted nets from a river mouth on Lough Neagh.

Legal proceedings have been instigated in respect of a net seizure on Lough Neagh.

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will explain the reasons why the Fisheries Conservancy Board is holding funds of approximately £150,000, which could be made available to angling clubs to compensate them for lost fish stocks. (AQW 1303/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There are a variety of reasons why court awards made to the FCB in respect of pollution incidents have not been implemented. The FCB has advised that the complexity of re-stocking/reinstatement programmes and staff pressures had combined to delay implementation. The necessary technical expertise to progress this work is not currently available within the Board. My Department has sought details of all court awards since 1999 (and any outstanding before this date) from FCB including full explanations regarding any delays/non-implementation. The Department is working closely with the Board to second vital expertise to assist in this work. The Board has been asked for a plan of action on how it intends to prioritise outstanding re-stocking/reinstatement work and to consider a consultancy tender exercise as an alternative means of managing this work.

For clarification the balance in the FCB restocking/reinstatement account stood at £110,590.60 at 29 October 2007.

EDUCATION

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to outline whether the directors for the Middletown

Centre for Autism (Holding) Company Ltd proportionally represent the religious composition of the Northern Ireland community; and to detail the religious composition of, and the selection and appointment procedures for, the directors. (AQW 9/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department of Education appointed two directors to the Middletown Centre for Autism (Holdings) Limited on 26 May 2004. Nominees for potential candidates for the two DE posts were canvassed from within the Department and set against criteria to consider those with relevant and specific experience in finance, autism and capital building projects. Those appointed were selected from the list available because they best met the necessary criteria.

The Department of Education is not able to disclose the religious denominations of its directors individually.

Autism

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education to outline the services that are currently offered by the Western Education and Library Board for autistic children living in the Western Board Area; and what steps are being taken to support autistic children and their families in West Tyrone. (AQW 271/08)

The Minister of Education: I am advised by the Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) of the current position and steps being taken in relation to services for children with autism living in the WELB area. This includes the provision for children with autism and their families living in West Tyrone.

The WELB has established an Autism Advice and Intervention Service and has expanded the number of staff in recent months. This team has specialist ASD Teachers, 2 Autism Intervention Officers and 1 Senior Educational Psychologist. The Board is currently recruiting a Head of Autism Service.

The WELB autism service accepts referrals from the Board's Educational Psychology Service, which is involved in the assessment of children who may have autism, and from multi-disciplinary assessment clinics. It provides:

- advice and support to individual teachers and assistants,
- individual interventions with individual children and young people,
- advice to parents in relation to pre-school children who are not yet accessing pre-school provision, as well as parental advice in relation to children who are of compulsory school age.
- in-service training for teachers and assistants that is both centre-based and school based. This is planned

and delivered in accordance with the need of schools and is available in pre-school, nursery, primary, post-primary and special school settings.

The WELB provides autism-specific classes in 5 of its special schools, namely: Foyleview School, Derry; Belmont School, Derry; Knockavoe School, Strabane; Elmbrook School, Enniskillen and Arvalee School, Omagh.

Children with autism and their families in West Tyrone access the support services and provision that have been established throughout the Board area. In addition, children and their families in West Tyrone should be able to benefit from proposed autism specific provision attached to mainstream schools.

Nursery Units

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why the original proposals for nursery units at St Brigid's Primary School and St Colmcille's Primary School, Ballymena, are not going ahead; and the basis on which this decision was made. (AQW 641/08)

The Minister of Education: The development proposal to establish single nursery units at each of the two new maintained primary schools in Ballymena, St Brigid's Primary School and St Colmcille's Primary School, was turned down in January 2007. I understand that this decision was taken on the grounds that there was already existing, adequate pre-school provision in the area.

Teaching Staff

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of people employed as teachers in (i) Gaelscoil na Daroige, Derry/Londonderry; (ii) Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach, Crumlin; and (iii) Gaelscoil Éanna, Glengormley, who do not hold professional teaching qualifications. (AQW 849/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not currently hold information on the teaching staff at the three schools as they are not yet in receipt of funding.

School Funding

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding given by her department to (i) Gaelscoil na Daroige, Derry/Londonderry; (ii) Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach, Crumlin; and (iii) Gaelscoil Éanna, Glengormley. (AQW 850/08)

The Minister of Education: Approval for funding is conditional on minimum year 1 intakes being

achieved and confirmation that school accommodation and sites are suitable. The processes for checking that conditions are met have not yet been completed and therefore my Department has not provided any funding to these schools to date.

Teaching Staff

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teaching staff employed in (i) Gaelscoil na Daroige, Derry/Londonderry; (ii) Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach, Crumlin; and (iii) Gaelscoil Éanna, Glengormley. (AQW 851/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not currently hold information on the teaching staff at the three schools as they are not yet in receipt of funding.

Wi-Fi

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of primary schools in which wi-fi units have been installed; and what plans she has to install this technology in other schools. (AQW 907/08)

The Minister of Education: Wireless connectivity has been provided to all primary schools as part of the rollout of laptops which will support the use of computer-based assessment for P5 pupils in the autumn term.

It is planned that all nursery, post-primary and special schools will also have wireless connectivity by the end of the school year, although any school has the option of declining a WiFi connection if it wishes.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to ensure that educational services continue at Riverside Special School in Ballyclare, in the event that the classroom assistants' dispute continues indefinitely, and in light of the fact that some children have already been told to stop attending the school. (AQW 910/08)

The Minister of Education: I assume the member is referring to Riverside Special School in Antrim. The non-availability of classroom assistants to support children with special educational needs in Riverside Special School, Antrim, and indeed all children with special educational needs, whether in a special school or mainstream setting, is regrettable and an obvious cause of concern to parents and schools.

The interest of children with special educational needs must be paramount and during industrial action

the arrangements for those children most affected by the strike action must be carefully considered. The education and library boards (ELBs) have advised the Department of a range of contingency measures that they put in place to assess whether or not special schools can remain open and whether or not the needs of individual children can be met in the absence of classroom assistance. In order to make these decisions ELBs have undertaken a risk assessment exercise to ensure that the child's safety is fully taken into account. Where an assessment of risk carried out by the school determines that a child's safety cannot be assured, then that child's attendance at school would not be appropriate.

Governors of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the governors of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 948/08)

The Minister of Education: The members of the Board of Governors of the Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir are:

Representing the School Trustees

- Ms L Kelly
- Roibeard Mac an Bheatha
- Donncha MacNiallais
- thaigh' Dhúire Ros UíMa

Representing the Western Education and Library Board

- Mr T Doherty
- An tUas Deaglan O Cearnaigh

Representing Parents

- Ms S McFeely

Representing Teachers

- Ms Maura Armstrong

The Acting Principal as an ex officio member

- id'Mr R Mac Daibhe

Members Co-opted

- Ms P McCartney
- Ms A Crilly

Review of the Planning and Management of the Education Workforce in Schools

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) when the fundamental review of the planning and management of the education workforce in schools will take place; and (ii) the length of time the review is expected to take. (AQW 1015/08)

The Minister of Education: This will be an important and wide-ranging review, and it is right that I give careful consideration to its scope, its terms of reference and its methodology. Work on these issues is under way in my Department and I will make an announcement in due course, to include details of the proposed timeframe for the review, which will look at all the main groups of staff in schools, including the roles of teachers and classroom assistants.

Equality Impact Assessment

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail whether or not her department carried out an equality impact assessment prior to the implementation of the recommendations of the Review of Public Administration, and the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 1053/08)

The Minister of Education: The implementation of the Review of Public Administration in education will require two Acts of the Assembly, and a programme of organisational change over a number of years. At each stage of implementation, proposals will be subject to equality impact assessments. Preliminary screening of the proposals to be included in the first Bill has been completed, and the results will be published for public consultation in the near future.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm what qualifications will be recognised when classroom assistants are allocated their pay bands. (AQW 1055/08)

The Minister of Education: The Management Side of the Education and Library Boards, i.e. the employer, has advised that following the implementation of the job evaluation process, qualifications will no longer determine the grade that a classroom assistant is placed on; qualifications will continue to be considered in the process of recruitment and appointment.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm that an NVQ Level III is used as the minimum qualification required, in current advertisements for the recruitment of classroom assistants. (AQW 1056/08)

The Minister of Education: The Management Side of the Education and Library Boards, i.e. the employer, has advised that NVQ Level III (or equivalent qualification as recognised by the Education and Library Boards) is not used as the minimum

qualification required in current advertisements for the recruitment of classroom assistants. It is used by Boards as necessary for short-listing purposes in cases where the candidate pool is so large that the school must introduce a higher level of qualification in order to affect a manageable short-list. Advertisements regularly ask for experience or a qualification, this qualification is normally NVQII or above.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm which body will grade classroom assistants under the new system; and to detail what criteria this will be based upon. (AQW 1057/08)

The Minister of Education: The Management Side of the Education and Library Boards, i.e. the employer, has advised that the job evaluation process has determined that there are three grades of classroom assistant; classroom assistant (general); classroom assistant (special needs), and classroom assistant (additional special needs). It will be for each school principal in consultation with each individual classroom assistant to determine which is the most appropriate grade in the circumstances pertaining in that school. For classroom assistants carrying out duties associated with the care of pupils with special needs verification will be sought from the Head of Special Education Branch in the relevant Board. The criteria used in the evaluation of these posts were those contained within the Greater London Whitley Job Evaluation Scheme as used by the Boards.

Garryduff Primary School

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the timetable for the commencement of works at Garryduff Primary School. (AQW 1095/08)

The Minister of Education: The works to provide a semi-permanent extension and car parking facilities at Garryduff Primary School are being taken forward by the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The Board has advised that additional land is required to facilitate this new provision however difficulties in purchasing the land means that the scheme cannot proceed at present. The Board understand that a planning application for the new provision will be progressed for consideration by Ballymoney Council at the end of November 2007.

Ballycastle High School

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education if she will make a statement on the provision of a new building for Ballycastle High School. (AQW 1096/08)

The Minister of Education: The North Eastern Education and Library Board are undertaking an economic appraisal for a new building for Ballycastle High School. The economic appraisal is expected to be forwarded to the Department for consideration shortly.

New School for St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the timetable for the commencement of the new school for St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle. (AQW 1097/08)

The Minister of Education: Planning of the proposed new school for St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle is at an advanced stage and it is anticipated that construction work will start on site early in the new year.

Straidbilly Primary School

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail when suitable car parking arrangements will be provided at Straidbilly Primary School. (AQW 1099/08)

The Minister of Education: The North Eastern Education and Library Board sought to negotiate the acquisition of land adjacent to Staidbilly Primary School to provide additional car parking though it has not been possible to reach agreement with the land owner. The North Eastern Education and Library Board are therefore not able to progress the scheme at the present time.

School Crossing Patrols

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school crossing patrols in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1105/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and library boards advised that they have provided the following number of school crossing patrols in 2005, 2006 and 2007:

| | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|
| BELB | 129 | 125 | 114 |
| NEELB | 156 | 155 | 153 |
| SEELB | 111 | 126 | 119 |
| SELB | 183 | 158 | 162 |
| WELB | 182 | 146 | 140 |
| Total | 761 | 710 | 688 |

School Crossing Patrols

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline the Education and Library Boards' policy in relation to the provision of crossing patrols at primary schools; and if she will arrange for this policy to be reviewed, in conjunction with the Minister for Regional Development, with a view to introducing a new policy for the provision of school crossing patrols, or pedestrian crossings near to schools. (AQW 1106/08)

The Minister of Education: The legislative power regarding the road safety of pupils is contained in paragraph (6) of Article 52 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 as amended by Article 23 of the Education (NI) Order 1997, and states that "With a view to assisting in the prevention of accidents, a board may carry into effect such measures as may be set out in a scheme framed by the board and approved by the Department".

Education and library boards use jointly agreed criteria to assess a location for the provision of a school crossing patrol. The criteria are based closely upon those developed by the Local Authorities Road Safety Officers' Association and in use, at present, in England, Scotland and Wales. The criteria include measuring the volume of traffic, investigating sight lines, and counting the number of children crossing a road unaccompanied by an adult. Following a request for an assessment, boards will only provide patrols where sites exceed the thresholds set out in the criteria. Boards may also remove crossing patrols from locations where it can be demonstrated that the danger has abated to levels that fall below thresholds.

The policy was last reviewed in 2005, and there are no plans to revise it in the immediate future.

Final Report of the Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Service Inquiry

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail what progress has been made in implementing Part Two of the Final Report of the Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Service Inquiry. (AQW 1148/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave his colleague the Member for Mid Ulster on 17 September 2007.

(Official Report Volume 23 No. 7, page 321 Column 2 and page 322 Column 1)

Sustainable Schools Policy

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which she will publish her department's Sustainable Schools Policy. (AQW 1150/08)

The Minister of Education: I intend to bring forward proposals towards the end of the year for the consideration of the Education Committee, before the policy would be published.

New Transfer Process

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the progress made to date on formulating the new transfer process. (AQW 1151/08)

The Minister of Education: Since coming into office I have listened to as many views as possible on the merits of different forms of transfer. As a result of this I am convinced of the need for a system which matches pupils to provision and not to types of school, which places the child at the centre of the transfer process, and which recognises that 14 is an age when children are ready to choose a path that best meets their needs and abilities, be that an academic path, professional and technical path, or combination of both. I will bring forward proposals when the time is right and when I am sure I have the right solution.

Teaching of Modern Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce modern languages into primary schools. (AQW 1152/08)

The Minister of Education: I am keen for young people to have the opportunity to benefit from learning a second language from an early age and here we can learn from existing good practice. The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has been running a modern languages pilot in primary schools. We can also draw on good practice from the Irish medium sector.

I am now putting a programme in place to provide peripatetic support for those primary schools who wish to introduce a second language during this school year, focussing mainly on Spanish and Irish. Officials are working with the Education and Library Boards to finalise arrangements for the programme, to begin in January 2008.

I am also awaiting recommendations, expected in March 2008, from the joint University of Ulster-Queen's University Belfast Subject Centre for

Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies which will inform a strategic approach to languages, including modern languages in primary schools.

Legal Proceedings Involving Education and Library Boards

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 680/08, to detail the nature of the disputes that resulted in the payment of compensation. (AQW 1171/08)

The Minister of Education: The disputes that resulted in the payment of compensation amounts, as provided by each Education and Library Board in answer to AQW 680/08, fall into four main categories as follows:

Public Liability claims, e.g. when pupils or other third parties have been injured and have instigated legal proceedings which have resulted in a compensation payment;

Employer Liability claims, e.g. when an employee has been injured and has instigated legal proceedings which has resulted in a compensation payment;

Employment Cases, e.g. cases which relate to employment disputes which fall within the jurisdiction of the Industrial or Fair Employment Tribunal, by way of example unfair dismissal, sex discrimination, religious discrimination, equal pay and Disability Discrimination claims;

Other Litigation claims which fall outside the ambit of paras 1-3 above by way of example contract disputes, (building/ procurement) property disputes.

GCSE Results

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland who gained five GCSE's at grades A*-C, including English and Maths, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1187/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

| | School Type | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|--|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| (1) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and mathematics | Grammar | 92 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| | Non-Grammar | 26 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| | Total | 50 | 50 | 49 | 51 | 51 |

| | School Type | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (2) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 95 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 96 |
| | Non-Grammar | 37 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 43 |
| | Total | 59 | 59 | 60 | 61 | 63 |
| (3) Percentage of year 12 boys not achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 7 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| | Non-Grammar | 71 | 71 | 70 | 68 | 64 |
| | Total | 48 | 48 | 47 | 46 | 43 |
| (4) Percentage of year 12 boys achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Non-Grammar | 38 | 36 | 35 | 31 | 29 |
| | Total | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 18 |
| (5) Number of year 12 pupils achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 5 | 3 | 11 | 0 | 35 |
| | Non-Grammar | 4,934 | 4,904 | 4,505 | 3,896 | 3,543 |
| | Total | 4,939 | 4,907 | 4,516 | 3,896 | 3,578 |

GCSE Results

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland who gained five GCSE's at grades A*-C, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1188/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

| | School Type | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and mathematics | Grammar | 92 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| | Non-Grammar | 26 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| | Total | 50 | 50 | 49 | 51 | 51 |
| (2) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 95 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 96 |
| | Non-Grammar | 37 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 43 |
| | Total | 59 | 59 | 60 | 61 | 63 |
| (3) Percentage of year 12 boys not achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 7 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| | Non-Grammar | 71 | 71 | 70 | 68 | 64 |
| | Total | 48 | 48 | 47 | 46 | 43 |
| (4) Percentage of year 12 boys achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Non-Grammar | 38 | 36 | 35 | 31 | 29 |
| | Total | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 18 |
| (5) Number of year 12 pupils achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 5 | 3 | 11 | 0 | 35 |
| | Non-Grammar | 4,934 | 4,904 | 4,505 | 3,896 | 3,543 |
| | Total | 4,939 | 4,907 | 4,516 | 3,896 | 3,578 |

GCSE Results

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of boys in Northern Ireland who failed to earn five GCSE's at grades A*-C, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1189/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

| | School Type | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and mathematics | Grammar | 92 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| | Non-Grammar | 26 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| | Total | 50 | 50 | 49 | 51 | 51 |
| (2) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 95 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 96 |
| | Non-Grammar | 37 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 43 |
| | Total | 59 | 59 | 60 | 61 | 63 |
| (3) Percentage of year 12 boys not achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 7 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| | Non-Grammar | 71 | 71 | 70 | 68 | 64 |
| | Total | 48 | 48 | 47 | 46 | 43 |
| (4) Percentage of year 12 boys achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Non-Grammar | 38 | 36 | 35 | 31 | 29 |
| | Total | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 18 |
| (5) Number of year 12 pupils achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 5 | 3 | 11 | 0 | 35 |
| | Non-Grammar | 4,934 | 4,904 | 4,505 | 3,896 | 3,543 |
| | Total | 4,939 | 4,907 | 4,516 | 3,896 | 3,578 |

GCSE Results

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of boys who failed to earn a single GCSE at grade A*-C, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1190/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

| | School Type | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and mathematics | Grammar | 92 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| | Non-Grammar | 26 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| | Total | 50 | 50 | 49 | 51 | 51 |
| (2) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 95 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 96 |
| | Non-Grammar | 37 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 43 |
| | Total | 59 | 59 | 60 | 61 | 63 |
| (3) Percentage of year 12 boys not achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 7 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| | Non-Grammar | 71 | 71 | 70 | 68 | 64 |
| | Total | 48 | 48 | 47 | 46 | 43 |
| (4) Percentage of year 12 boys achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Non-Grammar | 38 | 36 | 35 | 31 | 29 |
| | Total | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 18 |
| (5) Number of year 12 pupils achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 5 | 3 | 11 | 0 | 35 |
| | Non-Grammar | 4,934 | 4,904 | 4,505 | 3,896 | 3,543 |
| | Total | 4,939 | 4,907 | 4,516 | 3,896 | 3,578 |

GCSE Results

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils in Northern Ireland who failed to gain a single GCSE at grade A*-C, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1191/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

| | School Type | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and mathematics | Grammar | 92 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| | Non-Grammar | 26 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| | Total | 50 | 50 | 49 | 51 | 51 |
| (2) Percentage of year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 95 | 96 | 96 | 96 | 96 |
| | Non-Grammar | 37 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 43 |
| | Total | 59 | 59 | 60 | 61 | 63 |
| (3) Percentage of year 12 boys not achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 7 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| | Non-Grammar | 71 | 71 | 70 | 68 | 64 |
| | Total | 48 | 48 | 47 | 46 | 43 |
| (4) Percentage of year 12 boys achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Non-Grammar | 38 | 36 | 35 | 31 | 29 |
| | Total | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 18 |
| (5) Number of year 12 pupils achieving no GCSEs at grades A*-C | Grammar | 5 | 3 | 11 | 0 | 35 |
| | Non-Grammar | 4,934 | 4,904 | 4,505 | 3,896 | 3,543 |
| | Total | 4,939 | 4,907 | 4,516 | 3,896 | 3,578 |

Early Childhood Studies

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to awarding early years specialist status to graduates of the foundation degree in Early Childhood Studies. (AQW 1192/08)

The Minister of Education: This qualification is currently not listed by the Department of Education among those recognised as suitable for persons who are not qualified teachers and who provide support and advice to the staff of funded pre-school centres through the role of early years specialist. However as it is equivalent to NVQ level 4, the Department will consider whether it would be suitable for inclusion in the list of qualifications currently recognised by the Department.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's expenditure on consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year. (AQW 1211/08)

The Minister of Education: The department spent £905,600.57 on external consultants in the 2006-07 financial year and breakdown of the expenditure is contained in the following table.

DEPARTMENT: EDUCATION

| Category | Amount |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. policy appraisal and review | £274,522.65 |
| 2. strategic management | £404,479.08 |
| 3. organisational development | £84,335.00 |
| 4. performance management | £12,250.00 |
| 5. accountancy | £2,146.00 |
| 6. audit | £28,206.35 |
| 7. economic appraisal | £15,623.41 |
| 8. internal audit | £0 |
| 9. feasibility study | £0 |
| 10. quality accreditation | £42,446.37 |
| 11. investment appraisal | £0 |
| 12. corporate governance | £20,190.36 |

| Category | Amount |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 13. projects | £7,271.35 |
| 14. surveys | £9,800.00 |
| 15. marketing | £4,330.00 |
| 16. market research | £0 |
| Other | £0 |
| Total | £905,600.57 |

Draft Sports Development Strategy

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education, in view of the recent launch of the Draft Sports Development Strategy, what steps she is taking to ensure that all pupils attending grammar schools are offered the same opportunity to play soccer as any other sport.

(AQW 1215/08)

The Minister of Education: I am keen for more young people to take part in physical activity because I recognise the benefits it can have for their health and well-being, their self-confidence and their academic achievement. That is why I have been working with the IFA and GAA to put a Curriculum Sports Programme in place to provide greater opportunities for our youngest pupils to develop their physical literacy skills and an enjoyment for sports through taking part in soccer or Gaelic games.

In recognition of the importance of physical activity, the revised curriculum includes PE as an Area of Learning in its own right, and includes games. It remains a matter for schools to decide on the specific games and extra-curricular activities they provide. I am aware that the IFA offers a range of soccer programmes and opportunities which post-primary schools, including grammar schools, can participate in and I understand that there are currently 43 grammar schools involved.

I await the outcome of the consultation and the final version of the Draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation with interest. My officials will be considering the issues relating to education and will continue to liaise with DCAL as appropriate.

Downs Syndrome

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail how the education system is meeting the needs of children with Downs Syndrome. (AQW 1232/08)

The Minister of Education: Under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, the statutory responsibility for securing provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) rests with the Boards of Governors of schools Education and Library Boards

(ELBs). The statutory duties which arise in regard to children with SEN relate to the individual needs of the child and are not dependant on a particular diagnosis.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the ELBs that children with Downs Syndrome are normally assessed by health professionals before they start school and referred to the appropriate ELB Educational Psychologist (EP) for assessment. They may subsequently be referred by the EP for pre - school provision such as the ELB's Home Teaching Service, a special school nursery placement, a mainstream nursery placement with additional adult support or Toy Libraries attached to special schools.

In primary school settings a number of Downs Syndrome children are placed in mainstream schools with appropriate individual adult support. Other Downs Syndrome children may be educated in special education units or Learning Support Centres (LSCs) attached to mainstream schools or in special schools according to their assessed need. Within LSCs the pupils have a favourable pupil staff ratio and can work at a level commensurate with their need. In all cases the type of support provided will be entirely determined by the individual needs of the child taking into account all the advice received during the course of the statutory assessment and any parental preference.

Children with Downs Syndrome who have statements of special educational need have their progress reviewed annually via the annual review process. From the age of 14 as part of their transition arrangements they may also have access to Life Skills Programmes to facilitate their progressive independence in relation to adult services, training employment and further education as appropriate.

School Meals

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce free healthy school meals for all children starting primary school, regardless of family circumstances, in light of the launch of this initiative in Scotland. (AQW 1234/08)

The Minister of Education: I have no plans at present to introduce free school meals for all children starting primary school. However, I will await with interest the results of the Scottish pilot project.

The Department of Education is already providing additional funding of over £3 million to the Education and Library Boards and other school authorities. The purpose of the funding is to improve the food and nutritional content value of school meals and to support the implementation of new nutritional standards for school lunches and other food in schools. The standards for all sources of food in schools came into effect at the beginning of the current school term.

Bus Passes

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 521/08, to detail the schools attended by the 1,388 pupils living in Crumlin and Glenavy who were issued with bus passes. (AQW 1242/08)

The Minister of Education: The North-Eastern and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards have advised that pupils residing in the Crumlin/Glenavy area, who are in receipt of Translink bus passes, attend the following schools:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Ballinderry Primary School | Ballymacrick Primary School |
| Crumlin Primary School | St Joseph's Primary School |
| Abbey Grammar School | Antrim Grammar School |
| Aquinas Grammar School | Ballyclare High School |
| Ballyclare Secondary School | Belfast Royal Academy |
| Cambridge House Grammar School | Christian Brothers' Secondary School |
| Coláiste Feirste | Crumlin Integrated College |
| De La Salle High School | Dominican College, Fortwilliam |
| Edmund Rice College | Fort Hill Integrated College |
| Friends' School, Lisburn | Hazelwood College |
| Hunterhouse College | La Salle Boys' School |
| Lagan College | Laurelhill Community College |
| Little Flower Girls' Secondary School | Lurgan Junior High School |
| Malone Integrated College | Methodist College |

| | |
|--|--|
| Parkhall High School | Rathmore Grammar School |
| Slemish College | St Benedict's College, Randalstown |
| St Dominic's High School | St Eoghan's Primary School |
| St Francis De Sales Special School | St Gemma's High School |
| St Genevieve's High School | St Louis' Grammar School, Ballymena |
| St Louise's Comprehensive College | St Malachy's College |
| St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School | St Mary's High School, Lurgan |
| St Michael's Grammar School | St Patrick's College, Bearnageeha |
| St Patrick's High School, Lisburn | St Paul's Junior High School |
| St Rose's High School | The Royal Belfast Academical Institution |
| Victoria College | Wallace High School, Lisburn |

Integrated Schools

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) her department's expenditure on integrated schools and colleges in East Derry/Londonderry; and (ii) pupil numbers for such schools and colleges, in each year since 1999. (AQW 1265/08)

The Minister of Education: Details of expenditure and enrolment in each of the years from 1999/00 to 2006/07 are as follows:

| School | | 99/00 £'000s | 00/01 £'000s | 01/02 £'000s | 02/03 £'000s | 03/04 £'000s | 04/05 £'000s | 05/06 £'000s | 06/07 £'000s |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Carhill Integrated Primary School | Recurrent | 136 | 163 | 162 | 164 | 170 | 169 | 221 | 190 |
| | Capital | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 79 |
| | Enrolment | 50 | 47 | 48 | 43 | 41 | 45 | 43 | 44 |
| Mill Strand Integrated Primary School | Recurrent | 423 | 452 | 492 | 509 | 603 | 498 | 505 | 544 |
| | Capital | 0.7 | 0 | 55 | 37 | 0 | 4 | 138 | 5 |
| | Enrolment | 217 | 219 | 208 | 209 | 180 | 184 | 184 | 190 |
| Roe Valley Integrated Primary | Recurrent | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 81 | 189 | 282 |
| | Capital | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Enrolment | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 45 | 73 |
| North Coast Integrated College | Recurrent | 1,150 | 1,432 | 1,448 | 1,678 | 1,909 | 2,102 | 2,217 | 2,330 |
| | Capital | 190 | 638 | 739 | 181 | 26 | 92 | 33 | 11 |
| | Enrolment | 327 | 419 | 451 | 504 | 523 | 518 | 512 | 522 |

School Transport

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school transport in each Education and Library Board, for each of the last five years. (AQW 1270/08)

The Minister of Education: The expenditure incurred through the provision of home to school transport in each Board area over the last five years is as follows:

| | BELB | NEELB | SEELB | SELB | WELB | TOTAL |
|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 2002/03 | £4,017k | £14,152k | £11,877k | £14,841k | £12,317k | £57,204k |
| 2003/04 | £4,606k | £15,255k | £12,873k | £15,216k | £11,652k | £59,602k |
| 2004/05 | £4,425k | £16,806k | £13,285k | £16,367k | £13,167k | £64,050k |
| 2005/06 | £4,734k | £16,507k | £13,245k | £16,334k | £13,871k | £64,691k |
| 2006/07 | £4,914k* | £16,507k | £13,302k | £16,056k | £14,426k | £65,205k |

* Estimated outturn. Actual figures unavailable at present.

School Transport

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of school transport by (i) buses; and (ii) taxis, for each of the last five years. (AQW 1271/08)

The Minister of Education: Education and Library Boards have incurred the following expenditure through the provision of transport assistance by all forms of school bus and taxis, in each of the last five years:

| | Buses | Taxis |
|----------------------|----------|---------|
| 2002/03 | £47,098k | £7,661k |
| 2003/04 | £47,695k | £8,458k |
| 2004/05 | £52,926k | £8,012k |
| 2005/06 | £53,399k | £7,989k |
| 2006/07 [^] | £50,369k | £6,589k |

[^] The Belfast Board has not yet provided detailed outturn figures for the 2006/07 financial year. As such, the information provided only relates to the other four Boards.

School Transport

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of providing school transport in Northern Ireland; and to detail the cost per child, broken down by (i) maintained; (ii) controlled; (iii) Irish-medium; (iv) integrated; and (v) voluntary grammar sector, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1272/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below shows the total expenditure incurred through the provision of home to school transport in the requested school management sectors, for each of the last five years:

| | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 [^] |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------------------|
| Controlled & Maintained* | £41,573k | £41,687k | £44,441k | £45,456k | £39,093k |
| Irish-Medium | £343k | £411k | £488k | £354k | £313k |
| Integrated | £3,423k | £4,340k | £4,420 | £4,241k | £3,739k |
| Voluntary Grammar | £10,366k | £11,464k | £13,143k | £12,835k | £15,520k |

* Current statistics do not differentiate between pupils attending controlled and maintained schools. This category also includes special schools.

[^] The Belfast Board has not yet provided detailed outturn figures for the 2006/07 financial year. As such, the information provided only relates to the other four Boards.

The unit costs for the provision of home to school transport for the requested management sectors for each of the last five years are as follows:

| | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 [^] |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------------|
| Controlled & Maintained* | £573 | £587 | £642 | £661 | £658 |
| Irish-Medium | # | £842 | £1,052 | £738 | £566 |

| | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 [^] |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------------|
| Integrated | £458 | £553 | £557 | £532 | £471 |
| Voluntary Grammar | # | # | # | # | £586 |

* Current statistics do not differentiate between pupils attending controlled and maintained schools. This category also includes special schools.

[^] The Belfast Board has not yet provided detailed outturn figures for the 2006/07 financial year. As such, the information provided only relates to the other four Boards.

DE does not hold separate pupil number statistics on the Voluntary Grammar and Irish-Medium sectors for these years. These pupils are, therefore, included in the figures for the controlled and maintained sector.

It should be noted that the total expenditure incurred on school transport includes factors such as administration costs, building maintenance etc which have been excluded from the tables above as they are not related to individual sectors.

School Amalgamation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail her Department's concerns in relation to the amalgamation of St Joseph's Primary School, Ahoghill and St Patrick's Primary School, Aughercloney, in light of its request that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools review the proposal. (AQW 1286/08)

The Minister of Education: The September 2007 enrolment at St Patrick's Primary School Aughercloney has reduced from 26 to only 6 pupils, and CCMS has therefore been asked to review the proposed amalgamation.

Renewable Energy

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Education if she could outline her department's position on the installation of renewable energy sources, such as solar panels, in new build schools. (AQW 1288/08)

The Minister of Education: All new school buildings currently in planning are required to comply with the Achieving Sustainability in Construction Procurement – Sustainability Action Plan which promotes the use of renewable energy sources, including solar panels. Building Regulations also encourage the use of renewable energy sources. The Department is also willing to consider specific renewable energy issues raised in connection with any school project.

Children with Special Needs

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils registered as having special needs in the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 1309/08)

The Minister of Education: There were 11,519 children with special educational needs at schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board in 2006/07. A further 111 children attended voluntary and private pre-school centres.

Educational Psychologists

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of educational psychologists employed in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1313/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and Library Boards employ the following numbers of full time equivalent Educational Psychologists.

| | |
|-------|-------|
| BELB | 23.18 |
| NEELB | 22.38 |
| SEELB | 23.56 |
| SELB | 27.28 |
| WELB | 24.4 |

Educational Psychologists

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the waiting time for assessment by an educational psychologist, broken down by Education and Library Board area, for each of the past five years. (AQW 1314/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the average waiting time for assessment by an Educational Psychologist, for each of the last five academic years except where indicated, is as follows:

| | | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|-------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| BELB | Stages 3 & 4 | 5.7 weeks | 5 weeks | 4.6 weeks | 4 weeks | 4.3 weeks |
| NEELB | Stages 3 & 4 | 30.3 weeks | 18 weeks | 16.9 weeks | 11 weeks | 11.4 weeks |
| SEELB | Stage 3 | 36.9 weeks | 40.4 weeks | 38.6 weeks | 26.4 weeks | 24.4 weeks |
| | Stage 4 | 4.3 weeks | 4.1 weeks | 5.4 weeks | 5 weeks | 5.4 weeks |
| SELB | Stage 3 | 24 weeks | 24 weeks | 24 weeks | 30 weeks | 7.5 weeks |
| | Stage 4 | 5 weeks | 5.2 weeks | 6 weeks | 6 weeks | 6 weeks |
| WELB | Stages 3 & 4 | 7 weeks | 6.5 weeks | 7.5 weeks | 10 weeks* | 9 weeks* |

* calendar year

For BELB, NEELB and WELB the average time given is the combined waiting time for assessment by educational psychologists at both stages 3, non statutory assessments, and 4, statutory assessments of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs as these Boards use the Time Allocation model of service delivery. For SEELB and SELB this is given separately with the first row in each case referring to Stage 3 and the second row Stage 4.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

MLA Meetings

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of meeting requests received from MLAs; the number of these that were declined; the number that were accepted; and the party affiliation of those MLAs whose meeting requests were declined. (AQW 1240/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): To date I have received 12 meeting requests from MLAs. I have accepted 11 of these and declined 1. I declined to meet a member affiliated to the DUP, as the issue raised was the responsibility of another Minister.

Childcare Provisions

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has for the site of the current day care centre at the Belfast Metropolitan College's Gerald Moag campus. (AQW 1278/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland are autonomous organisations and, as such, their Governing Bodies determine how best to utilise their estates.

The Governing Body for Belfast Metropolitan College has advised me that it has not yet decided on the future use of the site of the current day care centre at the Gerald Moag campus.

Childcare Provisions

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the childcare provisions he will put in place to replace the current childcare service at the day care centre at Belfast Metropolitan College's Gerald Moag campus. (AQW 1279/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland are autonomous organisations and, as such, their Governing Bodies determine which services and facilities should be offered; this includes any provision for childcare.

The Gerald Moag campus of Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) is operated by the Northwin consortium under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract. The original PFI contract included the provision of a day care facility.

The College has informed me that, for the academic year 2006/07, only one third of all available childcare places at the campus were used by College students and staff. Given this relatively low usage, BMC informed Northwin in June 2006 that the day care facility should be withdrawn as it did not adequately meet its objective of providing a service for college students and staff.

The college is now reviewing the child care provision on offer throughout Belfast to the College's students and staff. The Governing Body has also advised me that Northwin has not been invited to introduce alternative child care arrangements at the Gerald Moag building.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to widen the education

maintenance allowance scheme to include all students staying on in education, and not just students whose families meet the current means-tested income threshold of £30,810. (AQW 1294/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

There are no current plans to abolish the upper household income threshold for payment of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs). The purpose of the EMA scheme is to encourage students from low-income households to remain in full-time education who may otherwise have left because of financial constraints on their families. It has been specifically designed to tackle this issue which, in the past, may have acted as a barrier for many young people who wished to continue with their education. The EMA is also designed to increase the employment potential of the young person, address the well-established link between low attainment and low income and encourage non-traditional learners.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his department's expenditure on consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year. (AQW 1307/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The total consultancy expenditure for the Department for Employment and Learning for the financial year 2006/07 was £378,284. An analysis is given below:

| Consultancy Category | Actual Expenditure April 2006- March 2007 |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Total Management Advisory Category | £244,906 |
| Total Financial Advisory Category | £6,437 |
| Total Assurance Category | £20,847 |
| Total Human Resources Category | £1,317 |
| Total Internal Audit Category | £2,900 |
| Total Research Category | £99,377 |
| Total Marketing Category | £2,500 |
| Grand Total for DEL and NDPBs | £378,284 |

Training for Success

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the personal learning plan template, to be used for all candidates enrolled on the 'Job Ready' strand of 'Training for Success', was implemented. (AQW 1318/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Personal Training Plan software was issued to all Suppliers on 16th October 2007.

Following discussions with *Training for Success* Suppliers in August 2007, the Department relaxed, for the first year of this new provision, the submission deadline for participants' Personal Training Plans. The relaxation was designed to ensure that Suppliers had sufficient time to become familiar with the new provision and to train their staff accordingly.

Migrant Workers

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to facilitate the recognition of qualifications from outside the European Union, in order to assist migrant workers or immigrants with qualifications can play their full role in developing the economy. (AQW 1339/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

There is provision within my Department whereby anyone with qualifications from outside the European Union can ask the Department to map their qualifications to UK qualifications. This is done through the United Kingdom National Academic Recognition Information Centre (UK NARIC), International Comparisons database, to which my Department subscribes. This service has been in operation since April 2002 and can be accessed by making direct contact with the Department.

Seagate Job Losses

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to provide training opportunities for the staff at Seagate to gain meaningful employment. (AQW 1341/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department will assist individuals to find alternative employment. Senior officials met with Seagate Technology management on Monday 5th November 2007.

Seagate management has expressed a clear commitment to working with the Department and other Agencies to assist employees. The company is currently undertaking a statutory 90-day consultation period on the closure proposal.

The Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, will provide advice on employment opportunities, job search, training and education opportunities, careers advice and benefits advice. This will be provided on-site as required. Training provision will be made available as appropriate in discussion with the company and employee representatives.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to offer training and other assistance to the 900 employees of the Seagate factory in Limavady, in order to ensure that they have an adequate knowledge and skills base to obtain long-term sustainable employment in the north west.

(AQW 1363/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department will assist individuals to find alternative employment. Senior officials met with Seagate Technology management on Monday 5th November 2007.

Seagate management has expressed a clear commitment to working with the Department and other Agencies to assist employees. The company is currently undertaking a statutory 90-day consultation period on the closure proposal.

The Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, will provide advice on employment opportunities, job search, training and education opportunities, careers advice and benefits advice. This will be provided on-site as required. Training provision will be made available as appropriate in discussion with the company and employee representatives.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he has taken to ensure that his department maximises the delivery of services to Seagate employees affected by the impending closure of the factory in Limavady.

(AQW 1393/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department will assist individuals to find alternative employment. Senior officials met with Seagate Technology management on Monday 5th November 2007.

Seagate management has expressed a clear commitment to working with the Department and other Agencies to assist employees. The company is currently undertaking a statutory 90-day consultation period on the closure proposal.

The Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, will provide advice on employment opportunities, job search, training and education opportunities, careers advice and benefits advice. This will be provided on-site as required. Training provision will be made available as appropriate in discussion with the company and employee representatives.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the mechanism that will be put in place to ensure that there will be a viable all-island market for electricity from renewable sources; and specifically, what subventions will be made available to ensure that generators of green electricity are able to supply electricity between jurisdictions.

(AQW 1239/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Within the context of the European Union vision for more competitive regional energy markets, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic are leading the way in creating a Single Electricity Market (SEM) designed to promote competition and improve the security of supply in the electricity market on the island of Ireland. Decisions on the SEM will be taken in the manner which is best calculated to secure a diverse, viable and environmentally sustainable long-term energy supply in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, subject to the principal objective and duty to protect the interests of consumers. The longer term aim is to develop a regional electricity market, comprising the United Kingdom, Irish Republic and France.

Plans for the development of renewables are included in this approach and, in this context, DETI and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) have recently completed a Grid Study of the potential for increased electricity generation from renewable sources on an all-island basis.

However, subvention measures in support of sustainable energy remain a matter for the respective jurisdictions. The Renewables Obligation is the main support mechanism for large scale renewables in Northern Ireland while the Irish Republic operates a Feed-in Tariff system and it is a condition of each mechanism that the electricity must be consumed in the jurisdiction of its generation. There are no plans at present to adopt a single approach to encouraging renewables development across the island.

Renewable Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) what targets have been set in relation to renewable energy supply; (ii) how the expansion of the renewable energy supply industry is measured against these targets; and (iii) how the development of the industry has impacted on the price of technology and installation.

(AQW 1248/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland's current renewable energy supply target is that 12% of electricity consumption in 2012 will be from indigenous renewable sources.

DETI monitors progress against this target using generation and consumption figures from the electricity supply industry. In 2006/07 indigenous renewables represented 3.8% of total consumption while a further 2% was provided by imports of renewable electricity.

No assessment has been carried out to date on the impact of renewables development on the price of the associated technology and installation. Moreover, the development of the Northern Ireland renewable supply industry could be expected to have only an insignificant impact on the costs of these global technologies.

Electricity Production

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the (i) amount of electricity produced; and (ii) associated level of greenhouse gas emissions, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1249/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Figures on the total electricity produced in Northern Ireland is only available on a financial year basis.

| Year | Total Electricity Produced in Northern Ireland (GWh) ^a |
|---------|---|
| 2006/07 | 9425 |
| 2005/06 | 9837 |
| 2004/05 | 7493 |
| 2003/04 | 7010 |
| 2002/03 | 6194 |
| 2001/02 | 7723 |
| 2000/01 | 8352 |

^a Source: Northern Ireland Electricity plc

CO₂ is the main green house gas released during power generation (c. 99.5%). Small amounts of methane and nitrous oxide are also produced, however these amounts are so small they have not been included. The table below shows the levels of CO₂ in kilo tonnes in each of the last 5 years for which figures are available. CO₂ figures for electricity generation are not yet available for 2006 or 2007.

| Year | Kilo tonnes of CO ₂ ^b |
|------|---|
| 2005 | 5264.2 |
| 2004 | 4734.5 |
| 2003 | 4867.5 |

| Year | Kilo tonnes of CO ₂ ^b |
|------|---|
| 2002 | 5051.2 |
| 2001 | 6418.4 |

^b Source: Department of Environment

Renewable Energy Supply

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the impact of the renewable energy supply industry on (i) the environment; (ii) the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund; and (iii) household energy production technologies. (AQW 1253/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI have not commissioned any specific studies on the assessment of the impact of the renewable energy supply industry on the environment, the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF) and household energy production technologies to date. Increasing the amount of electricity generated from renewable sources impacts positively on the environment in terms of reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The majority of the activities supported through the EREF focus on increasing the deployment of small scale renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies. The impact of the fund will be evaluated post March 2008. The review of the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy market, which is due to complete shortly will identify gaps and barriers that exist in the current renewable energy and energy efficiency marketplace.

Power Stations

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the average level of CO₂ emissions per GWh, supplied to the transmission system by each of the power stations in Northern Ireland, for each of the last three years. (AQW 1274/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The following table sets out the average level of CO₂ emissions per GWh by each of the power stations in Northern Ireland for the years 2004, 2005 and 2006.

NORTHERN IRELAND POWER STATIONS: TONNES OF CO₂ EMITTED PER GWH (2004-06)

| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------|
| AES Kilroot | 960 | 968 | 960 |
| Coolkeeragh ESB | N/A ⁽¹⁾ | 461 ⁽¹⁾ | 374 |
| Premier Power - Ballylumford | 470 | 479 | 506 |

Source (i): Department of the Environment
(ii): Individual Power Stations

(1) Figures for Coolkeeragh relate only to the operation of the current plant by Coolkeeragh ESB; this plant only became operational in June 2005.

Geo-Thermal Energy

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment his department has made of the potential to harness geo-thermal energy in Northern Ireland, as indicated by the findings of the Tellus project. (AQW 1311/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has, through Action Renewables, let a contract to research the potential for deep geothermal energy in Northern Ireland. The aim of the study is to assess the potential geothermal energy resources suitable for heating, using all available information including the recently completed Tellus airborne survey. Key potential end users in both existing and planned public and private sector developments will be matched to the best potential areas of locally sourced geothermal heat energy. The final project report will be available in March 2008.

In terms of shallow geothermal energy, Action Renewables is also working with the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) and the British Geological Survey (BGS) to produce an internet-based report system that will allow Northern Ireland potential consumers to input a postcode and obtain an assessment of the suitability of the ground conditions for the installation of Ground Source Heat Pump systems.

The GSNI is also a partner in the GeoThermal Regulation - Heat (GTR-H) project. Its aims are to identify, and to establish a strategy to overcome, the main barriers to the development of low carbon geothermal energy in selected EU countries. The project will use the experience of partner countries with well-developed geothermal energy markets and efficient regulatory frameworks, to propose new legislation for those partner countries, such as Northern Ireland, where these do not yet exist. The introduction of geothermal energy legislation is likely to be an important factor when trying to attract private sector investment for high capital deep geothermal energy projects in Northern Ireland.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will undertake to make the East Derry/Londonderry constituency a priority for investment, due to the employment crisis triggered by the loss of 900 jobs at the Seagate factory, and the associated impact on the economy in the area. (AQW 1357/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The economic impact of the proposed closure on the East Derry/Londonderry constituency can only be

fully understood following the completion of a skills base analysis and a study of the geographical distribution of the workforce.

Invest NI will continue to promote NI as a location for investment and will be supportive of any proposals brought forward which offer sustainable, long term and high calibre employment for all of NI.

The availability of a significant proven workforce in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency will be a factor very much to the fore of Invest NI's consideration in discussions with potential investors.

Invest NI

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will carry out, and publish, a geographical analysis of jobs created and/or funded by Invest NI in the last ten years. (AQW 1394/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Table 1 below provides an analysis, by Parliamentary Constituency Area, of jobs promoted and safeguarded, along with the amount of financial assistance offered to inward-investment projects by Invest NI (during the 5-year period 2002/03 – 2006/07), and the Industrial Development Board (during the 5 years 1997/98 - 2001/02). Planned investment figures are also presented, which represent the gross cost of projects being assisted.

It should be noted that these areas are not self-contained labour markets. 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. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for 'directing' investment to specific geographic areas, although it has been able to influence the location decisions of some inward-investment projects. In the case of established businesses, reinvestment patterns will be determined by the existing location of the business.

TABLE 1: SUPPORTED INWARD INVESTMENT PROJECTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA (1997/98 - 2006/07)

| Parliamentary Constituency | Jobs Promoted | Jobs Safeguarded | Assistance Offered (£m) | Planned Investment (£m) |
|----------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Belfast East | 4,326 | 1,391 | 78.4 | 346.9 |
| Belfast North | 3,539 | 218 | 27.6 | 100.0 |
| Belfast South | 9,025 | 893 | 76.3 | 320.1 |
| Belfast West | 1,984 | 60 | 25.6 | 86.2 |

| Parliamentary Constituency | Jobs Promoted | Jobs Safeguarded | Assistance Offered (£m) | Planned Investment (£m) |
|----------------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| East Antrim | 3,920 | 721 | 48.4 | 330.4 |
| East Londonderry | 312 | 2,200 | 28.4 | 130.2 |
| Fermanagh & South Tyrone | 1,390 | 417 | 18.9 | 89.6 |
| Foyle | 4,954 | 2,998 | 107.2 | 513.9 |
| Lagan Valley | 671 | 846 | 13.8 | 99.6 |
| Mid Ulster | 313 | 118 | 4.9 | 35.5 |
| Newry & Armagh | 1,681 | 30 | 11.2 | 36.8 |
| North Antrim | 279 | 1,245 | 11.0 | 56.9 |
| North Down | 1,041 | 231 | 6.1 | 29.4 |
| South Antrim | 1,149 | 1,423 | 18.8 | 146.1 |
| South Down | 611 | 810 | 10.4 | 30.0 |
| Strangford | 323 | 727 | 6.7 | 35.0 |
| Upper Bann | 954 | 3,141 | 27.5 | 145.4 |
| West Tyrone | 716 | 1,446 | 14.3 | 73.2 |
| Total | 37,188 | 18,915 | 535.6 | 2,605.2 |

Notes:

- Figures relate to Invest NI/IDB clients only. There may also have been other externally-owned businesses investing in the area over the time period.
- Job promotion data is not available for locally-owned clients.
- Jobs promoted represent the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
- Jobs safeguarded represents the number of jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported.
- Figures include both first time inward investments and reinvestments by existing clients.
- 1997/98 to 2001/02 relates to IDB, 2002/03 to 2006/07 relates to Invest NI.
- Inward investment does not include business development activities, including R&D, training, knowledge management or trade development.
- Planned Investment includes assistance offered by Invest NI.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what discussions he has had, with colleagues in the Executive, about establishing a special task force to implement a strategy for the future of Seagate employees who are facing redundancy.

(AQW 1396/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On hearing of the announcement I confirmed with

Executive colleagues that the relevant interaction between my Invest NI staff and counterparts in DEL was underway and that, whilst mindful of the company's need to conduct employee consultation/briefing sessions, an appropriate level of interaction with the company management was in hand to ensure that all possible support and advice for the employees would be provided as soon as possible.

I am content that a sufficiently strong working relationship exists between staff in my department and those in DEL, and other departments as necessary, to ensure that a cohesive action plan is developed to address the specific needs of the employees and ensure the optimum outcome for the economy in general.

ENVIRONMENT**National Park**

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment what immediate plans she has to meet with farmers and residents of the Mourne/Slieve Croob area of South Down, to discuss their concerns in relation to the possible designation of this area as a National Park.

(AQW 1170/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I am consulting the Environment Committee, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside about the reports of the Mourne National Park Working Party. I will take their views into consideration when I decide how to proceed.

I have also agreed to hear the views of a small group of Ulster Farmers' Union representatives from the Mourne area on the Working Party reports.

I will consider any further requests to meet key groups representing farmers or residents so that I may hear their views on the Working Party recommendations.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she is taking to ensure that Planning Policy Statement 7: Quality Residential Environments is more effectively enforced, when planning applications are being considered by the Planning Service.

(AQW 1181/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In recognition of public concern on this matter and pending the outcome of the policy consideration by a joint group of officials within both the Department of the

Environment and the Department for Regional Development, I have asked for Planning Service to be reminded to ensure that the impact of new housing development on the character of established residential areas is fully considered in line with current policy objectives. Planning Circular (PC 03/07) 'Assessing Planning Applications for Residential Development in Urban Areas, Villages and Other Small Settlements' was issued in August 2007. I would stress that this circular summarises the objectives of current policy. It is intended as guidance and advice and is not in any way a new or revised policy statement.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications that have been refused as a result of Planning Policy Statement 7: Quality Residential Environments, in (i) 2003; (ii) 2004; (iii) 2005; (iv) 2006; and (v) 2007.

(AQW 1184/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

NO OF APPLICATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN REFUSED AS A RESULT OF PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT 7

| | |
|-------|-----|
| 2003 | 141 |
| 2004 | 147 |
| 2005 | 282 |
| 2006 | 360 |
| 2007* | 350 |

Source ARGO v8.3/MVM2020

Date of Run: 24th October 2007

* up to and including 30 September 2007

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail whether or not Planning Policy Statement 7: Quality Residential Environments will be taken into account when considering any future planning applications at 5-7 Chapel Road, Cushendall.

(AQW 1186/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The policies contained within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 7: Quality Residential Environments apply to all residential development proposals with the exception of proposals for single dwellings in the countryside. PPS 7 would therefore be taken into account when considering any future application for residential development at 5 – 7 Chapel Road, Cushendall. As the site is within a Conservation Area, consideration will also be given to PPS 6 – 'Planning, Archeology and The Built Heritage'.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail whether or not Planning Policy Statement 7: Quality Residential Environments will be taken into account when considering a planning application for 24 apartments at 289-293 Ballymoney Road, Ballymena.

(AQW 1201/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In assessing planning application G/2007/0664/F, a proposal for 24 apartments at 289-293 Ballymoney Road, Ballymena, Planning Policy Statement 7: Quality Residential Environments, is one of a number of material considerations against which this application will be assessed.

Fly-Tipping

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what recent estimates her department has made in relation to the tonnage of waste involved in incidences of fly-tipping, accounted for as household waste, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 1202/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The limited data available suggest that 189 tonnes of waste was flytipped in the first 6 months of 2007. However, this may not accurately reflect the scale of the problem.

My officials are working with District Councils to encourage the use of a new flytipping database ("Flycapture") which would generate reliable statistics on flytipping across Northern Ireland and inform policy decisions for tackling the problem.

Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005

Lord Browne asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the proposed timetable for the introduction of legislation similar to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

(AQW 1208/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials are presently considering how the powers of district councils could be strengthened and extended to enable them to deal more effectively with a wide range of problems which affect the quality of life in our local environment or neighbourhoods. This work, which is known as the Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda, also takes into account developments in England and Wales under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

Primary legislation will be required to implement the Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda. The draft Programme for Government sets out an ambitious

programme for my Department and I am currently considering when to introduce this legislation in the light of the range of key goals set for my Department.

Industrial Zoned Land

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the availability of industrial zoned land in (i) Ballymoney Borough Council area; (ii) Ballymena Borough Council area; and (iii) Moyle District Council area. (AQW 1243/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) In July 2004, there were 12.09 hectares (29.9 acres) of industrial zoned land available within Ballymoney Borough Council Area.
- (ii) In July 2004, there were 8.46 hectares (20.9 acres) of industrial zoned land available within Moyle District Council Area.
- (ii) In October 2007, there were 34.92 hectares (86.25 acres) of industrial zoned land available within Ballymena Borough Council area.

Industrial land is monitored for area plan preparation purposes rather than annually. The figures for the Ballymoney and Moyle Council areas were produced during the preparation of the draft Northern Area Plan.

Vehicle Emissions

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how she plans to reduce the amount of harmful vehicle emissions; and what plans she has to change the acceptable level of emissions for vehicle testing. (AQW 1244/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Construction standards for vehicles, including the standards that must be met for vehicle emissions, are set at a European Union level. The control of such emissions is therefore governed by a number of EC Directives and Regulations which set out the requirements for emission of vehicle smoke, vapour, gas, oily substances and noise.

Those requirements are implemented in Northern Ireland by the Motor Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations (NI) 1999 and are applied according to the class of vehicle, date of first use and the relevant EC legislation.

Vehicle emissions are tested in accordance with the emissions requirements contained in the Construction and Use Regulations and it is an offence for a vehicle to be used on a road that does not comply with these.

My Department amends these Regulations as necessary in line with incoming EC Directives requiring implementation of new vehicle emissions standards.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if she will provide an update on the possible establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency. (AQW 1245/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am carefully considering my approach to environmental governance. In so doing I will take account of the recommendations in "Foundations for the Future" in relation to an independent Environmental Protection Agency, of resource and wider policy considerations and of points which stakeholders have raised.

I will make a public statement on the way forward following discussion with my colleagues on the Executive.

Dibney Rivers Pollution

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 299/08, what steps she will take to prevent this type of pollution by the Department for Regional Development. (AQW 1250/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is responsible for the regulation of discharges from waste water treatment works, sewerage systems and water treatment works.

The new government owned company, Northern Ireland Water (NIW), is required to have discharge consents under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in respect of all its discharges. Each discharge consent contains conditions relating to the quality and quantity of effluent that may be discharged to the water environment. These consents take into consideration a number of factors including the requirements of relevant European Directives.

Since NIW was established on 1 April 2007, approximately 1100 waste water treatment works, 30 water treatment works and 300 sewerage systems have been issued with discharge consents. In addition, consents have been issued in respect of small waste water treatment works which detail the levels of treatment and maintenance required.

NIW, unlike its predecessor, Water Service, does not have crown immunity; and is operating under a normal regulatory regime and is subject to appropriate enforcement action for non-compliance with consent

conditions and for any pollution incidents caused by a failure to properly maintain and operate its infrastructure.

Since 1 April 2007, 23 statutory samples have been taken of discharges from assets operated by NIW. In three of these 23 cases, Warning Letters have been issued under the Water (NI) Order 1999. The remaining 20 cases are at various stages of the enforcement process.

EHS has also been involved in the prioritisation of expenditure on waste water infrastructure for the first NIW Strategic Business Plan and will be engaged with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation in the process of setting the level of funding for environmental improvement in the 2010 – 2015 investment period.

Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she is taking to employ more staff in the enforcement section of the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office, taking into account that this office has 300 more enforcement cases than the Ballymena Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 1251/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am conscious that the Enforcement Section in the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office has been carrying vacancies in recent months. This has contributed significantly to a build up of enforcement complaints that are still to be investigated or which are under investigation.

I am pleased to say that progress has been made in filling the vacancies in this section and the one remaining vacancy will be filled in a matter of weeks, when pre- appointment checks have been completed.

I am satisfied that the current team structure, which now has a Principal Planning Officer also involved almost full-time directing its work, should start to make significant inroads into its caseload over the next few months.

The Planning Service will keep the situation under review and if caseloads do not decrease as anticipated then further action will be considered.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to make available advice she has received in relation to the application of draft PPS14 retrospectively to 16 March 2006. (AQW 1287/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Draft PPS 14 was introduced on 16 March 2006 and applied to planning applications received after that date.

In his judgement of September 7 on the judicial review of PPS14 brought by Omagh District Council, Mr Justice Gillen concluded that DRD did not have the statutory powers to prepare and issue draft PPS14. In that judicial review there was no challenge of any kind to the substance or merits of draft PPS14 and the Judge observed that had draft PPS14 been issued by my Department it may well have been unobjectionable.

On October 25 I reissued the policy provisions of draft PPS14 under the powers conferred by Article 3 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and said I would continue to apply them to planning applications received after 16 March 2006, until we have completed our reviews and developed new policies. I have not applied draft PPS 14 retrospectively.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Special European Union Programmes Body

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to ensure that funding from the Peace III programme will be fairly distributed; and to outline what plans the Special European Union Programmes Body has to engage with rural Protestant communities in border areas. (AQW 1153/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), as PEACE III Managing Authority, will work to ensure a fair allocation of Programme funds and will consider all appropriate steps to help ensure this outcome. As before, SEUPB will promote the Programme throughout the eligible area, actively encouraging applications from all communities in all areas, both urban and rural, and targeting social need.

EU PEACE funding will continue to be allocated objectively on the basis of the quality of the applications received. As before, applications for funding will be assessed openly and transparently using agreed selection criteria that reflect the Programme's distinctive aims.

Evaluation and other research on EU PEACE funding indicates that both communities have benefited significantly from the available funding and that PEACE I and II have successfully targeted social need and achieved a wide geographical coverage.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his department's expenditure on

consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year. (AQW 1165/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total cost of consultancy in the Department of Finance and Personnel in the 2006-07 financial year is set out in the table attached.

DEPARTMENT: FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

| Category | Amount £k |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. policy appraisal and review | - |
| 2. strategic management | 3,361 |
| 3. organisational development | 175 |
| 4. performance management | - |
| 5. accountancy | 4 |
| 6. audit | - |
| 7. economic appraisal | 11 |
| 8. internal audit | - |
| 9. feasibility study | 66 |
| 10. quality accreditation | - |
| 11. investment appraisal | - |
| 12. corporate governance | - |
| 13. projects | 733 |
| 14. surveys | - |
| 15. marketing | 10 |
| 16. market research | - |
| Other | - |
| Total | 4,360 |

Infrastructural Provision

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his department's attempts to secure the £400 million promised by the Government of the Republic of Ireland, in order to address regional disparities in infrastructural provision. (AQW 1183/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In the context of the Funding Package for the incoming Northern Ireland Executive announced by the Chancellor on 22 March 2007, the Irish Government made available £400 million (€580 million), to fund a package of infrastructure investment, including a major new roads programme to provide dual carriageway standard on routes within Northern Ireland serving the North West Gateway of Letterkenny/Londonderry and on the eastern seaboard corridor from Belfast to Larne.

My officials are currently working with officials from the Department of Finance (RoI) on the various

logistical issues associated with this contribution from the Irish Government.

Rates Relief

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to (i) provide rates relief to people who have had adaptations made to their homes due to their disability needs; and (ii) ensure that information on rates relief is made widely available to people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups in society. (AQW 1260/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Within the domestic rating system in Northern Ireland the Disabled Persons Allowance Scheme provides for a reduction to be awarded where a property has been adapted to meet the needs of a person with a disability.

The scheme was first introduced in 1978 and simplified in April 2007, as part of the rating reforms introduced under Direct Rule. The scheme was simplified because the majority of claimants had to wait over 6 months to obtain the allowance and it now provides for a standard 25% reduction for eligible persons. This standardised scheme is similar in many respects to the one that applies under The Council Tax but at 25% is a little more generous than the 20% reduction available in the rest of the UK.

This policy is currently being considered within the context of the NI Executive's further review of the domestic rating system.

Land and Property Services has carried out an information and outreach programme about the new rate reliefs including an advertising campaign, designed to reach out to all, but with a specific emphasis on more vulnerable groups such as people on low incomes, people with disabilities and pensioners.

Land and Property Services also works with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Social Security Agency and the voluntary and advisory sector to provide information for the public, as well as workshops for advice workers, on the rate reliefs. Information on the rate reliefs is available in accessible formats such as Braille, CD and audio-tape.

Rates Relief

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the various types of rate relief and other incentives available to small businesses that are starting up. (AQW 1320/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A Farm Diversification Relief scheme was introduced in Northern Ireland on 1 April 2007 along similar lines

to that in Great Britain, but based on NAV levels appropriate to Northern Ireland. Rate relief is set at 50% of full liability for a maximum of 36 months from 1 April 2007. The scheme applies to new small non-agricultural enterprises that are located in buildings that were previously agricultural - subject to a £7,000 NAV ceiling and is available to farmers themselves and their immediate families who satisfy a qualifying period.

There is currently no other specific rate relief available to small businesses that are starting up. However the Economic Research Institute is carrying out a study to assess the need for and value for money of a rate relief scheme for small businesses in Northern Ireland. As part of their considerations, they will examine the experiences of similar schemes operating in GB. I expect to have their conclusions by the end of the year and following that I will make a decision. There will be a judgement call here, we would either have to ask other businesses to pay more or we forgo the revenue. Like all new proposals, it would have to be considered in the context of other spending priorities.

I should add that small businesses, if they qualify under the legislation as industrial hereditaments, would, with other eligible businesses, receive rating at 30% of their total liability for this financial year. This level will apply and continue until March 2011 if the announcement on the matter in the draft budget is ratified following the consultation period in January 2008.

My colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, advises that Invest NI provides a comprehensive range of advice and financial support to new businesses, with individual programmes that are tailored to assist locally focused, export focused and globally focused start-ups. Invest NI also operates the www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk website which provides a single point of access to a comprehensive range of information and services to enable people starting a business to quickly find sources of local support and information.

Rates Relief

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to provide for rates relief to households currently receiving Housing Benefit, given the assumption that a separate water and sewerage charge will be added to the domestic rates bill.

(AQW 1323/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Strand One Report of the Independent Water Review Panel recommended that a single bill should be issued to consumers, with rates and water and sewerage

charges separately identified. The Executive has noted this and further analysis is being undertaken by officials.

The rate relief provisions that support the domestic rating system in Northern Ireland are also currently subject to consideration within the context of the Executive Review of Domestic Rating.

HM Treasury Payments

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether or not payments to Northern Ireland from HM Treasury will be reduced as a consequence of the proposal that water and sewerage charges will be added to the domestic rates bill; and, if so, what is the annual estimate of this reduction; and what discussions have been held with HM Treasury about this matter, including any transitional arrangements.

(AQW 1324/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Strand One Report of the Independent Water Review Panel recommended that a single bill should be issued to consumers. If, as I envisage, this household bill was to incorporate the regional rate, the district rate and the charge for water and sewerage then this is simply a logistical issue. In this context, the Treasury has no locus in the matter.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to fund and/or participate in a special economic task force to address the crisis facing people in East Derry/Londonderry, who are directly or indirectly affected by the impending closure of the Seagate factory.

(AQW 1390/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As demonstrated by my first draft budget with its primary focus on the economy, I intend to ensure that appropriate policies and funds are in place to deliver our objective of creating a new and vibrant economy for Northern Ireland.

Whilst there are currently no plans for a specific economic taskforce for East Derry / Londonderry, I will give my full support to Invest NI and DEL who will be working to ensure that the employees of Seagate are given every opportunity to develop their capabilities in this respect over the course of the coming months.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Enniskillen Fire Station

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's efforts to resolve the dispute at Enniskillen Fire Station over the display of a photograph commemorating the Enniskillen bomb. (AQW 1199/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Chief Fire Officer is working closely with firefighters based at Enniskillen Fire Station to find a local resolution to this matter. I am confident that this is the right approach to find an early and mutually acceptable outcome to this issue.

NHS Dentists

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on the number of dentists accepting new NHS patients in South Down. (AQW 1203/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the 12 months ending October 2007, there were 38 Principal dentists in South Down Constituency accepting new Health Service (HS) patients.

This number was calculated by comparing the number of registered patients with each dentist at November 2006, against the number of newly registered patients with each dentist at October 2007. It should be noted that newly registered patients will include those patients transferring from another dentist, as well as patients new to the NHS.

Specialist Nursing

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in view of his department's partnership with Queen's University, Belfast, regarding a proposed campaign to increase the number of nurses specialising in mental health and learning disabilities, to detail what incentives are planned to encourage school leavers to consider this as a profession. (AQW 1206/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The DHSSPS is preparing to run an advertising campaign in November to attract students to study both Mental Health and Learning Disability nursing. The campaign has the co-operation of all

three Universities in Northern Ireland - University of Ulster, the Open University and Queen's University. It also has the support of staff organisations.

Student nurses studying as full-time undergraduates in Northern Ireland receive a non-means tested bursary of £5770 per annum and do not pay course fees. They may also be entitled to other allowances including travel, dependency allowances and disability allowances.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's expenditure on consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year. (AQW 1210/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently reviewing the classification of consultancy expenditure. When this exercise is complete I will write to the member.

Children and Young People's Funding Package

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an assurance that he will match, or better, the commitment given by direct rule Ministers in relation to the children and young people's funding package, in his department's budget from 2008 onwards. (AQW 1222/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand the real and lasting differences that the initiatives funded under the children and young people's package can have, and I would like to be able to continue to support this important work.

However, until consultation on the draft Budget ends on 4 January 2008 and the budget is finalised, I cannot give any guarantees about every single initiative. I do recognise that existing initiatives need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Children and Young People's Funding Packages

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will confirm that monies provided for under the children and young people's funding packages will continue to be included in the department's baseline. (AQW 1223/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand the real and lasting differences that the initiatives funded under the children and young people's package can have, and I would like to be able to continue to support this important work.

However, until consultation on the draft Budget ends on 4 January 2008 and the budget is finalised, I cannot give any guarantees about every single initiative. I do recognise that existing initiatives need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Children and Young People's Funding Package

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how he intends to take forward the priorities set out in relation to the children and young people's funding package.

(AQW 1224/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand the real and lasting differences that the initiatives funded under the children and young people's package can have, and I would like to be able to continue to support this important work.

However, until consultation on the draft Budget ends on 4 January 2008 and the budget is finalised, I cannot give any guarantees about every single initiative. I do recognise that existing initiatives need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Children and Young People's Funding Package

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that monies provided for in the children and young people's funding package will remain within his department's funding baseline from 2008 onwards.

(AQW 1225/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand the real and lasting differences that the initiatives funded under the children and young people's package can have, and I would like to be able to continue to support this important work.

However, until consultation on the draft Budget ends on 4 January 2008 and the budget is finalised, I cannot give any guarantees about every single initiative. I do recognise that existing initiatives need

early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Children with Downs Syndrome

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's policies in relation to children with Downs Syndrome.

(AQW 1235/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has no policy specific relating only to children with Down's Syndrome. Services to all disabled children are provided in line with individually assessed need and in accordance with relevant legislation.

Community Care Package

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people currently living in the community who are awaiting a community care package; (ii) the number of people who have been waiting for more than 12 weeks; and (iii) the percentage of people who have been waiting for more than 12 weeks.

(AQW 1259/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 30 June 2007, 318 people living in the community were waiting for a community care package, 128 (40%) of these had waited 12 weeks or more.

| Less than 12 Weeks | | 12 Weeks or more | | All Persons Waiting |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Number | % of Total Waiting | Number | % of Total Waiting | |
| 190 | 60% | 128 | 40% | 318 |

Source: DHSSPS Information returns CC5b.

Pathology Laboratory at Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the future of the pathology laboratory situated at Altnagelvin Hospital.

(AQW 1267/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The pathology laboratory at Altnagelvin Area Hospital will provide appropriate clinical pathology services to support the clinical needs of secondary and primary care in its area.

On 28 November 2006 the Department issued for public consultation the recommendations of a review of clinical pathology laboratory services in Northern

Ireland. The pathology review report makes twenty-three recommendations which aim to ensure the sustainability of high quality hospital laboratory services across Northern Ireland.

The consultation ended on 28 February 2007. 289 responses were received and my Department has been considering these in detail. I expect to make an announcement in the near future regarding the final recommendations for the future of pathology services, including those provided from the laboratory at Altnagelvin.

Physiotherapy Waiting Lists

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting times for patients who need physiotherapy, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1273/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

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 specific time bands. This is detailed in the table overleaf for the years ending 31st March, 2003 to 2007, where a year refers to the period 1st April to 31st March.

During the year ending 31st March 2007, 68,955 persons attended their first outpatient appointment with a community physiotherapist. Of these, 53,849 (78%) had waited less than 3 months, 12,086 (18%) had waited 3 to 6 months, and 3,020 (4%) had waited 6 months or more.

Over the last five years, the number of persons attending a first outpatient appointment with a community physiotherapist has increased by just under 25% (13,675).

PERSONS ATTENDING THEIR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENTS WITH A COMMUNITY PHYSIOTHERAPIST BY LENGTH OF TIME WAITED (1ST APRIL 2002 – 31ST MARCH 2007)

| Year Ending | Less than 3 Months | | 3-6 Months | | 6 Months or more | | All Completed Waits for First Appointment |
|---------------|--------------------|-----|------------|-----|------------------|----|---|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | |
| 31 March 2007 | 53,849 | 78% | 12,086 | 18% | 3,020 | 4% | 68,955 |
| 31 March 2006 | 55,429 | 81% | 9,763 | 14% | 3,607 | 5% | 68,799 |
| 31 March 2005 | 47,710 | 77% | 11,179 | 18% | 2,897 | 5% | 61,786 |
| 31 March 2004 | 43,407 | 77% | 11,149 | 20% | 1,999 | 4% | 56,555 |
| 31 March 2003 | 44,489 | 80% | 9,447 | 17% | 1,344 | 2% | 55,280 |

Source: Departmental Information Return CP3

Midwifery Led Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of expectant mothers turned away from the Midwifery Led Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital in the last twelve months, due to shortage of staff and resources. (AQW 1275/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust have advised that they do not record the number of expectant mothers unable to be accommodated in the Midwifery Led Unit but it is not a regular occurrence. In the event of an expectant mother being unable to be accepted by the unit then they would be facilitated in the consultant led part of Craigavon Hospital's maternity unit, where they would be looked after by Midwives with the same skills.

Midwifery Led Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occasions on which the Midwifery Led Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital has had to close its birthing pool due to shortages of staff and/or resources, in the last twelve months. (AQW 1276/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The birthing pool in the Midwifery Led Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital has not been closed in the last twelve months.

Staffing Levels at Craigavon Hospital

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of qualified nurses required to staff maternity wards in

Craigavon Hospital safely; and (ii) the number of occasions upon which staffing levels have fallen below safety requirements, in the last twelve months.

(AQW 1277/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently around 88.64 whole time equivalent midwives are employed in the Maternity Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital, only trained midwives provide maternity care. The Southern Health and Social Services Trust have confirmed that they are satisfied that staffing levels in the midwife led unit over the past 12 months have been maintained to provide a safe service.

NHS Dentists

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of dentists in Portadown, Lurgan, Central Craigavon and Banbridge who carry out dental care and treatment on NHS patients.

(AQW 1280/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below provides detail of the number of practising NHS dentists and the towns where the dental surgeries are located:

NUMBER OF DENTISTS WHO CARRY OUT DENTAL CARE AND TREATMENT ON NHS PATIENTS

| | |
|--------------|-----------|
| Portadown | 22 |
| Lurgan | 17 |
| Craigavon | 1 |
| Banbridge | 12 |
| Total | 52 |

Source: Central Services Agency

Social Work Services

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of the adequacy of the resources available for the provision of social work services through the family and childcare programme.

(AQW 1289/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During 2006/07 the planned recurrent expenditure for the Family and Childcare Programme of Care was in the region of £146 million. As with any expenditure programme for families in need, there are always additional demands for services which could be provided if additional resources were made available.

Research recently published jointly by OFMDFM, DFP and the NI Children's Commissioner shows that

expenditure on children's social services in Northern Ireland is around 30% less per child than in England, Scotland and Wales.

In 2006/07, my Department was able to provide additional funding as part of the Children and Young People's Funding Package amounting to £10.55 million developing priority services in support of looked after children, vulnerable young adults, child protection and children with special needs and disabilities. In the past three years we have invested an additional £6 million in Foster Care, £2 million in child protection, £2 million in residential Care and £2.5 million in Leaving and After Care. There has also been major reform of social work training, including the Degree in Social Work which was launched in 2004. Continued investment in qualifying training for social workers will ensure a continued supply of social work recruits to meet workforce and service needs.

Work is ongoing to ensure appropriate continuing professional development opportunities are available for social workers to ensure appropriate expertise is developed and skills and knowledge are kept up-to-date.

My Department has set out a wide range of proposals for the development of Family and Child Care services in both 'Care Matters' and 'Families Matter', both of which were issued for consultation this year. It is also clear that a number of recommendations included in the Bamford Review are also relevant to services within this Programme of Care.

We are moving ahead with major reforms of front line child protection services; with reform of adoption legislation; and we hope to move forward with a range of reforms arising from 'Care Matters'.

In conclusion, this is an important area and I will continue to try to address the resource needs of this programme in the future. At present, however, my Department is not in a position to provide resources on a par with GB.

Management Staff

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of management staff employed in the Western Health and Social Services Board.

(AQW 1300/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of staff working in a management position in the WHSSB, including Local Commissioning Group (LCG) Board members, as at 30th September 2007 was 94 (91.19 whole-time equivalent). This includes staff who may have management responsibilities for more junior grades or whose position has the potential to do so.

Source: Human Resources Management System

Attacks on Hospital Staff

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of violent attacks on staff in hospital Accident and Emergency departments that have been reported to Health and Social Care Trusts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1317/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of violent (physical) attacks on staff in hospital Accident and Emergency departments in the last three years to 31st March 2007 are 2004/2005 - 90, 2005/2006 - 104, 2006/2007 - 102.

Health Promotion Agency

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what resources have been allocated by the Health Promotion Agency to advertising the health reasons for teenagers under the age of consent to delay sexual activity. (AQW 1321/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health Promotion Agency (the Agency) has not allocated specific resources to the advertising of the health reasons for teenagers under the age of consent to delay sexual activity. However, the Agency has recently commenced work on the establishment of a programme which aims to effectively communicate the "Delaying Sex" message to young people. This will include the development and delivery of a training programme and supporting materials which can be used in a range of settings by those who work with and care for young people.

£400k was allocated in 2006/07 and 2007/08 to the HSS Boards towards implementing the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy. The Department has not provided specific funds to the Agency in relation to teenage pregnancy. However, whilst no funding has been allocated specifically to the delaying sex message, the Agency has carried out a range of related work including seminars in 2005 on the effectiveness of approaches to teenage pregnancy and parenthood work, and the role of parents in sex education, and it also advised an education theatre company on the content of a play supporting the objectives of the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy aimed at pupils aged 14 and over. It also produced a series of fact sheets on issues relating to sexual health. More recently the Agency has begun work on the establishment of a "Delaying Sex" programme for young people and those who work and care for young people.

Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what proportion of the £400,000 allocated to the Health and Social Services Boards, as a result of the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy, has been spent on achieving Target 3, which concerns teenagers under the age of consent delaying sexual activity. (AQW 1322/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Many of the targets in Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy are inter-related. Health and Social Services Boards (Boards) therefore take a coordinated approach making links with other strategies, including sexual health, mental health and well-being and drugs and alcohol. Services are commissioned to take this into consideration. For this reason the funds allocated against one specific target cannot be accurately identified.

Each Board has an intersectoral multi-disciplinary group which advises the commissioning process by identifying priorities and agreeing the way forward in implementing the Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy for that Board area. Examples of commissioned programmes and services which could be expected to help address the target specified include sexual health and relationships programmes; programmes supporting parents to communicate more effectively on risk-taking behaviours with young people; a peer education programme on sexual health and relationships; youth development programme within a youth centre setting; community based lay health worker programme targeting young people; training for teachers to support Relationship and Sexuality Education; employment of Nurses to provide education and support to looked after children; and a young people's health clinic.

Expenditure on Hospital Services

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's expenditure on hospital services and community health per head of the population in Northern Ireland, compared with the amount spent per head in England, Scotland and Wales in each of the past five years. (AQW 1325/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below sets out the comparative expenditure per head of population for current health expenditure as published in the Public Expenditure Survey Analysis (PESA) 2007. Expenditure on hospital services and community

health is not readily available. 2005/06 is the most recent year for which outturn data is available.

**EXPENDITURE PER HEAD OF POPULATION
(CURRENT SPEND EXCLUDING CAPITAL)**

| | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Northern Ireland | 1,051.90 | 1,138.72 | 1,269.80 | 1,338.93 | 1,466.59 |
| England | 953.03 | 1,038.62 | 1,164.46 | 1,290.14 | 1,384.23 |
| Scotland | 1,066.90 | 1,228.93 | 1,392.42 | 1,433.33 | 1,572.39 |
| Wales | 1,033.94 | 1,140.11 | 1,299.53 | 1,398.83 | 1,464.89 |

The differential between Northern Ireland and England has reduced from 10.4% in 2001/02 to 5.9% in 2005/06. Higher comparative annual uplifts in England compared to N. Ireland will reduce this differential further.

These figures do not take into account the relative needs of the populations. A recent major exercise on comparative need, taking account of differences in age profile, deprivation levels and market forces factors, has shown that the health service in Northern Ireland requires 10% more resources per head than England due to its proportionately higher levels of need.

Breast Feeding

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what targets he has set for breast feeding; and to give his assessment of how well these targets are being met.

(AQW 1327/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: “A Healthier Future - A Twenty Year Vision for Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland 2005-2025” sets two targets for breastfeeding:

- (i) by 2025, 70% of all infants will be breastfed by one week after birth (50% by 2010); and
- (ii) by 2025, 40% of all infants will still be breastfed at 6 months (20% by 2010).

Recent survey results show that the prevalence of breastfeeding¹ at one week of age in Northern Ireland increased from 37% in 2000 to 46% in 2005; and increased from 10% in 2000 to 14% in 2005 for infants still being breastfed at 6 months. Although breastfeeding rates here remain lower than England, Scotland and Wales, the increase over this period was greater in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. This shows a positive upward trend, and my Department will continue to monitor progress.

Source: Infant Feeding Survey 2005.

¹ Prevalence of breastfeeding refers to the proportion of all babies who were wholly or partially breastfed at specific ages.

Closure of the Hightown Bridge in Mallusk/Glengormley

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of whether or not the closure of the Hightown Bridge in Mallusk/Glengormley has had a negative impact on Ambulance Service and Fire and Rescue Service response times in the area.

(AQW 1427/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Both the Ambulance Service and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service travel under ‘blue light’ conditions in response to emergency calls, thus ensuring that traffic gives way.

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has advised that it can still achieve the required response times in the Glengormley / Mallusk Area whether the Hightown Bridge is open or closed.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has advised that the closure of the Hightown Bridge in Mallusk/Glengormley has not adversely impacted on response times in the area.

Intractable Epilepsy

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to meet the health requirements of children who suffer from intractable epilepsy.

(AQO 640/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Specialist hospital services, for children who suffer from intractable epilepsy, are provided at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. The services are comparable to major centres in the UK. Typically diagnostic tests would include an electroencephalogram (EEG). Other investigations, for example CT or MRI scans could be used to exclude causes of epilepsy that may be amenable to surgery.

Treatment includes ketogenic diet and usually will include a range of medications either singularly or in combination dependent on the completeness of the patients response.

Cervical Cancer

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will introduce a human papilloma virus vaccination programme for 16 year old girls, this year, as a one-off initiative; and to develop a catch-up programme for other young women, to reduce cases of cervical cancer.

(AQO 617/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would like to be in a position to confirm that I will be introducing a human papilloma virus vaccination programme aimed at reducing the number of deaths from cervical cancer in 2008/09. This decision though will be subject to the final figures emerging from the budgetary process.

The vaccination programme is intended to target girls around 12 years of age, as research has indicated that this is the ideal age for the vaccination. I am also hoping to put in place a catch-up vaccination programme for older girls but, again, I cannot confirm this in the current financial circumstances.

On 26 October the Department of Health in London and the Scottish Executive announced details of their plans for HPV vaccination over the coming three years and beyond. The Welsh Assembly Government is expected to announce similar plans in the near future. Northern Ireland must ensure that it does not fall behind the rest of the UK in regard to this cancer-prevention investment – if this happens it will be unprecedented in the field of immunisation.

Attacks on Medical Staff

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff in accident and emergency departments and ambulance staff, who have been injured at work as a result of drunken assault in the last three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 723/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Firstly, let me say that I utterly condemn all such attacks on healthcare staff. The specific information on the precise nature and location of attacks is not presently recorded; however, my officials are currently reviewing the range of data to be maintained by Health and Social Care Trusts.

5,449 cases of verbal and physical abuse against healthcare staff were reported during the period 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005. This decreased to 5,382 in the period 1 April 2005 and 31 March 2006 but rose again to 6,010 in the period 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2007. These are alarming statistics and are totally unacceptable. Whilst the reasons and motivation for violent attacks is not known, I have no doubt that alcohol has contributed to a number of these incidents.

Nurses

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses currently employed by the health service, who will reach their normal retirement age in each year from 2007-2010, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQO 674/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The projected total number of nursing staff, both qualified and nurse support staff, set to retire between 2007 and 2010, is;

| | Nursing Staff | | | | | |
|--|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------|-------|
| | Belfast Trust | Northern Trust | Southern Trust | South-Eastern Trust | Western Trust | Total |
| Those already at retirement age (60 years) | 31 | 15 | 19 | 21 | 15 | 101 |
| Those projected to retire in year - 2007 | 43 | 30 | 35 | 17 | 30 | 155 |
| -2008 | 62 | 40 | 38 | 34 | 36 | 210 |
| -2009 | 83 | 41 | 50 | 41 | 38 | 253 |
| -2010 | 86 | 47 | 58 | 46 | 33 | 270 |

QUALIFIED NURSES BY AGE AND TRUST AT 30TH JUNE 2006 – NORMAL RETIREMENT AGE 60

| | Qualified nursing staff | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------|-------|
| | Belfast Trust | Northern Trust | Southern Trust | South-Eastern Trust | Western Trust | Total |
| Those already at retirement age (60 years) | 31 | 14 | 11 | 19 | 10 | 85 |
| Those projected to retire in year -2007 | 43 | 26 | 32 | 16 | 25 | 142 |
| -2008 | 62 | 32 | 29 | 31 | 31 | 185 |

| | Qualified nursing staff | | | | | |
|-------|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------|-------|
| | Belfast Trust | Northern Trust | Southern Trust | South-Eastern Trust | Western Trust | Total |
| -2009 | 82 | 35 | 35 | 39 | 31 | 222 |
| -2010 | 85 | 42 | 49 | 39 | 26 | 241 |

NURSE SUPPORT STAFF BY AGE AND TRUST AT 30TH JUNE 2006 – NORMAL RETIREMENT AGE 60

| | Nurse Support staff | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------|-------|
| | Belfast Trust | Northern Trust | Southern Trust | South-Eastern Trust | Western Trust | Total |
| Those already at retirement age (60 years) | 0 | 1 | 8 | 2 | 5 | 16 |
| Those projected to retire in year -2007 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 13 |
| -2008 | 0 | 8 | 9 | 3 | 5 | 25 |
| -2009 | 1 | 6 | 15 | 2 | 7 | 31 |
| -2010 | 1 | 5 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 29 |

Source: Human Resources Management System

Inpatients in Knockbracken Hospital

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who are currently inpatients in the medium security facility in the forensic unit in Knockbracken Hospital, and who are awaiting discharge to appropriate secure accommodation. (AQO 618/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 32 in-patients in the medium security facility, the Shannon Clinic. The Shannon Clinic is a 34 bed unit in Knockbracken Healthcare Park which takes short and medium stay patients. At present, there is one patient being proposed for transfer to the community and another to St Luke's, Armagh.

Long-Term Alcohol Addiction Treatment

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how much funding has been allocated to treat long-term alcohol addiction; (ii) a breakdown of funding by Health and Social Care Trust, in number and percentage terms; and (iii) the residential inpatient facilities for treating patients with severe alcohol addiction and dependency problems, the capacity of these facilities, and which Trust areas have no such facilities. (AQO 672/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provides funding for core

Health Board addiction services. These services cover both alcohol and drugs and therefore a separate breakdown for alcohol alone is not available. In answer to your specific questions

- (i) The total amount of funding provided to Health Boards for the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction in the last financial year for which figures are available was £5,133,184.
- (ii) The breakdown by Board in numbers and percentage –

| | | |
|----------------|------------|-------|
| Northern Board | £931,148 | (18%) |
| Southern Board | £549,678 | (11%) |
| Eastern Board | £2,401,944 | (47%) |
| Western Board | £1,250,414 | (24%) |

- (iii) The residential inpatient facilities for treating patients with severe alcohol addiction and dependency problems, and their current capacity across the five Health Trusts is described thus:

| Trust | Beds | Facility |
|---------------|-----------|------------------------|
| Belfast | 10 | Shaftesbury Square |
| South Eastern | 14 | Downshire (Ward 15) |
| Western | 7 | Alcohol Treatment Unit |
| Southern | 10 | St. Luke's Armagh |
| Northern | 10 | Carrick 1 |
| Total | 51 | |

| Trust | Beds | Facility |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Additional beds contracted by trusts | 8 | Ramona House |
| | 8 | Northlands |
| | 21 | House in the Wells |
| | 6 | Carlisle House |
| Total | 43 | |

All five Trusts have facilities for in-patient/residential addiction treatment

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: There are 231 F1 Training posts in the 2007 NI Foundation Programme.

- 187 posts are held by graduates from Queens University Belfast's Medical School, with
- 44 posts held by graduates from outside of Northern Ireland.

There are no graduates in short term training posts outside of the F1 Foundation Programme

Hospital Admissions

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his policy on the admission of people over 65 to hospital, and on their treatment, once they have been admitted.

(AQO 707/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Decisions to admit to hospital, and the subsequent determination of treatment, reflect clinical decisions which take account of individual needs and service protocols. A patient's age is not the deciding factor.

Lymphodeoma Services

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of funding available for lymphodeoma services; and to provide a breakdown of the distribution of this funding.

(AQO 615/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: £500,000 has been made available recurrently in 2007/08 to fund lymphoedema services. Each of the four Health Boards will share the funding on a capitation basis. This funding will support the development of a specialist lymphoedema network to facilitate the implementation of high quality lymphoedema care throughout the province. Plans include the creation of multidisciplinary teams in each trust with the necessary mix of skills and expertise to treat the condition effectively and a consultant led complex case clinic which will rotate around a number of locations to provide a regional service.

F1 Foundation Programme Trainees

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of medical trainees, in the year after their graduation, who are (i) F1 Foundation Programme trainees; and (ii) in short-term training posts outside the F1 Foundation Programme.

(AQO 704/08)

Radiotherapy Machines

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of whether or not the radiotherapy machines in the new cancer centre in Belfast are being used to full capacity; and to detail any instances where the machines have broken down; and the impact that this has had on patients.

(AQO 614/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently eight radiotherapy machines in the Cancer Centre and these are being used to their planned capacity. Existing demand for radiotherapy in Northern Ireland is fully met by the present level of service.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that there has been only one occasion when a radiotherapy machine was out of service impacting on two patients who had their treatment start dates deferred by one day.

The Trust has also confirmed that all patients requiring radiotherapy are treated within standards recommended by the Royal College of Radiologists.

Review of Public Administration

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has in place for staff in Health and Social Services Boards, who could be displaced as a result of the Review of Public Administration.

(AQO 706/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Staff in Health and Social Services Boards who are displaced as a result of the Review of Public Administration will be dealt with under the same principles as all affected staff across the Health and Social Care sector.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to

meet with his counterparts in the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly, to discuss matters of mutual interest. (AQO 630/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I expect to meet Nicola Sturgeon MSP, Scottish Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, and Edwina Hart AM, Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services in the near future to discuss areas of mutual interest.

Additionally, officials in my Department are in regular contact and exchange information, with their counterparts in both Scotland and Wales, across a wide range of policy areas in which we share an interest.

Personal Health Matters

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to increase public awareness of personal health matters; and to develop a culture of 'self-check' for men and women. (AQO 616/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Public Health strategy, "Investing for Health", provides the framework within which my Department promotes the importance of a healthy lifestyle. This includes public information campaigns on sexual health, the dangers of smoking and the importance of sensible drinking, regular exercise and eating a balanced diet.

The Department is not currently engaged in any initiatives exclusively relating to men's health. However, Men's Health Week, co-ordinated by the Men's Health Forum, aims to heighten awareness of preventable male health problems and to encourage early detection and treatment of problems.

Information leaflets on breast screening which includes advice on breast awareness, [the term now used in place of "self examination"] are also available in a range of locations including GP surgeries and health centres.

Budget Implications

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on the implications for his department, following the publication of the Northern Ireland budget. (AQO 628/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have not agreed this budget. I have agreed a draft budget as a basis for general consultation with the Assembly and the general public.

Over the CSR period this will only provide a real terms increase of 1.1% per annum for Health. Although my budget will increase to over £4.2bn by 2010/11, this represents an increase of only £455m. Given that I have unavoidable pressures and existing commitments of some £700m in that year, I will need a significant element of my efficiency savings of £343m to be reinvested simply to meet these ongoing pressures.

This leaves a mere £16m to invest in new service developments next year.

By comparison, the Department of Health in England has seen a much larger rise of 3.7%.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All-Ireland Transport Facilities

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to increase all-Ireland transport facilities. (AQW 1177/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has established excellent relations with the road authorities in the South, facilitated through the Cross Border Steering Group (CBSG), which delegates from Roads Service, the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the Irish Department for Transport attend. Chief Executives from Roads Service and the National Roads Authority share chairmanship of this group, which meets on a regular basis. CBSG discussions cover a range of roads policy issues including sharing details of respective roads programmes and the monitoring of cross border projects. These meetings provide joined-up planning between both jurisdictions to ensure that the Strategic Road Network is developed in a manner that will be of benefit to the whole island of Ireland.

You will be aware of the Irish Government's intention to make available £400 million to help fund major roads programmes for the provision of dual carriageway standards on routes within the North on the Western Corridor, (Derry to the border at Aughnacloy), and the Eastern Seaboard Corridor (Belfast to Larne). The Executive has confirmed its acceptance, in principle, to taking forward these projects and Roads Service is now engaged with the NRA in developing a process for the governance, delivery, and funding of these projects. These projects highlight how progress is being made between both jurisdictions to develop the strategic road network to be of benefit to the whole island of Ireland.

My Department, together with the Department of Transport in the South, has also funded a research study into cross-border community based rural transport. The study is intended to help us understand what barriers there are to the development of cross-border community transport and to identify the level of demand and the need for these types of services. The report should be completed in November 2007.

Additionally, the All Ireland Free Travel Scheme for Older People became operational in April 2007. Under the rules of this Scheme, senior citizens in possession of a travel pass can use public transport services free of charge throughout the island of Ireland.

I am also making funding available to upgrade part of the Belfast to Dublin railway line between Lurgan and Lisburn.

Under the auspices of the British Irish Council, Ministers have agreed that the potential for further cooperation and collaboration in relation to transport planning and investment should be examined to further strengthen the integration of transport networks across geographical and jurisdictional boundaries in all eight administrations, including those on an all Ireland basis.

Finally, I can also advise that my Department is currently working with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the South to develop a collaborative Spatial Planning Framework. This will be a shared document which will set out how we will work together to implement both the National Spatial Strategy in the South and the Regional Development Strategy here, so that the whole island can share the benefits. This process will focus on improving infrastructure, more sustainable uses of resources, better transportation links and identifying priorities for action.

Road Management

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total length of roads managed by the Roads Service in the Western Division; the total annual expenditure for managing the roads network in that area, in each of the years (i) 2004/05; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2006/07; and the anticipated expenditure for 2007/08. (AQW 1198/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the total length of roads managed by it, in Western Division, is 8665 km.

The total annual expenditure by Roads Service, for managing the roads network in Western Division from 2004/05, 2005/06, and 2006/07 together with the

anticipated expenditure for 2007/08, is detailed in the table below:

| | 2004/05 £k | 2005/06 £k | 2006/07 £k | 2007/08 £k |
|----------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Capital | 18,618 | 22,732 | 25,048 | 23,327 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Resource | 29,746 | 28,146 | 28,016 | 25,300 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Total | 48,364 | 50,878 | 53,064 | 48,627 ⁽¹⁾ |

(1) Anticipated expenditure.

In providing the above information I should explain that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. Major road improvements are prioritised on a countrywide basis taking account of a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environment impact and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council, constituency or county in which they are located.

Roads Service expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, transportation measure and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

In relation to its maintenance activities I should explain again that Roads Service does not apportion its maintenance budget equally across district council areas. Resources available for each maintenance activity (e.g. resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc) are apportioned to district council areas using appropriate indicators of need. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

Road Signage

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which black and white chevron signage will be erected at the bend on the Glenbuck Road, Ballymoney. (AQW 1200/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised me that following your request earlier this year, a site visit on the Glenbuck Road was carried out, and it was agreed that bend warning signage and chevrons at the location you had highlighted, would be provided.

I am pleased to advise that the new bend warning signage and chevrons will be erected within the next three weeks.

Sewerage Systems

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number and location of all sewerage systems that discharge directly in to the tidal waters along the coastline of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1204/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it maintains approximately 1,100 wastewater treatment works, many of which discharge to coastal waters, watercourses and loughs, with appropriate levels of treatment. Unfortunately, discharges to tidal waters are not separately identified in NIW's records and it would take some time to manually extract the information. I have asked the Chief Executive of NIW to contact you directly in relation to the provision of the detailed information requested.

Within most sewerage systems there are also a number of intermittent discharge points spilling storm sewage during periods of heavy rain as a design consideration to protect against out of sewer flooding of land and property. Similar to the treated outfalls, these are subject to regulation by the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service.

In addition to the treated discharges, there are 10 locations where untreated sewage is pumped, or flows by gravity, directly into the tidal waters along the coastline of Northern Ireland. The attached table lists the locations and remedial works that are already underway, or are included within Northern Ireland Water's capital investment programme, to address the situation.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's expenditure on consultancy; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, for the last year. (AQW 1214/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A breakdown of the expenditure incurred on external consultancy by the Department for Regional Development, excluding its executive agencies and NDPBs, during the 2006/2007 financial year is set out below.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

| Category | Expenditure 2006/07 £ million |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Policy appraisal and review | 1.72 |
| Strategic management | 0.21 |
| Organisational development | 0.05 |
| Performance management | 0.01 |
| Audit | 0.01 |
| Economic appraisal | 2.28 |
| Feasibility study | 0.07 |
| Quality accreditation | 0.08 |
| Projects | 0.04 |
| Marketing | 0.61 |
| Total | 5.08 |

Road Resurfacing

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the Roads Service's annual expenditure on resurfacing roads, broken down by trunk road and non-trunk road, for (i) 2004/05; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2006/07; and the expected expenditure in 2007/08, for the Southern Division. (AQW 1226/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The resurfacing expenditure of my Department's Roads Service, broken down by trunk and non-trunk roads, is detailed in the table below.

The budget figures for 2007/08 represent the opening budget position, and this amount is subject to change during the financial year, dependent on normal budget monitoring and the outcome of bids or easements in quarterly monitoring rounds.

| Resurfacing Expenditure | Roads Service Outturn 2004/05 | Roads Service Outturn 2005/06 | Roads Service Outturn 2006/07 | Roads Service Initial Allocations 2007/08 | Southern Division Initial Allocations 2007/08 |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Trunk Roads | £7119k | £7290k | £5366k | £6729k | £1670k |
| Non- trunk roads | £28730k | £25413k | £23366k | £16290k | £3668k |

Road Management

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total length of roads managed by the Roads Service in the Southern Division; the total annual expenditure for managing the roads network in that area, in each of the years (i) 2004/05; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2006/07; and the anticipated expenditure for 2007/08. (AQW 1227/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the total length of roads managed by it, in Southern Division, is 7182 km.

The total annual expenditure by my Department's Roads Service, for managing the roads network in Southern Division from 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 together with the anticipated expenditure for 2007/08, is detailed in the table below:

| | 2004/05 £k | 2005/06 £k | 2006/07 £k | 2007/08 £k |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| Capital | 34,054 | 31,572 | 70,975 | 19,505 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Resource | 31,203 | 30,719 | 28,349 | 26,300 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Total | 65,257 | 62,291 | 99,324 | 45,805 ⁽¹⁾ |

(1) Anticipated expenditure.

In providing the above information I should explain that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. Major road improvements are prioritised on a countrywide basis taking account of a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environment impact and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council, constituency or county in which they are located.

Roads Service expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, transportation measure and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas on a needs-based priority approach using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

In relation to its maintenance activities I should explain again that Roads Service does not apportion its maintenance budget equally across district council areas. Resources available for each maintenance activity (e.g. resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc) are apportioned to district council areas using appropriate indicators of need. This

ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the country.

Railway Station Signage

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to renew the signage on railway station platforms throughout the Northern Ireland Railways network. (AQW 1266/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink / NIR are responsible for the upkeep or replacement of signage on all railway station platforms. At present there is no specific timetable in place for the renewal of these platform signs. However, Translink have confirmed that signage at all locations will be included as part of the DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) work schedule which is ongoing. Consequently all platform signage will be replaced as these works are undertaken at various locations throughout Northern Ireland. The estimated completion date of these works is the end of August 2008.

Gortcorbies Climbing Lane

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 465/08, to indicate the proposed site for the disposal of surplus material from the proposed Gortcorbies Climbing Lane; and to provide a date for the commencement of this project. (AQW 1268/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I refer the member to my previous answer AQW 465/08.

My Department's Roads Service, in consultation with Planning Service and Environment and Heritage Service, is still investigating options for the disposal of the surplus material, in compliance with current statutory requirements.

In these circumstances, I am unable to provide a date for the commencement of the project.

Beragh Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the total cost of upgrading Beragh Waste Water Treatment works. (AQW 1302/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the cost of upgrading Beragh Wastewater Treatment Works and its outlying pumping stations was £2.56 million. The new works have been designed to treat flows from Sixmilecross and Beragh. The wastewater treatment works at Sixmilecross were replaced by a sewage pumping station.

Fintona Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the total cost of upgrading Fintona Waste Water Treatment works. (AQW 1304/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the total cost of upgrading Fintona Wastewater Treatment Works was £1.87 million. This project involved the construction of a new wastewater treatment works within the existing boundary of the old wastewater treatment works.

Roads Management

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total length of roads managed by the Roads Service in the Northern Division; the total annual expenditure for managing the roads network in that area, in each of the years (i) 2004/05; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2006/07; and the anticipated expenditure for 2007/08. (AQW 1315/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the total length of roads managed by it, in Northern Division, is 5757 km.

The total annual expenditure for managing the roads network in Northern Division from 2004/05, 2005/06, and 2006/07 together with the anticipated expenditure for 2007/08, is detailed in the table below:

| | 2004/05 £k | 2005/06 £k | 2006/07 £k | 2007/08 £k |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| Capital | 22,637 | 22,912 | 12,736 | 18,000 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Resource | 28,297 | 29,475 | 26,737 | 24,300 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Total | 50,934 | 52,387 | 39,473 | 42,300 ⁽¹⁾ |

(1) Anticipated expenditure.

In providing the above information I should explain that Roads Service does not simply split its total budget for capital expenditure on roads across all the district council areas. Major road improvements are prioritised on a countrywide basis after considering a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flow, number of accidents, potential saving in travel times, impact on the environment and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council, constituency or county in which they are located.

Roads Service expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, transportation measure and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such

works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas on a needs-based priority approach, using indicators such as population, weighted road lengths and the number of accidents. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds for improvements across the country.

In relation to its maintenance activities, I should explain again that Roads Service does not apportion its maintenance budget equally across district council areas. Resources available for each maintenance activity (e.g. resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc) are apportioned to district council areas using appropriate indicators of need. This ensures, so far as possible, an equitable distribution of maintenance funds across the country.

Road Resurfacing

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the Roads Service's annual expenditure on resurfacing roads, broken down by trunk road and non-trunk road, for (i) 2004/05; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2006/07; and the expected expenditure in 2007/08, for the Northern Division. (AQW 1316/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The resurfacing expenditure of my Department's Roads Service, broken down by trunk and non trunk roads, is detailed in the table below.

The budget figures for 2007/08 represent the opening budget position, and this amount is subject to change during the financial year, dependent on normal budget monitoring and the outcome of bids or easements in quarterly monitoring rounds.

| Resurfacing Expenditure | Roads Service Outturn 2004/05 | Roads Service Outturn 2005/06 | Roads Service Outturn 2006/07 | Roads Service Initial Allocations 2007/08 | Northern Division Initial Allocations 2007/08 |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Trunk Roads | £7119k | £7290k | £5366k | £6729k | £975k |
| Non- Trunk Roads | £28730k | £25413k | £23366k | £16290k | £3220k |

Strathroy Link Road, Omagh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his department's commitment to the construction of the Strathroy link road in Omagh; and to provide an indicative timeline for this work. (AQW 1375/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015 envisaged a number of improvements to the highway network within Omagh, which included Strathroy Link. The Strathroy Link scheme is led by and dependent upon contributions from developers, supplemented by funding from the Department. The delivery of the Strathroy Link scheme will, therefore, be dependent on the availability of developer contributions and departmental funding, and the completion of the necessary statutory procedures. It is unlikely that the scheme could commence before 2013.

Planning Application

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the recent planning application for a housing development at Milford Village, Armagh, (i) what plans he has to upgrade the current sewerage system in the village; and (ii) to give a timescale within which any remedial works will be completed. (AQW 1426/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that they are not aware of any sewerage infrastructure problems in the Milford catchment and they have, therefore, no plans to upgrade the existing sewage system. The small additional flow anticipated from the new development should not have an adverse effect on the sewerage system in the village.

Travelwise Pledge

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of occasions upon which he has used sustainable public transport, while on official duties, since taking the Travelwise pledge. (AQO 712/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In continuing steps to encourage commuters to swap their cars for other modes of transport such as walking, car sharing, bus, train or bicycle, for one journey each week, I launched the Travelwise Pledge during my Department's Travelwise Week in mid September.

It has only been a short time since the launch, but where it has been feasible, I have used sustainable transport on 4 occasions when on official duties, using the train, a taxi and car sharing.

It is staggering how many cars on the road contain just one person. The Travelwise survey suggests that some 69% of commuters travel alone in the car.

I appreciate public transport may not suit everybody but I would encourage people to also consider the car

sharing option. Car sharing saves time, money and benefits the environment and our health.

The Travelwise NI campaign is encouraging commuters to consider the alternatives to being stuck in traffic by trying sustainable transport options such as car sharing, public transport or depending on the distance, walking and cycling are healthy and cheap alternatives. Such initiatives make a positive contribution to the Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy, which sets challenges for all of us to make our society more sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms.

I fully endorse the Travelwise Pledge and, where possible, I do plan to consider the use of public transport for official duties, when the opportunity arises. I would encourage all my Executive colleagues and fellow MLAs to set an example and follow this lead.

Strand One Report of the Independent Water Review Panel

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that there will be no additional redundancies as a result of proposals for 40% efficiency targets for Northern Ireland Water, as proposed by the Strand One report of the Independent Water Review Panel. (AQO 655/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Independent Water Review Panel's Strand 1 Report recommended that NIW's operational cost efficiency target should be raised to 40% for the period ending 2009/10. My Executive Sub-Committee colleagues and I have not yet reached a view on a number of the Panel's recommendations, and this one relating to efficiencies may require further investigation before a decision is reached.

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Rail Service

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what funding bid he has submitted to support the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry rail service. (AQO 680/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The bid which I submitted to the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review included some £20.4 million capital for the Belfast to Derry line for the period 2008/09 to 2010/11. I also bid within the wider Investment Strategy for sufficient funding to relay all the line between Ballymena and Derry. This would include the provision of a passing loop between Coleraine and Derry.

Water Charges

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on his plans for water charges, in light of the Hilyard Report. (AQO 697/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I refer the honourable member to my recent statement to the Assembly on 22 October.

The position which I outlined on behalf of the Executive provides a firm basis for delivering a better deal for all water customers than that proposed by the Direct Rule administration.

A great deal of work needs to be done by the Executive, the independent panel, the Committee for Regional Development and all the stakeholders in the coming weeks on a number of major issues such as the use of capital values and metering before the Executive can make definite decisions on these. We will have an opportunity to debate these in the House tomorrow.

In addition the Panel is working through the second phase of the review which is expected to be concluded in December.

Joint Infrastructure Projects

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the contact between the Roads Service and the National Roads Authority, in relation to joint infrastructure projects. (AQO 638/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have established excellent relations with the road authorities in the South, facilitated through the Cross Border Steering Group attended by delegates of Roads Service, the National Roads Authority and the Department of Transport in the South. Chief Executives from Roads Service and the National Roads Authority share chairmanship of the Group, which meets on a regular basis.

Discussions cover a range of roads policy issues, including sharing details of respective roads programmes and the monitoring of cross-border projects.

The recently opened 14km length of dual carriageway on the A1/N1 between Newry and Dundalk is a prime example of the cooperation which exists between the road authorities in both jurisdictions. Roads Service and Louth County Council were the joint Client for this, the largest cross-border road project yet carried out.

Members will be aware of the Irish Government's intention to make available £400 million to help fund major roads programmes for the provision of dual carriageway standard on routes within the North, on the Western Corridor (the route from Derry to the border at Aughnacloy) and the Eastern Seaboard

Corridor (the Belfast to Larne route). The Executive has confirmed its acceptance, in principle, to taking forward these projects and Roads Service is now engaged with the National Roads Authority in developing a process for the governance, delivery, and funding of these projects.

Excellent cooperation also exists on Minor Works projects, whereby officials from the three Roads Service Divisions which interface with the South, meet with their counterparts in the Southern County Councils. These meetings ensure that joined-up planning is aimed not only at the major schemes, but is incorporated at every level of road development where cross-border implications can be identified.

Road Investment

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has for capital investment in roads in Fermanagh over the next five years; and, if so, to outline commencement dates for this investment. (AQO 678/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTN TP) identified a number of schemes which are located in (or impact on) County Fermanagh:

- A4 Dungannon to Ballygawley – 20.5km of high standard dual carriageway that will include 6 flyover-type junctions.
- A4 Annaghilla Improvements – 3.8km of single carriageway realignment with eastbound 2+1 lane.

These two schemes form part of my Department's DBFO Package 2 and are expected to commence in early 2008.

Other schemes included in the RSTN TP are:

- A4 Henry Street/Sligo Road, Enniskillen – Provision of an additional lane on approach to the junction.
- A32 Cherrymount Link, Enniskillen – New 1.1km single carriageway link road.

In July 2006 my Department's Roads Service issued a consultation document entitled 'Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015' which included the following schemes:

- A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass – 3.2km of 2+1 single carriageway.
- A4 Fivemiletown Bypass – 3.4km of 2+1 single carriageway.
- A32 Dromore – Irvinestown – Enniskillen – A Programme of single carriageway and realignment schemes including 2+1 carriageway on the A32 Dromore – Irvinestown – Enniskillen road.

The inclusion of these schemes is currently being evaluated.

Delivery and timing of these schemes will be dependent on clearing the statutory procedures, having a satisfactory economic appraisal and indeed on the outcome of Budget 2008-2011 and the investment envisaged under ISNI 2.

Regarding capital investment in Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM) schemes and Bridge Strengthening works in Fermanagh over the next 5 years, it is not possible to give a determination of exact costs, at this stage. However, over the next 3 years, given historical budget trends, approximately £830,000 per year is estimated for the LTSM schemes. Regarding the Bridge Strengthening Programme, Roads Service's Western Division's annual budget over the next 3 years is likely to be in the region of £1.6 million per year. In terms of the Fermanagh Council area, it is estimated that a total in the order of £2 million will be spent on bridge strengthening works over the next 3 years.

Road Upgrade

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the A32 road from Enniskillen to Omagh. (AQO 641/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: 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 on the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen.

Roads Service is currently considering responses to the consultation document and work on the assessment of this 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, other than to indicate that the outcome will align with Budget 2008-2011 and the investment envisaged under ISNI 2.

I understand that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will contribute £5 million towards upgrading this route as a result of new hospital provision in Enniskillen.

Hilyard Report

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details on the Hilyard Report; and what is his assessment of the views of this report,

in relation to the introduction of water meters.

(AQO 682/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I announced details of the Strand One Report by the Independent Water Review Panel to the Assembly on 22 October.

The Report did not rule metering out but recommended that, in the short term, implementation plans should not proceed.

As I said in response to questions which followed, I believe that the environmental, social, cost and operational implications of metering will be debated publicly over the next few weeks in the lead-up to the publication of the Independent Panel's Strand 2 Report. They can be debated tomorrow during the take-note debate which has been tabled by the Regional Development Committee.

Ballycolman Pumping Station

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the proposed timetable for updating the Ballycolman pumping station at Ballycolman estate, Strabane; and what action he is taking to prevent flooding in the estate. (AQO 600/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the scheme to update the sewage pumping station at Ballycolman estate, Strabane, is programmed to commence in February 2008 and to be completed in December 2008. The design is at an advanced stage and includes for upgrading the existing system and provision of a storm sewage pumping station at an estimated cost of £1.3million.

In addition to a pre-planned quarterly maintenance inspection and test of the pumping station equipment, NIW has an emergency response system in place to deal with flooding complaints and any station breakdowns in the intervening period. Because Ballycolman Pumping Station is classified as a high priority site under NIW's Pollution Control Plan, which necessitates immediate response in advance of the proposed scheme, its mobile operations staff inspect the pumping station twice weekly and provide immediate response to any telemetry alarms. The station is monitored twenty four hours a day by telemetry centre staff. An immediate response is triggered in the event of a high sump level alarm, a pump failure alarm or a customer complaint about out-of-sewer flooding at Ballycolman and NIW staff are dispatched immediately to the site to assess the situation and deploy appropriate resources to rectify the situation. In the event of potential out-of-sewer flooding due to high river levels coinciding with prolonged heavy rainfall, a Major Incident Emergency Response Team is activated and additional

staff, emergency pumps, tankers, sandbags etc are deployed to site.

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Railway Service

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what action has been taken to source European (TENs) funding for the upgrading of the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry railway. (AQO 599/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Following the announcement of 26 October 2007 on the proposed budget for public transport, final decisions have yet to be made on the level of investment on the Derry railway line. An application for EU TENs funding therefore could not be made until the draft budget is confirmed.

Road Improvements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to improve the road junction between New Road and Harbour Road in Portavogie; what plans he has to remove or reduce pillars that are blocking sight lines at this junction; and to improve the road infrastructure of Portavogie. (AQO 607/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am advised that my Department's Roads Service completed a minor improvement scheme, during 2005, to enhance the pedestrian facilities along Harbour Road, Portavogie, between the junctions of Princess Ann Road and New Road. To facilitate the construction of an appropriate footway, a new boundary wall and pillars were constructed to replace the existing vehicular entrance at No 3 Harbour Road.

I understand that, to minimise the general impact of the scheme on the aforementioned property, agreement was reached with the owner to position the replacement wall and pillars to provide a suitable vehicular access to the property and ensure the provision of sightlines, similar to the previous, at the Harbour Road junction with New Road.

Whilst Roads Service officials accept the sightline at this junction is somewhat limited, they have informed me that the provision of a substantial improvement to the sightline in question would require the acquisition and demolition of the property.

Roads Service has no major plans for improvement work to the road infrastructure in the Portavogie area. However, they would be happy to assess any request received to undertake minor improvements for

possible inclusion in the Local Transport and Safety Measures programme.

The assessment process will determine the priority status of any potential scheme which will then compete for delivery within the confines of Roads Service finite resources.

Greater Belfast Ring Road

Mr Burnside asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to develop an outer Greater Belfast ring road, at dual carriageway or motorway standard, encompassing Lisburn, Antrim, Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus, Newtownards and Bangor. (AQO 710/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for Northern Ireland 2002 – 2012, the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTN TP) and the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) did not identify the need for a scheme such as an outer Greater Belfast ring road. Furthermore, the recent consultation exercise to produce the expanded Strategic Road Improvement Programme to 2015 through the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) did not identify any proposals for such a scheme. In these circumstances, I do not consider an outer Greater Belfast ring road a strategic requirement at this time.

However, the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) identifies 5 Key Transport Corridors (KTCs) within the Regional Strategic Transport Network which are the primary focus of Roads Service's Strategic Road Improvement Programme. The Strategy's vision of a modern, sustainable and safe transportation system will require substantial upgrading of all of the Key Transport Corridors, including the Northern KTC which encompasses the A26/A57 running from the M1 at Moira to the M2 at Templepatrick. The level of funding made available will determine how quickly this longer term objective can be achieved.

In addition the BMTP provides a comprehensive and realistic local transport plan up to 2015. Over half the funding available within the Plan is identified for public transport, walking and cycling schemes.

The limited amount available for strategic highway improvements therefore targets the removal of major bottlenecks, and safety and capacity improvements to the existing strategic network within the Belfast Metropolitan Area. The M1, M2 and Westlink, strategic links through Belfast are currently under improvement.

Sewage Treatment Facilities

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of whether or not the current sewage treatment facilities at Whitehead and Ballystrudder meet the standards required under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive; and to give a timescale within which proposals to upgrade sewage treatment facilities at these locations will be implemented. (AQO 685/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Responsibility for determining whether or not wastewater treatment facilities meet the appropriate treatment requirements of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations rests with the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service. They have indicated that the appropriate treatment is not in place at either Ballystrudder or Whitehead.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that an option to combine flows from Ballycarry, Ballystrudder and Whitehead for discharge via a new marine outfall has been presented to and accepted by Environment and Heritage Service. This option will remove the Ballycarry and Ballystrudder discharges from Larne Lough.

A marine dispersion model has been constructed of the area between Whitehead Pumping Station and Blackhead and also an area to the North of Blackhead. Two locations have been identified within this area for the marine outfall and a detailed study is underway to identify the optimum one. The study is expected to be completed in November 2007 and this will enable design of the proposed works to commence. Construction is scheduled to commence in February 2009 and to be completed in Autumn 2010, subject to availability of funding and statutory approvals. It is estimated that the scheme will cost in the region of £13 million.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties that have been allocated in (i) Killinchy; and (ii) Moneyreagh, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1154/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties allocated in Killinchy and Moneyreagh in each of the last three years was as follows:

- Killinchy – 4 in 2005; 2 in 2006 and 2 in 2007
- Moneyreagh – 6 in 2005; 3 in 2006 and none in 2007

Housing Executive Waiting List

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list who have identified Killinchy as one of their areas of choice. (AQW 1155/08)

The Minister for Social Development: 35 applicants have indicated Killinchy as a 1st or 2nd preference area for housing. 25 of these have more than 30 points and are therefore considered to be in housing stress.

Housing Executive Waiting List

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list who have identified Moneyreagh as one of their areas of choice. (AQW 1156/08)

The Minister for Social Development: 38 applicants have indicated Moneyreagh as a 1st or 2nd preference area for housing. 19 of these have more than 30 points and are therefore considered to be in housing stress.

Dunclug Action Plan

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's total expenditure to date on the Dunclug Action Plan; and the amount that has been spent on consultants' fees. (AQW 1160/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development launched the Dunclug Action Plan on 17th January 2007. To date the Department for Social Development's total expenditure is £364,757.87. This amount includes £5,737 which NIHE have paid to consultants who were appointed on 12th April 2007.

Disabled Facilities Grant

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of people who have received the disabled facilities grant in the last 12 months; and (ii) the average waiting time for the grant to be paid. (AQW 1175/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the 12 months to 30 September 2007, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive issued approvals for 1,698 Disabled Facility Grants.

The average time taken by the Housing Executive to process payments of Disabled Facility Grant is just

over 4 weeks. This excludes the time taken by applicants to complete the necessary documentation.

Housing Executive Telephone System

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total cost of implementing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's new centralised phone system. (AQW 1229/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is currently implementing a new telephone system as part of a 10 year contract with technology partner, BT at a total projected cost, over 10 years, of £2.6m. It is projected that a 10 year net saving of £500k will be achieved when compared against the cost of the maintenance and operation of the old telephony system. The new system's use of the latest technology will deliver a much more efficient and flexible service than the ageing system.

Caravans

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to introduce legislation to deal with security of tenure for people who occupy caravans as their main residence. (AQW 1261/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have no immediate plans to introduce legislation to give security of tenure to those who occupy caravans as their main residence. This is a complex area of policy and law and not solely an issue for my Department. Housing law in Northern Ireland covers the rented sector and those who live in caravans are private home owners. Next year I will be considering issues for a housing policy consultation document which will lead to a housing bill, and while this will focus on my key priorities of affordable housing and homelessness, I will ask my officials to liaise and consider with the Department of Environment and Department of Enterprise Trade and Industry officials the most appropriate way forward on this issue.

Disabled Facilities Grant

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale within which she will review the disabled facilities grant to reflect the increased cost of building work. (AQW 1284/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The rates used to establish the amount of grant payable are reviewed on an annual basis. A facility already exists to pay up to a maximum of £50,000 in high cost mandatory adaptation schemes eg to cater for wheelchair access.

Housing Executive Telephone System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average number of calls taken by the new Northern Ireland Housing Executive phone system, on a daily basis. (AQW 1291/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is implementing a new telephone system on an incremental office-by-office basis. The new system is now operational in 21 out of 45 Housing Executive offices and on average 4500 calls are being taken daily.

Housing Executive Telephone System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of offices linked to the new Northern Ireland Housing Executive phone system. (AQW 1292/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is implementing a new telephone system on an incremental office-by-office basis. The new system is now operational in 21 out of 45 Housing Executive offices and on average 4500 calls are being taken daily.

Housing Executive Telephone System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of complaints received about the new Northern Ireland Housing Executive phone system; and what steps she is taking to address these complaints. (AQW 1293/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has not received any formal complaints about the new telephony system. Issues were however raised by customers and a number of elected representatives during the initial implementation stage (particularly in the Housing Executive's South East administrative area).

A post implementation review, in each of the offices in which the new system has been introduced, identified a number of potential enhancements and these are being integrated into a service improvement plan to ensure that all issues have been addressed.

The improvements will be implemented so as to ensure that disruption in the service provided to customers is minimised, before the introduction of the new technology throughout the rest of the organisation is progressed.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Killyleagh area. (AQW 1296/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive currently owns 246 dwellings in Killyleagh.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Killinchy area. (AQW 1297/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive currently owns 27 dwellings in Killinchy.

Housing Association Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by Housing Associations in (i) Killinchy; (ii) Moneyreagh; and (iii) Killyleagh. (AQW 1299/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing Associations own 11 dwellings in Killyleagh but none in either Moneyreagh or Killinchy.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people per 1000 in receipt of Disability Living Allowance in Northern Ireland by (a) local government ward area; and (b) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1328/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold all of the information requested.

However, I have placed in the Library tables giving information on the numbers of people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance by Ward area, Parliamentary Constituency, and Local Government Districts. Also included is the number of DLA recipients expressed as a percentage of Parliamentary Constituency and Local Government District population, however we do not have the population figures available at Ward level.

The figures given reflect the number of claims where an amount of Disability Living Allowance is in payment at the date of extract.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development what provision she is making to meet the needs of Seagate employees, who will be affected by the impending closure of the factory in Limavady. (AQW 1391/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has been working and continues to work closely and in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning to meet the needs of Seagate employees. The Social Security Agency will provide comprehensive advice and information on social security benefits to all employees and assist with the completion of benefit claim forms where appropriate. Staff from the Social Security Agency will be deployed on site to facilitate this as and when necessary. Entitlement to benefit will depend on each individual's personal circumstances.

Old Andersonstown PSNI Station Site

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to gift-aid the site of the old Andersonstown PSNI station to the local community, for a purpose to be determined through local consultation, led by the West Belfast Partnership Board. (AQO 610/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This is an important site, key to the regeneration of the area. It was acquired by my Department with the objective of shaping and attracting investment to add value to West Belfast and its community. That remains my objective. The Executive, in its Programme for Government, has set a key priority of growing the economy. That requires us to look at ways in which to secure investment from the private sector, and from elsewhere, for projects and programmes which can demonstrate sustainability, without always looking to the public purse.

Faced as I am with tight budgetary constraints, I am not in a position to gift valuable sites. I want to find an economically sustainable use for this site as part of the wider regeneration of the area, while embracing local community aspirations, as far as possible. I hope to announce shortly how I see that process being taken forward.

Regeneration of Coleraine

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans for the regeneration of Coleraine. (AQO 635/08)

The Minister for Social Development: May I say first of all, that I was dismayed by the announcement we heard recently about impending job-losses at Seagate Technology in Limavady. I'd like to assure the Assembly that my department will work closely with the Department of Employment and Learning to provide assistance through the Jobs and Benefits Office network. This news underscores the need for us to continue our drive to generate jobs and investment around Northern Ireland. And can I assure Members from the Coleraine area that this will not undermine the ability of the town to take forward planned developments I will outline now.

I visited Coleraine on 17 October to announce a public consultation on two proposed regeneration schemes for the town centre. One is a large mixed use scheme on the Mall car park that would include retail, office and residential accommodation and up to 950 parking spaces. The other is a smaller mixed use scheme that would include retail and residential accommodation, a restaurant and up to 500 parking spaces.

This is a very exciting development for Coleraine. The schemes would bring £115 million of private sector investment to the town and deliver 220,000 ft² of retail space, over 100 apartments and town houses and over 1,400 new town centre parking spaces.

My Department is also considering a public realm scheme for Bridge Street, Church Street and Kingsgate Street in the town centre to complement work which we have already supported in The Diamond.

Voluntary and Community Sector Funding

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her strategy to adequately fund the voluntary and community sector. (AQO 642/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My department has lead policy responsibility for the voluntary and community sector. Funding to the sector is, however, a responsibility that is shared across all government departments.

I must emphasise, however, that ensuring the sustainability of the voluntary and community sector cannot focus on funding alone. I want to focus on results; on what kind of Sector we need in our society; on the important work that the Sector undertakes; and in particular, how the Sector can be most effectively resourced to deliver the services that our vulnerable and disadvantaged people need.

My department is presently co-ordinating the implementation of Positive Steps, which is Government's response to the taskforce report on resourcing the voluntary and community sector. Positive Steps specifies a range of actions to be undertaken by

departments and by the Sector itself, actions that are aimed at sustaining the role and services of the Sector.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people suffering from epilepsy, who were awarded the higher rate mobility through appeals, for the years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQO 608/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold the information requested, as the data relating to appeals does not record specific disabilities.

I can however tell you that 273 people have been awarded high rate mobility component and 3,440 awarded the low rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance where epilepsy was the main disabling condition in the last three years.

Review of Public Administration

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development if she will make a statement regarding the transfer of functions from her department to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 667/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am committed to the principle of strong local government, but I must also be assured that any changes I agree to under RPA will promote the effective delivery of functions. After careful consideration, I have therefore decided that urban regeneration and community development functions should transfer to local government over time. However, I would stress that some essential preparations are necessary before this takes place.

In relation to housing, this function will not transfer and will remain the responsibility of my Department, delivered through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. This has been accepted in principle by all interested parties and maintains the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's integrity as the strategic housing authority for Northern Ireland.

Social Housing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the 2006/07 target to provide 1,400 new build social and affordable housing units; to detail the number actually built; and what plans she has to ensure that the shortfall will not be repeated, and to make up for the shortfall. (AQO 687/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The targets for 2006/07 were to complete 1,400 houses already on site and to make 1,500 new starts. In the event, due to well publicised pressures in the housing market in terms of price increases, difficulties in obtaining land and the planning situation, only 1,032 new houses could be started. However, Housing Associations were able to re-direct activity into houses already being built and were able to complete 1,625 new homes. As a result, 225 new homes were completed ahead of time. Land for future years of the programme was also acquired.

The Semple Review makes 80 recommendations aimed at improving access to social and affordable housing. Some are concerned with improving delivery and include proposals to remedy the issues I have just mentioned. Since many involve other Departments I have set up and chair an Inter-Departmental Group, with an advisory panel of experts to take the issues forward. I am confident that improved delivery will result. However delivery against future targets will depend on the availability of sufficient resources. There remains a substantial shortfall in funding in the current year if we are to be able to achieve 1,500 starts.

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Schemes

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of neighbourhood renewal partnership schemes that have constituted voluntary or community groups as the lead partner; and to state whether or not such groups are encouraged to become the lead partner. (AQO 660/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I can confirm that at 5 November 2007 the number of schemes supported by DSD using Neighbourhood Renewal funding, where a voluntary or community group is the lead provider is 298. This equates to approximately 85% of the total number of schemes supported by Neighbourhood Renewal funding. The Neighbourhood Renewal strategy is about a partnership approach to improving the quality of life and life chances of those living in Neighbourhood Renewal areas by addressing the core causes of deprivation. That means tackling areas such as health, education, employability, skills and crime. This involves delivery of services by a mixed economy of statutory, voluntary and community and independent providers focused on the delivery of specific outcomes. All Government Departments and statutory agencies have a part to play in delivering these improvements and I am determined that they will do so. I signed up to the draft budget and Programme for Government on this basis.

Housing Executive Land Bank

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the value and extent of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive land bank in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. (AQO 605/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a land bank totalling 36 hectares in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. It is currently valued at £77m. Six sites have been declared surplus and these are being actively processed for marketing.

Lisanelly Site, Omagh

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the regeneration of the Lisanelly site in Omagh. (AQO 664/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The acquisition of Lisanelly Barracks by DSD to facilitate its regeneration would be subject to Executive approval of the very substantial sums involved, and to the resolution of a number of outstanding issues. Officials from my Department are continuing to work with MOD and colleagues in other Departments in this regard.

The process would be greatly facilitated should this and other redundant military sites be gifted to the Northern Ireland Executive by the British Government, as has been requested.

Community Group Funding

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development what action she will take to ensure that there is continuity of funding for community groups in South Antrim, that are approaching the end of the current round of funding allocations. (AQO 604/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department funds a number of community groups in the South Antrim area, through the Community Investment Fund, the Local Community Fund, the Areas at Risk programme and the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy.

Under the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy, my Department is currently providing funding to a range of community organisations taking responsibility for the delivery of services to local neighbourhoods in South Antrim. This interim funding, through to August 2008, was made available pending the development of Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans. Action Plans are now being finalised, and in future, DSD will work across Government to support those

key services that are deemed central to tackling the root causes of deprivation in local communities.

Social Housing

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development if she will review the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's policy for the provision of car parking in areas of social housing. (AQO 622/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I looked into this matter recently. Due to the fact that the roads in most Housing Executive estates are adopted, its policy on car parking is based on a guidance booklet entitled "Creating Spaces", issued jointly by Roads Service and Planning Service.

In existing estates there are many constraints on the Housing Executive's ability to create additional spaces. These include traffic volume, space available, gradients, the proximity of junctions or bends and the percentage of dwellings in the estate or part of the estate being considered for improved parking, that remain in Housing Executive ownership.

If you have a specific problem area in mind, I will be happy to investigate if you let me have the details.

Economy 7

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the impact of the recently announced 14% increase in Economy 7 charges. (AQO 669/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am very disappointed at the recent price increase announced by NIE. This will affect around 5% of households who use Economy 7 as their main form of heating. I will be meeting NIE soon to urge them to do more to minimise the impact of this increase on the fuel poor.

I have also asked my officials to find ways to accelerate current programmes for replacing Economy 7 heating systems in the homes of the most vulnerable people.

St. Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has in relation to the development of the site of the St. Patrick's Barracks in Ballymena. (AQO 666/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The British Army plans to leave the St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena on 31 December 2007 and the Ministry of Defence has indicated its intention to dispose of the

site in April 2007. My Department has registered an interest in acquiring the site to meet a number of public sector needs in the town. Social housing is one of the possible uses which is being considered. Officials are currently working on an option appraisal as required under Government accounting rules.

Affordable Housing

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to ensure that new build affordable homes meet the requirements of disabled people. (AQO 691/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Association Guide already requires all new build social housing units to be designed and built to 'lifetime home' criteria which consist of 17 standards that have been developed to ensure that any social home is flexible, adaptable and accessible. Lifetime Homes are designed to be easily adaptable to accommodate people who develop moderate mobility problems with maximum ease and at minimum cost.

Wheelchair housing is designed for people who are dependant on wheelchairs and require larger areas and circulation spaces. Dwellings designed to the wheelchair standards set out in the Housing Association Guide will accommodate the majority of wheelchair users but there are exceptional cases where the particular needs of a person identified at the outset with the Community Occupational Therapist can be accommodated through special design or purchase.

As far as affordable housing is concerned the Co-ownership scheme is designed to allow choice of dwelling by the purchaser who may buy a dwelling that has been designed or adapted and meets their requirements.

As further types of intermediate housing are introduced my Department will try to ensure that the needs of disabled people are considered and accommodated where possible.

All new build affordable dwellings are constructed to the minimum standards laid down in the Northern Ireland Building Regulations. These standards already make provision for disabled persons to access all new housing and may be increased in the future to include even higher standards.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 16 November 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Research into the Financial Cost of the Northern Ireland Divide

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give a timescale within which the Deloitte report 'Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide' will be formally published, rather than released in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act. (AQW 348/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The report was commissioned, conducted and finalised during direct rule. Copies of the report have already been placed in the Assembly library and made available to the OFMDFM Committee and to Members. Furthermore, if any person contacts the department for a copy of the report, it will be provided as quickly as possible. Given the wide accessibility of the report we have no plans for formal publication.

Support For Victims

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of the department's expenditure on supporting victims and survivors in Northern Ireland; and to list the names of the groups supported and the amount received by each, for each of that last five years.

(AQW 526/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Records show that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has allocated funding, detailed in the table below, to groups, organisations and projects involved in providing support for victims and survivors between April 2002 and March 2007.

| Name of Organisation | 2002-03 £ | 2003-04 £ | 2004-05 £ | 2005-06 £ | 2006-07 £ |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| A Peace Cantata | | | | 4,430 | 1,235 |
| Aisling Centre | | 25,203 | 34,630 | 27,039 | 27,768 |
| Ardoyne Commemoration Project | | | 2,550 | | |
| Armagh Voluntary Welfare Group | | 6,830 | 670 | 6,100 | 5,970 |
| Ashton Community Trust | 3,800 | 30,798 | 61,565 | 55,042 | 64,494 |
| Ballymurphy Womens Centre | 1,980 | 55,029 | 47,460 | 37,615 | 55,763 |
| Bannside Community Group | | 5,000 | 2,844 | | 4,150 |
| Barnardos Parenting in a Divided Society | 27,916 | 65,510 | 74,819 | 69,000 | 7,500 |
| BBC Legacy Project | | | | | 89,340 |
| Belfast Cognitive Therapy Centre | 8,400 | 12,280 | 740 | | |
| Breaking The Silence | | 4,500 | | | |
| Calms | 6,724 | 49,978 | 63,551 | 71,176 | 117,885 |
| Care In Crisis | | | | | 1,964 |
| Cedar Foundation | | 51,684 | 63,837 | | |
| Centre of Creative Energy | | 1,260 | 3,920 | 3,405 | 2,935 |
| Cheshire Regimental Association | | 2,198 | | 290 | |
| Churches Resource | | 18,710 | | 27,455 | 19,741 |

| Name of Organisation | 2002-03 £ | 2003-04 £ | 2004-05 £ | 2005-06 £ | 2006-07 £ |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Claudy Memorial Group | | 5,985 | 6,042 | | |
| Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum | | | | | 2,590 |
| Clonard Strategy Group | | 2,500 | | | |
| Coiste na n-Iarchimi | | | | | 2,404 |
| Colin Community Counselling | | | | 2,400 | 1,126 |
| Columba Community | | | 41,393 | 36,686 | 38,295 |
| Commissioner for Victims & Survivors Recruitment | | | | | 25,921 |
| Community Foundation for NI | 10,000 | 2,500 | | | |
| Community Relations Council | | 231,294 | 193,344 | 217,391 | 220,164 |
| Comrade Support Group | | | 2,272 | 2,340 | 2,420 |
| CORI | | 577 | 183 | | |
| Conflict Trauma Resource Centre | | 8,957 | 382 | 1,000 | 2,500 |
| Contact Youth | | 42,002 | 39,127 | 40,403 | 31,929 |
| Corpus Christi Services | | 45,354 | 43,672 | 48,143 | 57,019 |
| Creative Writers Network | | | | 5,000 | |
| Crossfire Trust | | | 31,626 | 9,670 | 7,544 |
| Cruse Bereavement Care | | 8,227 | | | 3,400 |
| Cunamh | | 80,816 | 58,703 | 73,966 | 74,424 |
| Democratic Dialogue | | 4,985 | | | |
| Derry Well Women | | 38,376 | 31,884 | 42,298 | 60,428 |
| Disabled Police Officers Association | | 3,000 | 538 | 7,585 | 2,200 |
| Dr Dillenburg Research Project | | | 55,000 | 18,550 | 55,650 |
| East Belfast Mission | | | 3,450 | 1,560 | |
| Edenbrooke Primary School | | | | | 238 |
| Eastern Health & Social Services Board (EHSSB) | | | 144,500 | | |
| EHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel | 10,470 | 74,535 | 44,477 | 60,395 | 66,147 |
| Ex Services Mental Welfare Society | | | 40,820 | 49,777 | 48,304 |
| Family Trauma Centre | 4,062 | 4,762 | | | |
| Families of the Displaced, Dispersed and Disappeared (FODDD) | | 23,265 | 25,030 | 35,268 | 39,017 |
| Families Achieving Change Together (FACT) | | 43,269 | 35,070 | 41,452 | 39,640 |
| Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR) | | 111,914 | 61,177 | 72,235 | 121,206 |
| Falls Community Council | | 4,900 | | | |
| Fermanagh Voluntary Welfare Support Group | | | | 2,775 | 7,138 |
| Firinne | | 44,908 | 39,048 | 44,154 | 45,492 |
| HAVEN | | 33,986 | 36,463 | 31,894 | 36,417 |
| Historic Enquiries Team Working Group | | | | | 312 |
| Holywell Trust | 7,329 | | | | |
| Holy Trinity Centre | | 9,210 | 13,295 | 6,900 | 3,000 |

| Name of Organisation | 2002-03 £ | 2003-04 £ | 2004-05 £ | 2005-06 £ | 2006-07 £ |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Greater Shankill Forum | | | | | 875 |
| Homes United by Ruthless Terrorism (HURT) | | 11,600 | 48,660 | 59,432 | 70,268 |
| Institute for Counselling & Personal Development | | 28,608 | 25,717 | 40,526 | 31,147 |
| Innocence, Truth & Justice | | 980 | | | |
| Innocent Victims of the Conflict | | | 2,100 | | |
| Interim Commissioner for Victims & Survivors | | | | 76,426 | 296,978 |
| Irish Peace Institute | | 2,500 | 5,000 | 4,100 | |
| Koram Centre | | 63,099 | 53,360 | 50,758 | 51,848 |
| Ladies Friendship Group | | | | | 4,075 |
| Lenadoon Counselling Project | | 34,064 | 25,705 | 40,795 | 27,986 |
| Lifeline | | 6,250 | 6,250 | 6,250 | 6,250 |
| Lifeways Psychotherapy and Counselling Network | | 31,752 | 31,513 | 41,972 | 39,610 |
| Lisburn Community Relations Network | | | | 1,200 | |
| Lisburn YMCA | | | | 1,200 | |
| Lurgan Welfare Support Group | | | | | 4,216 |
| MAGNI Conflict Exhibition | | 79,000 | | | |
| Make Your Mark | | 25,918 | 25,918 | 28,832 | 29,565 |
| Mourne Action for Survivors of Terrorism (MAST) | | 27,414 | 27,404 | 44,248 | 37,303 |
| New Life Counselling Service | | 20,440 | 23,965 | 30,227 | 82,111 |
| Newforge Brunch Club | | | 3,960 | 4,540 | 464 |
| Newry & Mourne Voluntary Welfare Group | | 4,000 | 1,910 | 6,231 | 6,531 |
| Nexus Institute | | 12,196 | 11,196 | 14,174 | 14,875 |
| Northern Health & Social Services Board (NHSSB) | | | 222,752 | 103,646 | |
| NHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel | 10,630 | 44,689 | 53,658 | 62,173 | 63,529 |
| NI & Stanford University Hope Project Group | | 500 | | | |
| NIACRO | | 4,000 | | | |
| NI Centre for Trauma & Transformation | | | | 4,660 | 500,000 |
| NI Memorial Fund | 260,000 | | | | |
| NI Music Therapy Trust | | 76,123 | 14,642 | 31,749 | 33,936 |
| NI Terrorist Victims Together (NITVT) | | 2,500 | | | 3,050 |
| North & West Belfast Trust | | 161,413 | 183,735 | | |
| North Ulster Victims Support Network | | | | 2,500 | 12,594 |
| NOVA Barnardo's NI | | 89,083 | 137,577 | 138,416 | 100,242 |
| Omagh Support & Self Help Group | | 13,367 | 55,066 | 56,322 | 59,955 |
| Pat Finucane Centre | | 9,882 | | 3,255 | |
| Positive Action for Innocent Victims of North Down (PAIN) | | 110 | | | |
| Restorative Action Following on the Troubles (RAFT) | | 15,077 | 17,583 | 27,465 | 6,575 |
| REACT | | | 5,399 | | |

| Name of Organisation | 2002-03 £ | 2003-04 £ | 2004-05 £ | 2005-06 £ | 2006-07 £ |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Regimental Association of the UDR Coleraine | | 31,847 | 32,626 | 31,837 | 32,051 |
| Regimental Association of the UDR Castlederg | | | | | 1,284 |
| Relatives for Justice | 5,625 | 97,404 | 98,723 | 92,959 | 107,833 |
| Restorative Justice | | | 1,000 | | |
| Royal Artillery Association | | 410 | 800 | 600 | 2,465 |
| RUC GC Association | | 2,500 | 2,125 | 3,950 | |
| RUC GC Association Armagh | | | | | 850 |
| RUC GC Association Banbridge | | | | | 4,765 |
| RUC GC Association Omagh | | | | | 19,582 |
| RUC George Cross Foundation | | | | | 453 |
| RUC Families | | | 5,000 | 5,000 | 5,000 |
| Rural Network | 2,000 | | | | |
| Rural Victim Survivor Network | | 4,930 | | 25,140 | |
| South/North Armagh Victims Encouraging Recognition (SAVER/NAVER) | 3,550 | 72,723 | 64,899 | 51,275 | 94,924 |
| Seeds of Hope | | 1,000 | | | |
| Shankill Stress & Trauma Group | | 67,564 | 65,905 | 73,367 | 82,577 |
| Sligo Presbyterian Church | | 7,500 | | | |
| Society of St Vincent de Paul | | 3,135 | | | |
| SOLAS Victim Support | | 1,780 | 6,725 | 8,056 | 2,066 |
| South Down Action for Healing Wounds (SDAHW) | | 56,734 | 49,818 | 58,485 | 67,097 |
| South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) | | 64,077 | 56,078 | 75,003 | 100,867 |
| SELB/WAVE/Queen's University | | 75,000 | 139,442 | 85,000 | |
| Southern Health & Social Services Board (SHSSB) | | 53,000 | 73,000 | | |
| SHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel | 38,939 | 58,945 | 64,929 | 58,412 | 80,555 |
| South Derry Ex Prisoners Association | | | | | 2,500 |
| South Tyrone Voluntary Welfare Group | | | | 5,350 | 6,535 |
| South West Community Victims Initiative | | 10,000 | | | |
| Sperrin Lakeland Trust | 2,047 | 6,741 | 58,517 | 55,845 | 66,229 |
| Springhill Community Group | | 30,788 | 30,788 | 39,073 | 52,648 |
| STEER Mental Health | | 956 | | | |
| Stewartstown & District Support Group | | | 925 | | 300 |
| Strategy Seminars & Victims Conference | | | | 16,700 | |
| Streetbeat | | 37,688 | 34,208 | 37,577 | 43,424 |
| Survivors of Trauma | | 53,472 | 44,940 | 43,667 | 57,102 |
| Tar Anall | | 1,585 | | 2,000 | |
| Tara Centre | | 46,604 | 47,069 | 70,461 | 64,881 |
| TEAR | | | 1,476 | 6,680 | 4,899 |
| The Cross Group | | 4,172 | 4,173 | 4,975 | 6,375 |

| Name of Organisation | 2002-03 £ | 2003-04 £ | 2004-05 £ | 2005-06 £ | 2006-07 £ |
|--|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| The Ely Centre | | 41,433 | 87,403 | 75,964 | 76,616 |
| The Koram Centre | | | 2,600 | | 21,711 |
| The Phoenix Group | | | | | 35,447 |
| The Wider Circle | | 33,647 | 30,998 | 47,815 | 53,601 |
| Threshold | | 49,582 | | | |
| Tinderbox Theatre Company | | 20,000 | 44,150 | 30,200 | |
| Tollymore Mountain Centre | | 7,075 | 7,711 | | |
| Top of the Rock | | | 2,420 | 3,265 | |
| Training for Women Network | | 4,900 | | | |
| Trauma Advisory Panel Residential | | 3,750 | | | 1,587 |
| Trauma Recovery Network | | | | 1,000 | 235 |
| Tullycarnet Victims Support Group | | | | | 5,400 |
| UDR Association Enniskillen | | | | 3,650 | 800 |
| UDR Association Fivemiletown | | | | 590 | 11,362 |
| United Services Club | | 22,975 | 22,976 | 25,038 | 27,705 |
| Ulster Special Constabulary Association | | | | 12,300 | 40,221 |
| Victims And Survivors Trust (VAST) | | 63,067 | 63,514 | 52,429 | 56,758 |
| Victims & Survivors Newsletter | | | | 710 | |
| Victims & Survivors (NI) Order 2006 | | | | | 2,820 |
| Victims Unit/Victims Liaison Unit Trauma Awareness Training | | | | 1,221 | |
| VOICE | | | | 4,298 | |
| WAVE Trauma Centre | 15,115 | 290,059 | 223,832 | 338,969 | 370,009 |
| West Tyrone Voice | | 66,294 | 59,775 | 69,286 | 66,081 |
| Western Enterprise, Social, Legal and Educational Victim's Trust | | 2,147 | | | |
| Western Education & Library Board | | 27,500 | 35,000 | 11,500 | |
| Western Health & Social Services Board (WHSSB) | | | | 81,659 | |
| WHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel | 49,735 | 69,603 | 70,736 | 57,421 | 126,465 |
| Widow's Mite | | | | | 4,840 |
| Youth Action | | | | | 65,208 |
| Yarn & Darn | | | 9,412 | 450 | 646 |
| Total | 468,322 | 3,411,454 | 3,830,845 | 3,703,668 | 4,812,427 |

In addition, the table below shows OFMDFM's contribution (25% of the total funding allocated) to the victims measure of the Peace II Programme. A year by year breakdown of these figures is not currently available.

| Name of Organisation | Amount |
|--|---------|
| Voices Women's Group | 4,264 |
| Relatives for Justice | 66,316 |
| Families Achieving Change Together (FACT) | 47,701 |
| South/North Armagh Victims Encouraging Recognition (SAVER/NAVER) | 58,302 |
| STEER Mental Health | 33,986 |
| West Tyrone Voice | 39,678 |
| WAVE Trauma Centre | 354,431 |
| Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR) | 44,493 |
| Institute for Counselling and Personal Development | 26,201 |
| Survivors of Trauma | 57,118 |
| Lisburn Prisoners Support Project | 33,356 |
| 123 House | 31,939 |
| Tar Isteach | 39,992 |
| Community Action for Locally Managed Stress (CALMS) | 39,857 |
| Shankill Stress & Trauma Group | 37,860 |
| Corpus Christi Services | 26,177 |
| Ballymurphy Women's Centre | 31,513 |
| Sub Committee for Victims | 36,447 |
| NOVA Barnardo's NI | 21,838 |
| Sub Committee for Victims | 25,000 |
| Columba Community | 27,486 |
| Springhill Community House | 31,649 |
| Trauma Recovery Network | 23,551 |
| Tar Anall | 24,450 |
| New Life Counselling Service | 33,872 |
| Springvale Training | 22,950 |
| CUNAMH | 47,203 |
| Disabled Police Officers Association | 24,893 |
| Ashton Centre | 29,578 |
| Royal National Institute for Deaf People | 22,310 |
| Tara Centre | 28,579 |
| Fermanagh College | 17,400 |
| Firinne | 25,438 |
| Victims and Survivors Trust (VAST) | 17,759 |

| Name of Organisation | Amount |
|---|------------------|
| The Koram Centre | 30,395 |
| Holy Trinity Centre | 13,062 |
| Dairy Farm Jobclub | 27,848 |
| Corpus Christi Services | 5,667 |
| The Ely Centre | 16,499 |
| Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health | 17,815 |
| Royal National Institute for Deaf People | 14,337 |
| Survivors of Trauma | 14,976 |
| Conflict Trauma Resource Centre | 15,423 |
| Prison Service Trust | 16,009 |
| Lifeways Psychotherapy & Counselling Centre | 15,608 |
| Mourne Action for Survivors of Terrorism (MAST) | 4,999 |
| The Wider Circle | 1,565 |
| Community Action for Locally Managed Stress (CALMS) | 4,721 |
| South Tyrone Empowerment Programme | 2,499 |
| Lifespring Health and Healing | 2,500 |
| Total | 1,637,510 |

Pay Disparity In All-Ireland Implementation Bodies

Mr W Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action he is taking to address the issue of pay disparity between staff from the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Civil Service in the Republic of Ireland, who are employed by some of the all-Ireland implementation bodies, such as Waterways Ireland and Foras na Gaeilge. (AQO 588/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Chief Executive Officers of the North/South Implementation Bodies and Tourism Ireland have raised concerns about disparities in pay, between their staff employed in Northern Ireland, whose pay is linked to the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and their staff employed in Ireland, whose pay is linked to the Irish Civil Service.

When the Bodies were established there was relative parity between the levels of civil service pay in Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, in recent years pay awards in the Irish Civil Service have been significantly higher than those in the Northern Ireland Civil Service resulting in pay disparities in the North/South Bodies.

In a joint paper submitted to the NSMC Secretariat, the Chief Executives have said that operational effectiveness has been diminished because of pay disparities

and specifically that the recruitment, retention and motivation of personnel were all affected. At the recent NSMC meeting in Institutional Format, it was agreed that officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Finance would advise their Ministers of the issues and consider the CEO Pay Paper together with additional information provided by the Bodies in the context of relevant national pay policies. Conclusions will be reported to a future NSMC meeting.

Executive Committee Accountability

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures the Executive is considering in order to increase the accountability of the Executive Committee, and individual Ministers, to the Assembly. (AQO 735/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: All Ministers are already accountable to the Assembly through a range of mechanisms. There are the scheduled question times for each Minister and the normal procedures for answering Written questions; Ministerial statements and their subsequent questions sessions; the statements presented to the House following each North South Ministerial Council and British Irish Council meeting; and of course each Minister's interaction with their Departmental Committee.

As co-chairs of the Executive, we ensure that all relevant Executive decisions are shared with the Assembly immediately after the Executive meeting in which they are taken.

In addition, we have given Junior Ministers responsibility for co-ordinating all Executive business in the Assembly and have asked the Assembly to consider allowing written Ministerial statements, a step which would facilitate the timely reporting of all Ministerial and Executive business.

We consider that collectively these processes provide a robust mechanism by which Ministers can be held to account. We do not believe it necessary to consider any further measures at this time.

Children and Young People

Mr Molloy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to promote children and young people's issues. (AQO 780/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Junior Ministers have been given special responsibility for the co-ordination of policy and the promotion of the rights and needs of children and young people.

They have had a series of engagements with the voluntary sector recently, including a meeting with a large group of non-governmental organisations at the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People to listen to what they considered to be priority issues for children and young people.

The Junior Ministers also recently launched the participation network, which will support statutory agencies and government to engage with children and young people in public decision making. This initiative was started, and has been partly funded by our department.

The Junior Ministers will also take the lead in reviewing and revising as necessary the 10-year strategy for children and young people. A revised action plan for the next 3 years will be developed to show how we plan to address specific issues.

In addition, they will bring forward the implementation of the play policy for 0-18 year olds.

We also propose to provide support for a number of model projects for children and young people.

Commissioner for Older People

Mr Spratt asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the progress made towards providing an older persons' commissioner. (AQO 779/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently reviewing the case for an Older People's Commissioner. This will be informed by work to be undertaken by an independent party which will focus, among other things, on potential roles and responsibilities for such an office.

The Central Procurement Directorate has recently invited tenders from organisations wishing to undertake the work.

It is anticipated that the contract will be awarded later this week. The work will include consultation with the Departmental Committee and age sector representative groups and is expected to be completed by the end of November. We will then consider the findings before making a decision.

Programme for Government

Mr Newton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what priority will be given to the economy, within the forthcoming Programme for Government. (AQO 757/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive launched its draft Programme for

Government for public consultation on 25 October. The Programme for Government is framed around five priorities which are focused on addressing the key challenges we face.

Growing a Dynamic and Innovative Economy is our top priority and this has been warmly welcomed by the business community here. Sustainable economic growth and prosperity are vital if we are to provide the opportunities and the means through which we can enhance quality of life, reduce poverty and disadvantage, increase health and well being and build stronger more sustainable and empowered communities. We recognise, however, that each of the priority areas is interconnected and we cannot grow the economy in isolation from determined efforts to transform our society and enhance our environment.

Public-Private Partnerships

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is its assessment of the success of Public Private Partnerships, under the terms of its economic policy remit. (AQO 746/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In taking forward the Investment Strategy, our priority must be the delivery of high quality, well maintained assets and facilities which can provide effective services for the public, support positive social change and enhance our environment. People using our services must be our priority and understandably they want the timely delivery of investment projects at the least overall cost to the taxpayer. Public-Private Partnerships offer one route to deliver these benefits and will only be considered when this is found to be the most appropriate solution, following a rigorous assessment of the costs and benefits.

A number of major projects are planned to be taken forward as Public-Private Partnerships under the Investment Strategy published for consultation on 25 October.

Review of Government Departments

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on its proposed review of the number of Government departments; to detail the timescale for the review; and to give its assessment of whether or not the number of departments should be significantly reduced.

(AQO 745/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: 'Building a Better Future', the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011, contains a commitment to review the overall number of government departments

by 2011. We are currently considering the appropriate mechanism for taking forward such a review and will inform the Assembly of our proposals in due course. At this stage, it would be inappropriate to speculate as to the outcome of the review.

Public Appointment Procedures

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what public appointment procedures, other than that for the Victims' Commissioner, were initiated prior to devolution, but completed post-devolution; what impact devolution has had on such appointments; and if none, why these public appointment procedures have been treated differently from the Victims' Commissioner appointment process. (AQO 756/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Eleven public appointment competitions were initiated prior to devolution but completed post-devolution. These competitions involved appointments to the following public bodies:

1. The Agricultural Wages Board;
2. The Livestock and Meat Commission;
3. The Arts Council;
4. The Architecture and Built Environment Ministerial Advisory Group;
5. Sport NI;
6. The Ambulance Service Health and Social Services Trust;
7. The Blood Transfusion Service Agency;
8. The Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee;
9. The Strategic Investment Board;
10. The Planning Appeals Commission; and
11. The Water Appeals Commission.

Four of these competitions were directly affected by devolution:

- In the case of appointments to the Arts Council and Sport NI, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure concluded that the pool of successful candidates was not sufficiently large enough from which to make a choice and the competitions were extended and re-advertised.
- In the case of the Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee, the proposed appointments were subject to the proposed introduction of legislation, the Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment No 2) Regulations (NI) 2007. However, the Assembly annulled these proposed regulations on 1 October 2007 and as a result the Minister of the Environment was unable to proceed with the appointment process.

- In the case of the Strategic Investment Board we decided not to make any appointments from this competition.

Polymaking

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether or not it has carried out an evaluation of the standard of polymaking within Northern Ireland Government departments, under its excellence in policy and legislation making remit. (AQO 778/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In August 2004, the Policy Innovation Unit in OFMDFM was commissioned to undertake an internal audit of polymaking and legislative capacity across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The audit sought to establish the degree to which departments were equipped with the particular skills necessary for good policy and legislation making. It also sought to establish the impact of training and improvement initiatives undertaken in these fields across the NICS.

The audit was finalised in November 2005 and work is ongoing, in line with its recommendations, to improve policy and legislation making capacity across departments.

Racial Equality Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will confirm that it will not adopt the former direct rule Minister's efficiency-saving proposal to scrap ethnic minority funding; and to outline how the department plans to meet its commitment in the Racial Equality Strategy to build capacity in the minority ethnic community. (AQO 752/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: While Ministers are committed to the delivery of the efficiency targets set out in the Draft Budget 07 document, Ministers have not come to final decisions regarding the package of efficiency measures to be pursued during the Budget period. The proposals put forward by Direct Rule Ministers are currently under review.

It has been widely acknowledged that existing funding has enabled minority ethnic organisations to build capacity and allowed members of the sector to become fully involved in public, economic, social and cultural life here. The exact details of any future funding to support the commitments in the Racial Equality Strategy are still being considered in light of the Budget process, and within the framework of the draft Programme for Government.

Civic Forum

Mr McGlone asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will provide an update on the timescale for reporting on the future of the Civic Forum; and what action it has taken to progress this issue. (AQO 754/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: At the Executive meeting on 18th October 2007, Ministers agreed the Terms of Reference and methodology for a comprehensive review of the structure, membership and role of the Civic Forum.

The review will be progressed quickly but it is not possible at this stage to provide a detailed timetable as we need to appoint an independent facilitator to advise the review team and we intend the review team to canvass views as widely as possible from key stakeholders.

When the review has been completed we will present our proposals to the Executive and to the Assembly.

Engagement with the UK Government

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the general agenda topics raised in its ongoing engagement with the United Kingdom Government. (AQO 727/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Engagement with Ministers of the United Kingdom Government normally takes place in the context of the inter-governmental machinery established for that purpose or on matters of interest or concern at a particular time. In this context, our Junior Ministers attend meetings of Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe) chaired by the Foreign Secretary and which considers European Union matters which impinge on devolved responsibilities. In July we hosted the summit meeting of the British Irish Council (BIC) at which discussion took place on the future development of the Council's work programme. We also met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 2 October for discussion on a range of issues principally relating to reserved and excepted matters of interest to the Executive. Ongoing engagement also takes place at official level in response to business need relating to matters in which OFMDFM and relevant Departments in Whitehall have a common interest.

Commissioner for Older People

Mr P J Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to make the appointment of the Commissioner for Older People a priority in the new financial year. (AQO 747/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently reviewing the case for an Older People's Commissioner. This will be informed by work to be undertaken by an independent party which will focus, among other things, on potential roles and responsibilities for such an office.

The Central Procurement Directorate have recently invited tenders from organisations wishing to undertake the work.

It is anticipated that the contract will be awarded later this week. The work will include consultation with the Departmental Committee and age sector representative groups and is expected to be completed by the end of November. We will then consider the findings before making a decision.

As outlined in "Building a Better Future" the Draft Budget 2008 – 2011, OFMDFM want to give older people a strong independent voice and is committed to ensuring an enhancement of rights for older people and to making a real difference to their day-to-day lives. The work of the review is being taken forward as a matter of urgency and a decision on the issue will be given priority in the coming weeks.

Executive and Assembly Co-operation

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it has taken to increase communication and co-operation between the Executive and the Assembly. (AQO 772/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are committed to building a strong and effective relationship between the Ministers and the Assembly at all levels. We believe that the quality of this relationship provides an important barometer of healthy and effective devolution.

To this end, we have sought to increase the level of communication and co-operation between the Executive and the Assembly by giving responsibility to our Junior Ministers to co-ordinate all Executive business within the Assembly.

In discharging this role, they now routinely attend the meetings of the Assembly Business Committee to assist in the timely and efficient scheduling of Executive Business. They have also been active in encouraging Ministers to make more statements to the Assembly and in seeking to improve the process for notification of Ministerial visits to MLA constituencies.

We remain open however to any other improvements which could be made and would welcome suggestions which any Members may wish to bring forward.

Programme for Government

Mr Clarke asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the next steps in bringing forward the Programme for Government. (AQO 788/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The draft Programme for Government 2008-11, draft Investment Strategy 2008-18 and draft Budget 2008-11 documents were launched for public consultation in the Assembly on the 25th of October 2007. The consultation period on all three documents will last until the 4th of January 2008.

During this time, officials from OFMDFM, supported by DFP and SIB officials, will hold a small number of public consultation events across Northern Ireland. In addition to these they will meet key stakeholder groups. The Assembly Committees will have an important role to play in considering the documents and we understand that the OFMDFM committee has tabled a 'take note' debate on the PfG and the Investment Strategy in the Assembly in mid-November. This will provide an opportunity for us to hear the views of all MLAs, including any major concerns that they may have, at an early stage.

Following the close of the consultation exercise, all the responses that we have received will be carefully considered and revisions made to the draft Programme for Government, draft Investment Strategy and draft Budget as necessary. We will also be reviewing and finalising the Public Service Agreements. The final documents will then need to be agreed by the Executive.

We plan to present the Programme for Government to the Assembly for agreement before the end of January 2008. We would intend to co-ordinate this event with the Investment Strategy and the Budget. Agreement by the end of January is necessary to allow Departments sufficient time to carry out detailed work on their financial allocations and to plan effectively for the new financial year.

Victims' Commissioner

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the extension given to the process of appointing a Victims' Commissioner and its subsequent delay, to outline what current plans are in place to progress the recommendations of the Interim Victims' Commissioner. (AQO 739/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are currently considering a draft strategy for victims and survivors which will set out the way forward for policy in this area over the coming years. The recommendations in Bertha McDougall's report will help both to inform the emerging policy and the work of the Commissioner when appointed. We hope to be in a position to discuss our detailed proposals with the Committee soon.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Tree Felling Licences

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to introduce tree felling licences in Northern Ireland, similar to those in place in the rest of the United Kingdom

(AQW 1374/08)

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 (NI) 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.

Flash Floods

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the criteria used for the recruitment of outside firms to deal with the aftermath of the flash floods on 12 June 2007. (AQW 1386/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Maintenance and clear up operations following the floods of 12 June 2007 were carried out by DARD Rivers Agency's own Direct Labour Organisation. No outside firms were employed.

For investigations during and post-flood, the Agency used its Framework Consultants who are procured in accordance with Government procurement procedures. These consultants were already engaged on flood investigation projects in Belfast and were supported by the Agency's own engineers.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the numbers of (i) farms

that submitted a Single Farm Payment application in 2007; (ii) inspections carried out at 31 October 2007; and (iii) inspections that will be carried out in relation to applications for the 2007 year. (AQW 1387/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) A total of 38,970 applications have been received in respect of the 2007 Single Farm Payment Scheme.

(ii) and (iii) The following tables provide details of the number of applicants selected for inspection in respect of their Single Farm Payment application in 2007 and the number of inspections completed at 31 October 2007.

2007 SINGLE FARM PAYMENT ELIGIBILITY INSPECTIONS

| Eligibility Inspection Authority. | Number of Applicants Selected for Eligibility Inspection in 2007 | Number of Eligibility Inspections Completed at 31 October 2007 |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| DARD (Service Delivery Group) | 1953 | 1470 |

2007 SINGLE FARM PAYMENT CROSS-COMPLIANCE INSPECTIONS

| Cross-Compliance Competent Control Authority | Number of Applicants Selected for Cross-Compliance Inspection in 2007 | Number of Cross-Compliance Inspections Completed at 31 October 2007 |
|--|---|---|
| DARD (Service Delivery Group) | 392 | GAEC Inspections - 317 Food and Feed Law Inspections - 267 |
| DARD (Veterinary Service) | 390 | 299 |
| Environment and Heritage Service | 408 | 252 |
| Health and Safety Executive | 390 | 383 |

- Note:**
- (i) Each of the 4 Cross-Compliance Competent Control Authorities selects and inspects 1% of applicants for their elements of Cross-Compliance.
 - (ii) GAEC inspections are carried out during eligibility inspection visits.
 - (iii) Environment and Heritage Service and Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland figures have been supplied by the relevant Departments.

All-Ireland Animal Health Veterinary Regime

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her department's policy

with regard to the establishment of an all-Ireland animal health veterinary regime. (AQW 1399/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I have already announced, the All-island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy is one of my key priorities. I believe that full co-operation on animal health and welfare issues on the island of Ireland has the potential to help reduce and prevent animal disease spread, to facilitate trade in livestock and to improve the sustainability of farming in the North.

Ireland is effectively a single epidemiological unit for disease control purposes. Both parts of the Island therefore have a common interest in preventing the introduction of disease or eradicating it where it occurs. While it is possible for the Veterinary Services in both jurisdictions to have different approaches to control of disease which reflect our respective structures and industries, we already work closely in a number of areas of veterinary health. These include co-operation on testing regimes for TB and Brucellosis, especially in border areas, and we already have broad alignment of border control policies in order to prevent the introduction of animal disease.

I had very productive discussions on the Strategy with my Ministerial colleague in Dublin, Mary Coughlan TD, at a recent North South Ministerial Council Agricultural Sector meeting. The Strategy that we noted sets out further areas where we can co-operate closely on veterinary matters and where we can seek closer alignment of policy.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1444/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The total bids in respect of Current expenditure (i.e. Resource) submitted to DFP by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review, together with Draft Budget allocations, are set out in the table below.

| | 08/09 £m | 09/10 £m | 10/11 £m |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Total Resource bids | 31.91 | 36.02 | 41.26 |
| Draft Budget allocations | 14.60 | 25.00 | 37.70 |

The total bids for capital expenditure (after deducting capital receipts) and the Draft Budget allocations (net of receipts) are set out in the following table.

| | 08/09 £m | 09/10 £m | 10/11 £m |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Capital bids | 134.86 | 72.82 | 69.13 |
| Capital allocations | 83.60 | 28.60 | -171.00 |

The Draft Budget Capital allocation in 2010/11 is based upon a receipt of £200m from the sale of land at Crossnacreevy.

Source of Products

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she will give to the introduction of legislation requiring restaurants and other eating establishments to display the source of the products being sold. (AQW 1527/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has responsibility for the labelling of beef, responsibility for the labelling of other food products rests with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) under the Food Labelling Regulations (NI) 1996. DARD inspectors, along with local authority Environmental Health Officers, ensure that all beef on sale, down to retail level but excluding the food service sector, is correctly labelled with origin and traceability information. I have met with representatives of the food service sector as well as other stakeholders and can advise that a voluntary pilot scheme is currently being developed involving origin labelling of beef in a number of local restaurants. This study will provide valuable information on consumer attitudes and preferences and will inform future policy decisions about origin labelling of beef in the food service sector.

Under the FSA's current legislation, food products do not have to be labelled with origin information, unless failure to do so would mislead the consumer. The FSA is currently consulting with industry on its revised country of origin labelling guidance which is aimed at helping manufacturers, producers, retailers and caterers to comply with the law and to encourage them to give more voluntary origin information in a helpful and informative way.

Local Produce

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she will take to ensure that her colleagues in the Executive source local produce when entering into public procurement arrangements in relation to catering. (AQW 1528/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: EU legislation means that the procurement of food by public sector bodies cannot be solely based on local supply. My Department is actively engaged with

the Central Procurement Directorate's work on the development of a Sustainable Procurement Action Plan for the NI public Sector. Staff from DARD can also assist suppliers to compete more successfully by providing technical support and advice.

My Department has contributed to the success of the RAFAEL project in the North West, which focused on encouraging local food producers to develop and successfully compete for new markets in the public sector, specifically in hospitals and schools. I have written to my Ministerial colleagues in the Departments of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and in Education to see how this type of initiative could be rolled out to other parts of the North, and officials have met to progress. I also intend to write to public procurement bodies in the North reminding them of the high animal welfare and productivity standards of locally produced food.

As a public authority, DARD has a statutory duty under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998 to carry out equality screening. We are fully committed to our meeting equality obligations and screen all of our emerging policies.

DARD will rigorously equality screen all its future public procurement policies relating to Departmental spend, and where significant equality impacts are identified, will also carry out a full Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA).

Rural Development Programme

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the progress of new delivery mechanisms for the Rural Development Programme. (AQO 802/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Delivery of the Rural Development Programme is still at an early stage but I am pleased with the progress that has been so far. Under Axis 1 the Short Rotation Coppice programme and the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances Schemes are open. Under Axis 2 the First Afforestation and Forest Environments measures have continued from the 2001 – 2006 programmes.

Much of the new programme requires that Economic appraisals and statutory regulations are introduced before the programme can put money on the ground. Work is well advanced on these. Statutory Rules are already in place for the new Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Product Measure and Improving Marketing Capability Measure and I expect that the Marketing Grant Scheme will be open before the end of the year.

Axis 3 is to be delivered through self defined cluster groups of three or more councils bringing significant

benefits for rural dwellers. It will decrease the number of Partnerships that the general public have to deal with, and provide advantages from improved Corporate Governance and financial management. It will also provide for economies of scale and efficiencies particularly in the use of administration funds. In addition councils have a responsibility for many other strategies which lever money into the countryside and I am keen that the Rural Development money can work to add value to these.

Presently my Department is engaged with representatives of councils to brief them on the tasks that now need to be completed both for the formation of Cluster groups and for the competitive selection of Local Action Groups. Indeed I can report today that my officials have received written confirmation of the formation of the first cluster. Another has been approved by councils and we awaited written confirmation. A further three are taking proposals to cluster to council. The remaining two are in consultation. Funding is also being made available to Joint Clusters for these express purposes and for development of Local Development Strategies. This work is continuing at pace and I expect that the Axis 3 measures will be open in Spring next year.

DARD Direct Service

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the DARD Direct Service pilot programme; and to detail how this will be rolled out. (AQO 801/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD Direct is my Department's new service delivery approach which is designed to provide a 'one stop shop' service to our customers. This 'one stop shop' model was piloted at Inishkeen House in Enniskillen and was formally evaluated by Deloitte MCS Ltd. This independent evaluation confirmed that DARD Direct is a more effective and efficient way for my Department to deliver its services to our customers and that DARD should actively consider rolling it out across the North.

I am fully committed to improving customer service and DARD Direct will provide a better service to our customers. I plan to carry out an EQIA on the proposal of a network of 10 DARD Direct offices across the North.

I will make decisions on where DARD Direct 'one stop shop' offices will be located following this consultation process. The roll out of DARD Direct will be phased and I expect it to be completed by 2011.

Balmoral Show

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to support the future location of the Balmoral Show at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society Show Grounds.

(AQO 725/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development:: The only plans currently in place are those for the NI Government Departments' exhibition at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society's 2008 Balmoral Show. My officials have initiated the planning process for this exhibition, which will involve several government departments and extend to some 1000 square meters.

Article 4 and Article 10 Inspections

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the number of article 4 and article 10 inspections that have been carried out on Leader groups; and to detail how this compares with other programme monitoring that falls under her remit.

(AQO 792/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is required by EU Regulation No 438/2001 to carry out Article 4 inspections on all funded projects, and Article 10 inspections on at least 5% of the programme expenditure. To date my department has carried out 589 Leader plus Article 4 inspections representing 52% of the total number required, to ensure compliance with the regulation. A total of 23 Article 10 inspections covering 3.2% of Leader plus programme expenditure have also been conducted.

In comparison with the other EU programmes for which I am responsible, 1294 Article 4 inspections have been completed which is 80% of the total required and 5.7% of all other Programme expenditure has been monitored for compliance with Article 10. This means that the proportion of checks completed for the Leader plus programme is currently less than the number completed for the other DARD EU programmes.

I can confirm that my Department conducts both the Article 4 and 10 inspections in accordance with the guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel and in the same format and frequency as those conducted by other Departments within the North and the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the purpose behind the

clustering of district council areas in groups of three, in order to administer Rural Development Programme funds; and to detail how this will benefit its development.

(AQO 774/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Delivery of the Rural Development Programme is still at an early stage but I am pleased with the progress that has been so far. Under Axis 1 the Short Rotation Coppice programme and the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances Schemes are open. Under Axis 2 the First Afforestation and Forest Environments measures have continued from the 2001 – 2006 programmes.

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Fish Stocks

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the publication of fish stock advice by the International Council for the

Exploration of the Sea, what action she is taking to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the December Council. (AQO 800/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Last month I met with my English, Scottish and Welsh counterparts in Peterhead to discuss our priorities and to ensure that these are taken up in Brussels in December. I also put our position to the Fisheries Commissioner when I recently met him with Johnathan Shaw and Richard Lohead, and I also met with industry representatives to hear their views and discuss our approach. I am meeting with the industry again in early December and in the meantime we are working hard with the English and Scottish administrations to develop the scientific and economic arguments that will support our case to the Commission.

Local Produce

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to progress Government procurement of local produce, in order to assist agricultural industries. (AQO 799/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: EU legislation means that the procurement of food by public sector bodies cannot be solely based on local supply. The challenge therefore is to work with suppliers to help them compete more successfully. In tandem my Department is actively engaged with the Central Procurement Directorate's work on the Development of a Sustainable Procurement Action Plan for the NI public Sector.

DARD staff continue to provide technical support and advice to individual farmers or processors, producer groups or co-operatives, large and small to help them engage in public sector contracts.

Staff from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise at Loughry Campus have supported the Central Procurement Directorate by providing advice on the specifications for public food contracts. In addition they have had an input to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, "Fit for Future" initiative, which aims to improve the nutritional quality of food in hospitals.

The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors that develop technical and business management skills. College staff can assist with product specification, product development and the adoption of new technology. In addition, the College benchmarking programmes can be used to monitor and identify opportunities for improved efficiency and competitiveness in production systems.

DARD staff have been closely involved with the Rafael (Renaissance of Atlantic Food Authenticity and Economic Links) project, funded by INTERREG which is aimed at encouraging local "authentic" food producers to develop new markets.

The main focus of the project, centred in the North West, is to encourage and support local food producers and processors to develop and successfully compete for business in the public sector, specifically in hospitals and schools.

I have written to my Ministerial colleagues in the Departments of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Education to see how this type of initiative could be rolled out in the future.

Bluetongue

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on her plans to combat bluetongue disease. (AQO 762/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are two main potential routes by which the disease could enter the North of Ireland: by an infected animal; or through an infected midge in a vehicle or wind blown from an affected area. Our veterinary risk assessment is that the main risk to the North at the moment is through the importation of infected animals.

Until 1 November we had banned the importation of live susceptible animals from affected areas in Northern Europe. Animals and their vehicles that travel across the restricted areas were sprayed with insecticide. We carried out post import testing of imported cattle and sheep from continental Europe. We also advised potential importers to request that animals are pre-import tested as an additional precaution.

Due to the Foot and Mouth Disease preventive measures that were reintroduced here on 12 September 2007, ports currently remain closed to the import of live animals from anywhere in Britain, including the bluetongue restricted areas in England.

On 26 October the Commission published a new EU Regulation to come into effect on 1 November 2007. The new Regulation prevents us banning imports from Bluetongue zones and I have therefore asked my staff to extend post import testing to live susceptible animals imported to the North from all parts of continental Europe. My Department will also be issuing revised advice to all importers.

In relation to the possibility of midge transmission, DARD is working with the Met Office to seek advice on the pattern of air movements that may carry midges here. The potential for spread will be lessened by the onset of winter as midges cannot survive in very cold

conditions. We have also started surveillance of the midge population in the North.

We are continuing to work closely with Defra and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin to monitor developments. We will continue to liaise very closely with DAFF in Dublin to co-ordinate our preventive actions to protect the whole island from Bluetongue. The Department has also been working in partnership with key stakeholders here on preparedness to deal with the threat of disease, and will continue to do so.

Farm Nutrients Management Scheme

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the uptake of the Farm Nutrients Management Scheme since funding was secured; and to give her assessment of whether or not the scheme will be completed on target, in December 2008. (AQO 798/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since June, the Department has made good progress in undertaking pre approval inspections with over 2,900 such visits completed. 2,200 approvals have been issued. Against that, there are indications in some instances that farmers are delaying decisions as long as possible and in others, that work on the ground has been slower over the summer than we would have liked. I have discussed progress with farmers' representatives and asked them to encourage farmers to provide relevant information as soon as possible so that approvals can be issued. I have also asked them to encourage their members, who have had approval, to proceed with work as quickly as possible. Completing work by December 2008 will be very challenging but to help the individual farmer I have agreed that the end date for submitting a claim, as indicated in approvals, will be extended to December 2008 for all.

Bovine Tuberculosis and Brucellosis

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on the current situation regarding bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis. (AQO 761/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The TB programme here is based on the detection of diseased or high risk animals, the compulsory removal of these animals from their herd of origin to slaughter, and the restriction of movements of cattle from infected herds until they are tested clear. Generally individual animals which test positive are removed rather than the whole herd.

Since 2002, there has been clear evidence of a significant decline in the incidence of TB. The herd incidence peaked in 2002 at 9.93% and has dropped to 5.23% at the end of September 2007. The herd incidence is currently at a similar rate here and in the South.

The brucellosis control programme is based on the detection of diseased or high risk animals. It involves compulsory removal of these animals for slaughter, removal of all in-contact animals, which includes group or whole herd depopulation, and immediate restriction of all movements from or to infected herds until they are depopulated or tested clear. Generally whole herds are depopulated when infected animals are detected.

Over the last few years, there has been clear evidence of significant decline in the incidence of brucellosis from its peak at the start of 2002 when the herd incidence reached 1.43%. Overall, the trend remained downwards until 2006-07 when specific localised disease clusters halted the decline. This recent rise peaked in October 2006 at 0.6% but has since levelled off. Most recent figures show that the annual herd incidence at the end of September 2007 is at 0.52%.

Retailers and Farm Producers

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of times she has met with large retailers to discuss their relationship with farm producers. (AQO 751/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have met with large retailers on 4 occasions recently to discuss their relationship with farm producers. In June I met with senior headquarters staff from Sainsbury and Tesco in London, and more recently with local senior staff from Tesco and ASDA in the North. In addition, I have had a telephone conversation with Justin King (CEO Sainsbury's) and an informal meeting with Sir Terry Leahy (CEO Tesco).

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to ensure that any changes introduced as a result of the European Commission's 2008 review of the Common Agricultural Policy will benefit agriculture in Northern Ireland. (AQO 773/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has taken a number of steps to ensure the best possible outcome for the local agricultural industry arising from the European Commission's review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) or CAP Health Check.

In order to inform our position, we have commissioned research on the possible impact on the local agricultural industry of the abolition of milk quotas and increased EU compulsory modulation, which are likely to form the key elements of the Heath Check proposals. The research was conducted by Queen's University Belfast and the Agri-Food Biosciences Institute in conjunction with the Food, Agricultural and Policy Research Institute, University of Missouri. A report of the findings from this research was published in February 2007.

In conjunction with the agriculture departments in England Scotland and Wales, we are also contributing to ongoing research on the impact at local, UK and EU levels of the abolition of milk quotas.

My officials have taken part in numerous meetings with their counterparts across the UK in order to influence the Commission's thinking before it publishes its preliminary proposals later this year. The Health Check was discussed at a meeting of UK Agriculture Ministers, which I attended on 19 June, and also at the recent meeting of the North South Ministerial Council held on 9 November.

The Health Check proposals are expected to be published on 20 November 2007 and my Department will be conducting a full public consultation with stakeholders in order to establish our position with respect to the upcoming EU negotiations on the issue.

Removal of Staff and Equipment from Livestock Markets

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on her decision to remove her departmental staff and equipment from livestock markets; and to detail the response she received from the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Livestock Auctioneers Association in relation to this issue. (AQO 769/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The proposal to remove Departmental staff from markets and meat plants has been discussed with the industry for over 3 years. This is absolutely necessary because:

- herd-keepers are legally responsible for recording movements into and out of holdings and intervention by DARD staff leads to confusion;
- DARD needs to make use of its limited staff resource to deal with other priorities. These include action to reduce the prevalence of cattle tuberculosis and brucellosis and continuing threats of exotic diseases such as Avian Influenza, Foot and Mouth Disease and, most recently, Bluetongue.

Shaun Irvine, Chairman of NI Livestock and Auctioneers Association (NILAA) wrote to me on 28 September about the proposal to withdraw DARD staff from markets. Mr Irvine feels that until electronic identification is made available at all markets and meatplants, DARD staff should not be withdrawn.

The UFU have indicated that they similarly would wish the introduction of this measure to be delayed.

However, my staff are working closely with the managers of individual markets so that new arrangements will work properly. The transition will be managed over several weeks in a phased manner and the Department has made arrangements to support industry at a local level. Part of this process will involve setting up a help desk in local Divisional Offices, ensuring that DARD staff are present in the market during the first few weeks to provide local advice and supporting the electronic notification and recording of animal movements by markets and meat plants.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Ulster-Scots Promotion

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what support has been given to the promotion of Ulster-Scots within the Library Service, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1384/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The Public Library Service in Northern Ireland has a wide selection of Ulster-Scots material, and liaises closely with the Ulster-Scots Agency on the type of material held. Items donated by the Ulster-Scots Agency are held in branch libraries together with its free newspaper 'The Ulster Scot'. During the last three years, the Library service has facilitated a number of Ulster-Scots events organised by both the Ulster-Scots Agency and local groups. These have included storytelling, talks, music sessions and family history research some of which have been recorded by the media.

Irish Language and Ulster-Scots Events

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of (i) Irish language; and (ii) Ulster-Scots, events that he has attended.

(AQW 1504/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have attended a total of 5 Ulster-Scots events as the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. To date I have

received 3 invitations to Irish language events but have been unable to attend due to diary commitments.

Single Libraries Authority

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will give a precise date for the formation of the single libraries authority.
(AQO 790/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A single library service for all Northern Ireland, delivered by the Library Authority, will become operational on 1 April 2009, subject to the passage of the legislation in the Assembly.

Elite Sports Strategy

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in relation to the Elite Sports Strategy, to detail the selection criteria for the projects to be funded; and the reasons why no boxing projects have been selected, given the high levels of participation and local success in winning medals at international level in this sport.
(AQO 744/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is currently managing the Elite Facilities Capital Programme on behalf of DCAL. The criteria used by Sport Northern Ireland were as follows:-

- Technical and operational requirements of the governing bodies of the appropriate sport.
- Equality of access and quality sports development.
- Impact on improved sporting performance.
- Impact on regeneration including: New TSN, Tackling Social Exclusion, health inequalities, education and skills, community safety and environmental improvements.
- Impact on improving the image of Northern Ireland internationally.
- Value for money.
- Operational viability and sustainability.
- Deliverability by 2010 and integration of government best practice guidance including: design quality, value and risk engineering, sustainable procurement, delivery to specified time, cost and whole life quality parameters.
- Operational management.

Sport Northern Ireland received two boxing applications for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme. Both applications were rejected as they did not meet the minimum criteria.

GAA Promotion of Social Capital

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, further to his attendance at the Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association's conference in Belfast, what is his assessment of the role of this organisation in the promotion of social capital.
(AQO 735/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The GAA have a significant role in the social and community life of many towns and villages in Northern Ireland. They have many members and volunteers and are one of the biggest sporting organisations in Northern Ireland.

Whilst the main focus of the GAA is as a sporting and cultural organisation and therefore in terms of policy this would primarily lie within my Department, the involvement and activity of the GAA in community, development, education and regeneration opens up other opportunities for positive engagement with other departments such as Department of Social Development who have local responsibility for the promotion of social capital.

Irish-Language Legislation

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will explain how his statement on the Irish-language legislation consultation process is consistent with Annex B of the St Andrews Agreement.
(AQO 781/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member will be aware that the commitment made in Annex B of the St Andrews Agreement was made by the British and Irish Governments, and not by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

By bringing this issue forward for discussion to the House and to the Culture, Arts and Leisure committee, I am seeking consensus on a way forward to meet the statutory obligation within the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 to adopt a strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language.

A legislative route to meet this duty is one option, and I have identified my findings on the cost implications to the house and to the CAL Committee. However, I feel that there are other more proportionate and cost effective methods that can be considered to meet the statutory duty, and I look forward to hearing the views of my fellow Members before bringing this issue to the Executive.

Strategy for Sport

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will give a commitment that his

department will fully consult the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish Football Association and the Irish Rugby Football Union, about a strategy for sport. (AQO 793/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland, has developed a draft Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2007-2017. I published this draft for 3-month public consultation on 9th October 2007. The public and all those interested in sport, including the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish Football Association and the Irish Rugby Football Union, will have an opportunity to comment on the document prior to the consultation closing date. I will consider carefully all comments received by the closing date - including any from the GAA, IFA and IRFU - before finalising the Strategy.

Safety in Sports Grounds

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail when the Safety in Sports Grounds oversight committee will be appointed; and when the terms of reference for the programme will be published. (AQO 737/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I hope appointments to the planned safety at sports grounds oversight body will be made in the new financial year, 2008/09.

The terms of reference for the body were published by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in its policy document on new legislation on safety at sports grounds in December 2004.

Maritime Heritage

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on the future of maritime heritage. (AQO 758/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Maritime Heritage is a broad area and any statement I can make on the future can only be in relation to those aspects for which my Department has policy responsibility. In the main these relate to the conservation, preservation and display of artefacts held by National Museums Northern Ireland. National Museums have an extensive and significant maritime collection relating to the Harland and Wolff shipyards, plus a number of vessels including the Result which is on display in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. These collections are either on display or will be displayed as part of wider maritime and industrial exhibitions in the future.

We are committed to making the treasures held by our museums more accessible to the public and in that

regard I have asked my Department, through National Museums Northern Ireland to give priority consideration to the development of a Maritime Museum.

Beyond that we have also accepted the role of assisting DCMS appoint a Northern Ireland representative to the National Historic Ships Advisory Committee. That process is in train.

Coaches in Schools

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he had with the Minister of Education, prior to her decision to fund Gaelic Athletic Association and football coaches in schools. (AQO 771/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I had no discussions with the Minister of Education prior to her decision to introduce a funding programme for Gaelic Athletic Association and football coaches in schools. I can however confirm that the Minister of Education wrote to me subsequently to inform me of her intention to bring forward this programme, seeking my support and indicating that she saw it as fundamentally a curricular matter. I have in response welcomed the Minister's general interest in enhancing the provision of sport in schools but also asked her to consider a number of issues in relation to this particular initiative.

National Lottery Funding

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is his assessment of the total loss of investment in sport and the arts, including matched and leverage funding, which resulted from the loss of National Lottery funding due to the 2012 London Olympics; and to detail what representations he has made to the National Lottery in relation to the shortfall. (AQO 730/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: £4.5m will be transferred to the Olympic Lottery Distribution Fund between 2009 and 2012 from the Lottery balance of the Arts Council for Northern Ireland. £4.19 m will be transferred from Sport Northern Ireland. Existing grant commitments up to 2009 will not be affected by the transfer and therefore there is no immediate loss of either matched or leverage funding. The Arts Council for Northern Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland have not assessed the potential loss of matched funding post 2009.

While continuing to support the Olympic games I fully recognise the potential for adverse effects in these sectors. I have together with the other devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales made representation to DCMS to ensure that the contribution from Lottery was

kept as low as possible. I have also sought assurances that should Olympic costs increase no further funds will be diverted from the National Lottery. DCMS has recently confirmed that an agreement has been reached with the Mayor of London under which DCMS should 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.

Belfast Festival at Queen's

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement on funding arrangements for the Belfast Festival at Queen's. (AQO 766/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: This year Belfast Festival at Queen's received £199,500 from the Arts Council, which disburses funding to arts organisations on behalf of DCAL.

Following representations from Queen's University, a one-off grant of £150,000 was made available by DCAL to enable the 2007 Festival to take place.

Discussions aimed at securing the future of the Festival involving DCAL, the Arts Council, Belfast City Council and Queen's are on-going. As part of this process, Queen's University is developing a 3 year business plan, intended to move the festival towards a more sustainable business model.

Legislative Plans

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his legislative plans for the next year. (AQO 767/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The implementation of the Libraries Bill to establish a new Library Authority for Northern Ireland is the only planned legislation for the next year.

The Assembly had its second reading on 19 June and it is being considered by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

EDUCATION

School-Related Events

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of invitations she has received to attend events at schools and related institutions in South Down; (ii) the number of these that were accepted; and (iii) what percentage of all functions she has attended were in South Down, since 8 May 2007. (AQW 872/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Since 8 May 2007, I have received a total of 210 invitations of which I have accepted 144. Out of this total number, 19 invitations were to attend events at schools and related institutions in South Down and I have accepted 16.

7.61% of all functions that I have attended were in South Down.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the capital expenditure costs for Irish medium schools over the past three years. (AQW 1319/08)

The Minister of Education: Capital expenditure on Irish-medium schools over the past three years is as follows:

| School | 2004/05 (£000s) | 2005/06 (£000s) | 2006/07 (£000s) |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, Belfast | 39 | 0 | 0 |
| Bunscoil An T'Sleibhe Dhuibh, Belfast | 948 | 38 | 34 |
| Colaiste Feirste, Belfast | 1,950 | 1,728 | 210 |
| Scoil Na Fuiseoige, Belfast | 5 | 72 | 8 |
| Gaelscoil Ui Neil, Coalisland | 7 | 9 | 23 |

| School Name | 2004/05 (£000s) | 2005/06 (£000s) | 2006/07 (£000s) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Gaelscoil Na bhFál, Belfast | 65 | 0 | 0 |
| Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain, Belfast | 0 | 11 | 0 |
| Bunscoil Cholmcille, Derry | 0 | 26 | 0 |
| Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain, Belfast | 0 | 13 | 89 |
| Total | 3,014 | 1,897 | 364 |

Primary 7 Pupils

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children enrolled in Primary 7, in each primary school in the Ards peninsula area. (AQW 1334/08)

The Minister of Education: The requested information is as follows. The enrolment figures listed refer to the 2006/07 school year, as figures for the 2007/08 school year are not yet available.

| School name | Year 7 Pupils |
|----------------------------|---------------|
| Ballyvester Primary School | 10 |
| Loughries Primary School | 8 |

| School name | Year 7 Pupils |
|--|---------------|
| Greyabbey Primary School | 15 |
| Carrickmannon Primary School | 8 |
| Newtownards Model Primary School | 58 |
| Kirkistown Primary School | 15 |
| Castle Gardens Primary School | 46 |
| Victoria Primary School, Ballyhalbert | 21 |
| Portavogie Primary School | 21 |
| Ballywalter Primary School | 17 |
| Comber Primary School | 53 |
| Victoria Primary School, Newtownards | 71 |
| Ballykeigle Primary School | 6 |
| Donaghadee Primary School | 54 |
| Millisle Primary School | 14 |
| Alexander Dickson Primary School | 32 |
| Londonderry Primary School | 45 |
| Carrowdore Primary School | 20 |
| West Winds Primary School | 23 |
| Andrews Memorial Primary School | 54 |
| Killinchy Primary School | 40 |
| Abbey Primary School | 85 |
| St Mary's Primary School, Comber | 1 |
| St Anne's Primary School, Donaghadee | 5 |
| St Finian's Primary School | 26 |
| St Patrick's Primary School, Kircubbin | 11 |
| St Mary's Primary School, Ballygowan | 1 |
| St Mary's Primary School, Kircubbin | 15 |
| St Mary's Primary School, Portaferry | 33 |
| Kircubbin Primary School | 19 |
| Portaferry Integrated Primary School | 11 |
| Regent House School Prep. Dept. | 23 |

Source: NI school census.

Note:

1. Figures listed refer to primary schools in the Ards District Council area.

Towerview Primary School, Bangor

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education if she will provide a report on the shortfall in accommodation at

the new-build campus for Towerview Primary School in Bangor. (AQW 1337/08)

The Minister of Education: The new-build Towerview Primary School will have 11 classbases, plus a separate dining hall, nursery and special units. An 11 classbase school was agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board and is expected to cater for up to 320 pupils, which is considered adequate given Towerview's current enrolment of 318 and its projected long-term enrolment.

New College

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment of pupil numbers in the Ballinahinch, Downpatrick, Crossgar and Saintfield area; and to make a statement on her plans to build a new college in the area. (AQW 1352/08)

The Minister of Education: A Development Proposal to allow for the establishment of a new grant-maintained integrated college in the Crossgar area, to be known as Blackwater College, was published on 2 October 2007. Publication of the proposal initiated a statutory 2-month period during which comments including objections may be made to the Department of Education: that period will end on 3 December 2007. The Department will consider all factors relevant to this proposal including an assessment of pupil numbers in the area before a decision is made.

Educational Psychologists

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of places that will be available for the training of educational psychologists in each of the next three academic years. (AQW 1355/08)

The Minister of Education: The number of places that will be available for the training of educational psychologists in each of the next three academic years is as follows:

| | |
|---------|----|
| 2008/09 | 24 |
| 2009/10 | 24 |
| 2010/11 | 24 |

Obesity

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to detail what strategies she has in place to educate children about the dangers associated with obesity. (AQW 1376/08)

The Minister of Education: I recognise the importance of educating our young people about the importance and benefits of a healthy lifestyle. The revised curriculum therefore includes a new Personal Development strand, where young people will learn about the importance of a healthy diet and exercise, and Physical Education.

My department is also committed to developing a joint policy with DHSSPS to deliver the objective of all schools becoming Healthy Schools by 2015, as recommended in the Fit Futures report. It is hoped that work on this policy will begin in 2008, with the intention of launching a finalised Healthy School Policy in 2009.

Wi-Fi Technology

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the statement of the chairperson of the Health Protection Agency, that a wi-fi unit in a school will expose pupils to the same level of microwave radiation as three mobile phone masts placed on top of the building. (AQW 1377/08)

The Minister of Education: The Health Protection Agency (HPA) has responsibility for providing advice on protecting people from radiation hazards, including exposure to electromagnetic fields. It continues to assure us that there is no reason why schools should not use WiFi systems. This is consistent with advice issued by other bodies such as the World Health Organisation and an Expert Group established and funded by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources in the south of Ireland.

The HPA has recently announced, however, that while there is no scientific evidence to date that WiFi adversely affects the health of the general population, it will carry out a systematic programme of research which will include measurements of exposures from WiFi. It also states that it has good scientific reasons to expect the results of this research to be reassuring.

The health and well-being of children and young people in our schools is always paramount, and my Department will keep the situation under constant review.

Children's Health

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to improve children's health and fitness levels. (AQW 1379/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has been working to improve children's health and fitness levels through programmes to encourage healthy eating and physical activity and educating young people about physical and emotional health and

well-being through the personal development strand of the revised curriculum.

To develop the physical literacy skills of the youngest pupils, I launched my Curriculum Sports Programme on 12 November, whereby coaches from the GAA and IFA will work with primary school children and their teachers to encourage greater participation and enjoyment of sports and raise fitness levels in the long-term. In addition, initiatives such as New Nutritional Standards for school meals and Extended Schools are directly aimed at improving children's health, fitness levels and wellbeing. Furthermore, Home Economics is now a statutory requirement until age 14 for all children.

Special Unit Provision

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which she will announce her decision on the future of Special Unit provision in Coleraine. (AQW 1428/08)

The Minister of Education: Officials are currently considering Development Proposals to establish Key Stage One and Two Learning Support Centres at three primary schools in Coleraine, namely Ballysally, D H Christie Memorial and Harpur's Hill. I understand that the school and parents are anxious to know the outcome. I hope, therefore, to reach a decision shortly.

Irish Language Teachers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers on the substitute teachers' roll who are qualified dedicated Irish language teachers. (AQW 1462/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not hold this information however we contacted the Northern Ireland Register for Substitute Teachers (NISTR) who have advised that number of substitute teachers in the NISTR 'live' pool who have indicated an ability to communicate fluently in Irish and to teach the curriculum through the medium of Irish is 152.

Bus Passes

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1242/08, to detail the number of pupils from Crumlin and Glenavy who travel to each school listed in her response, using a bus pass issued by Translink. (AQW 1470/08)

The Minister of Education: The North-Eastern and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards have advised that the following number of pupils residing in the Crumlin/Glenavy area, and who are in receipt of Translink bus passes, attend these individual schools:

| | | | |
|--|-----|--|-----|
| Ballinderry Primary School | 1 | Ballymacrick Primary School | 16 |
| Crumlin Primary School | 138 | St Joseph's Primary School | 65 |
| Abbey Grammar School | 1 | Antrim Grammar School | 120 |
| Aquinas Grammar School | 29 | Ballyclare High School | 6 |
| Ballyclare Secondary School | 2 | Belfast Royal Academy | 20 |
| Cambridge House Grammar School | 3 | Christian Brothers' Secondary School | 4 |
| Coláiste Feirste | 8 | Crumlin Integrated College | 113 |
| De La Salle High School | 2 | Dominican College, Fortwilliam | 33 |
| Edmund Rice College | 3 | Fort Hill Integrated College | 9 |
| Friends' School, Lisburn | 19 | Hazelwood College | 3 |
| Hunterhouse College | 15 | La Salle Boys' School | 26 |
| Lagan College | 2 | Laurelhill Community College | 4 |
| Little Flower Girls' Secondary School | 1 | Lurgan Junior High School | 1 |
| Malone Integrated College | 19 | Methodist College | 12 |
| Parkhall High School | 27 | Rathmore Grammar School | 168 |
| Slemish College | 3 | St Benedict's College, Randalstown | 2 |
| St Dominic's High School | 92 | St Eoghan's Primary School | 1 |
| St Francis De Sales Special School | 4 | St Gemma's High School | 2 |
| St Genevieve's High School | 17 | St Louis' Grammar School, Ballymena | 11 |
| St Louise's Comprehensive College | 90 | St Malachy's College | 68 |
| St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School | 75 | St Mary's High School, Lurgan | 2 |
| St Michael's Grammar School | 3 | St Patrick's College, Bearnageeha | 1 |
| St Patrick's High School, Lisburn | 60 | St Paul's Junior High School | 1 |
| St Rose's High School | 10 | The Royal Belfast Academical Institution | 7 |
| Victoria College | 7 | Wallace High School, Lisburn | 30 |

NB The total number of pupils listed in this response (1,356) differs slightly from the figure provided in the response to AQW 521/08 as the figures in the previous answer included pupils attending FE Colleges.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 621/08, to detail the amount of her department's expenditure on hospitality and entertainment that was spent on alcohol, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1478/08)

The Minister of Education: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained/ compiled at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 621/08, to detail (i) the number of functions funded through her department's hospitality and entertainment budget; and (ii) the

expenditure associated with each of these functions, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1480/08)

The Minister of Education: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained/ compiled at disproportionate cost.

Funding

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to detail all funding her department has awarded to organisations working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 1513/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has made the following contributions to organisations working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

(LGBT) community:

| | | |
|---------|---------|--|
| 2003/04 | £13,000 | Executive Programme Funds (EPF) to YouthNet |
| 2004/05 | £60,000 | EPF to YouthNet |
| 2005/06 | £74,000 | EPF to YouthNet |
| 2006/07 | £24,920 | Grant to Gay & Lesbian Youth NI (GLYNI) from the Youth Council NI (YCNI) |
| | £60,000 | YouthNet via YCNI to develop outreach in relation to this work |
| 2007/08 | £19,814 | Grant to GLYNI from YCNI |
| | £82,000 | YouthNet to implement the LGBT strategy and for outreach workers |

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING**New Deal Programme**

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of benefit recipients who have participated in the New Deal programme, in each constituency, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 1383/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The number of benefit recipients who have participated in the New Deal programme in each constituency for the last five years are detailed in the following tables. The figures are presented by financial year.

TABLE 1 : STARTS (1) ON NEW DEAL FOR 18 TO 24 YEAR OLDS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | Total |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Belfast East | 346 | 407 | 292 | 216 | 255 | 1516 |
| Belfast North | 741 | 665 | 526 | 550 | 555 | 3037 |
| Belfast South | 395 | 406 | 289 | 326 | 253 | 1669 |
| Belfast West | 1043 | 894 | 799 | 869 | 856 | 4461 |
| East Antrim | 330 | 291 | 273 | 241 | 240 | 1375 |
| East Londonderry | 438 | 468 | 451 | 436 | 402 | 2195 |
| Fermanagh & South Tyrone | 337 | 350 | 257 | 212 | 149 | 1305 |
| Foyle | 1156 | 1063 | 973 | 953 | 957 | 5102 |
| Lagan Valley | 204 | 144 | 124 | 171 | 144 | 787 |
| Mid Ulster | 271 | 215 | 197 | 195 | 248 | 1126 |
| Newry and Armagh | 417 | 388 | 353 | 337 | 246 | 1741 |
| North Antrim | 322 | 344 | 301 | 368 | 342 | 1677 |
| North Down | 224 | 248 | 216 | 209 | 231 | 1128 |
| South Antrim | 288 | 284 | 190 | 202 | 171 | 1135 |
| South Down | 414 | 392 | 313 | 312 | 255 | 1686 |
| Strangford | 247 | 289 | 259 | 258 | 269 | 1322 |
| Upper Bann | 368 | 356 | 214 | 248 | 216 | 1402 |
| West Tyrone | 552 | 455 | 505 | 541 | 426 | 2479 |
| Missing Postcode (2) | 219 | 214 | 169 | 153 | 150 | 905 |
| Total | 8312 | 7873 | 6701 | 6797 | 6365 | 36048 |

(1) Includes those who have received an initial invitation but have not yet attended their first interview.

(2) Individuals were attributed to Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode.

Not all individuals had a correct or complete postcode.

TABLE 2 : STARTS (1) ON NEW DEAL 25+ BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | Total |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Belfast East | 254 | 360 | 297 | 185 | 192 | 1288 |
| Belfast North | 737 | 519 | 472 | 438 | 473 | 2639 |
| Belfast South | 338 | 248 | 269 | 213 | 209 | 1277 |
| Belfast West | 1280 | 695 | 643 | 802 | 585 | 4005 |
| East Antrim | 224 | 268 | 258 | 208 | 208 | 1166 |
| East Londonderry | 414 | 447 | 371 | 358 | 368 | 1958 |
| Fermanagh & South Tyrone | 608 | 443 | 517 | 360 | 188 | 2116 |
| Foyle | 1062 | 610 | 829 | 674 | 669 | 3844 |
| Lagan Valley | 216 | 108 | 124 | 154 | 136 | 738 |
| Mid Ulster | 224 | 245 | 179 | 215 | 201 | 1064 |
| Newry and Armagh | 535 | 418 | 457 | 374 | 355 | 2139 |
| North Antrim | 359 | 272 | 282 | 274 | 337 | 1524 |
| North Down | 274 | 231 | 207 | 201 | 162 | 1075 |
| South Antrim | 242 | 192 | 201 | 168 | 159 | 962 |
| South Down | 374 | 359 | 334 | 275 | 267 | 1609 |
| Strangford | 316 | 227 | 251 | 197 | 213 | 1204 |
| Upper Bann | 351 | 276 | 230 | 204 | 240 | 1301 |
| West Tyrone | 739 | 496 | 654 | 485 | 466 | 2840 |
| Missing Postcode (2) | 158 | 112 | 114 | 105 | 112 | 601 |
| Total | 8705 | 6526 | 6689 | 5890 | 5540 | 33350 |

(1) Includes those who have received an initial invitation but have not yet attended their first interview.

(2) Individuals were attributed to Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode.

Not all individuals had a correct or complete postcode.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to co-ordinate the work of his department, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Social Development to ensure that Seagate employees are able to access the full range of Government services. (AQW 1418/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A senior official has been appointed to co-ordinate this work to ensure that Seagate employees are able to access the full range of Government services. The Department has well-established procedures in place to assist those who are facing redundancy. This includes engaging other organisations including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Social Development.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Departmental Responses to Requests for Information

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the longest period of time his department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1331/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): In answering this question it has been assumed that the information sought refers to correspondence received in the Minister's office. On this basis the information requested is set out on the following page:

- (i) MP: 25 working days;
- (ii) MLA: 28 working days;
- (iii) Councillor: 10 working days;
- (iv) Member of the Public: 15 working days.

The time taken to answer individual correspondence cases will vary depending on the extent and complexity of the issues raised and the need to consult with relevant third parties. When it is apparent that further time is needed to provide a comprehensive reply, interim replies are routinely issued.

First Derry/Londonderry and Claremont Presbyterian Church

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what progress is being made on the refurbishment and restoration of the First Derry/Londonderry and Claremont Presbyterian Church, in the context of its tourist potential within the city. (AQW 1353/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is fully committed to the restoration and refurbishment of the First Derry/Londonderry and Claremont Presbyterian Church as an integral element of the Walled City Signature project.

The project has been economically appraised and NITB is awaiting the project promoter's architects to provide up-dated drawings, specifications and costs so that the financing package for the project can be agreed between the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) and NITB, and the necessary statutory approvals sought prior to the issue of NITB's letter of offer.

Ballycastle to Campbeltown Ferry Service

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the progress made towards reinstating the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service. (AQW 1490/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Scottish Government, which has lead responsibility for the Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry service, has produced a paper setting out the relevant issues including possible procurement processes and timetables. I am considering these issues in consultation with my Scottish counterpart.

Invest NI

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total number of visits

to Northern Ireland by possible inward investors, hosted by Invest NI in 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 1525/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The figures below outline the number of visits that have been organised by Invest NI for potential inward investors to Northern Ireland in 2005/06 and 2006/07.

| | |
|---------|-----|
| 2005/06 | 106 |
| 2006/07 | 124 |

Invest NI

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total number of visits by possible inward investors to (i) Fermanagh District Council area; (ii) Dungannon District Council area; (iii) Omagh District Council area; (d) Strabane District Council area; and (e) Cookstown District Council area, that were hosted by Invest NI in 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 1526/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The figures below outline the number of visits that have been organised by Invest NI for inward investors for the following District Council areas in 2005/06 and 2006/07.

| | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|
| Fermanagh District Council | 1 | 0 |
| Dungannon District Council | 0 | 0 |
| Omagh District Council | 1 | 5 |
| Strabane District Council | 0 | 0 |
| Cookstown District Council | 0 | 4 |

ENVIRONMENT

Illegal Waste Dumping

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if she has had contact with (a) the Minister with environmental responsibilities in the Republic of Ireland; and/or (b) the European Commission, regarding the estimated 250,000 tonnes of waste from the Republic of Ireland being illegally dumped in Northern Ireland, and if she will advise on what actions have resulted. (AQO 88/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I met with the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Mr John Gormley, at the Environment sector North South Ministerial Council meeting held on 26 October. At that meeting we

jointly endorsed a Road Map document which sets out a mechanism for tackling illegal cross-border waste movements.

I have not had any direct contact with the European Commission on the issue but my officials have met with the Commission, most recently on 18 September. My Department is co-operating with the relevant authorities in Republic of Ireland in respect of joint enforcement activities and has written to the competent authority in Republic of Ireland formally requesting removal of waste from two sites in Northern Ireland.

Planning Applications

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 325/08, in which she indicates that 23 of the Article 31 planning applications in the system when she took up office were submitted before the planning application for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway, if she will explain the reasons for her statement during the adjournment debate on the issue on 11 September 2007, in regard to her amazement and subsequent decision to look immediately at the Giant's Causeway application (page 294 of the Official Report). (AQW 1080/08)

The Minister of the Environment: When I came to office in May 2007 I was made aware of a number of Article 31 applications that were in the planning system for a long time and I asked for measures to be taken to reduce this number significantly. The Giant's Causeway application was one of many. Planning Service was in a position to complete a report on the Giant's Causeway application, among others, for my consideration at this time. In June I received reports on the Causeway Visitors Centre, originally submitted in 2002, and an application for a marina at Larne, submitted in 1999. At the beginning of July I received the report on a proposed extension of Glenarm Quarry which was in the system since 2005.

The measures that will reduce the number of Article 31 applications already in the system, as well as shorten the processing of future applications, include 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.

However, I would like 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 is accompanied by all of the information that is necessary to determine it.

While I have asked for measures to reduce the time taken to process Article 31 applications, it is only when the Planning Service is in a position to produce a report on an application that it can be put before me for my consideration. The length of time the application is in the system is not the determining factor and there are other key factors which contribute to processing timescales as I have explained in my previous written answer to you. (AQW 325/08).

In September, my Department wrote to all those whose Article 31 applications were received before 2000 and for which Planning Service was awaiting further information. They were given 28 days to respond. Where a satisfactory response was not received, Planning Service is now proceeding to determine the applications on the basis of the information available.

The Planning Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment if she will make a statement on the new unit being created in the Planning Service, that will focus specifically on planning applications which are of social or economic significance to Northern Ireland, including any extra staff and resources that will be allocated to this area. (AQW 1264/08)

The Minister of the Environment: 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 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 the experience with the Coca Cola, IKEA and Titanic Quarter planning applications has demonstrated. However, I would like 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 is accompanied by all of the information that is necessary to determine it. A further outcome 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 – including, potentially, applications which offer significant environmental or

community benefit. This Division is based at HQ and works directly to the Chief Executive in recognition of the importance of its work. The staff in the division was recently augmented by an additional Principal Planner and this has allowed the creation of two teams. Work is currently ongoing to develop these into multi-disciplinary teams by the addition of professionals from other disciplines and when these are in place, Planning Service should be equipped to deliver the targets as set out in the Programme for Government provided submissions are of a good quality as I have already explained.

Fly Tipping: Number of Incidences

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of incidences of fly tipping that were reported in each district council area, for each of the last five years. (AQW 1344/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials are working with District Councils (DCs) to encourage the use of a new fly-tipping database (“Flycapture”) which would generate reliable statistics on fly-tipping across Northern Ireland and inform policy decisions for tackling the problem.

However the statistics recorded on the Waste Dataflow system (which contains all municipal waste data returns from DCs) indicate that 2910 incidences of fly-tipping were recorded for 2005 and 2530 such incidences for 2006. Prior to 2005, the system simply recorded total tonnage rather than the number of incidents.

Annex 1 contains a breakdown by DC area.

ANNEX 1: NUMBER OF INCIDENCES OF FLY-TIPPING BY DISTRICT COUNCIL

| | 2005 | 2006 |
|---------------|------|------|
| Antrim | 28 | 96 |
| Ards | 148 | 48 |
| Armagh | 127 | 138 |
| Ballymena | 97 | 114 |
| Ballymoney | 49 | 28 |
| Banbridge | | |
| Belfast | 1072 | 452 |
| Carrickfergus | | |
| Castlereagh | | |
| Coleraine | 96 | 98 |
| Cookstown | 16 | 13 |
| Craigavon | 115 | 86 |
| Derry | 372 | 377 |

| | 2005 | 2006 |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Down | 46 | 10 |
| Dungannon & South Tyrone | | |
| Fermanagh | 16 | 50 |
| Larne | 81 | 65 |
| Limavady | | 8 |
| Lisburn | 295 | 373 |
| Magherafelt | 34 | 44 |
| Moyle | 31 | 38 |
| Newry & Mourne | | |
| Newtownabbey | | 202 |
| North Down | 35 | 91 |
| Omagh | 55 | 43 |
| Strabane | 197 | 156 |
| Total | 2910 | 2530 |

Fly Tipping: Costs

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total cost of cleaning up following incidences of fly tipping, in each district council area, for each of the last five years. (AQW 1346/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment & Heritage Service does not hold this information.

Fly Tipping: Prosecutions

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of successful prosecutions for fly tipping, broken down by district council area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1347/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Environment & Heritage Service does not hold this information.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Tree Preservation Orders currently in place in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1369/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that, as of 9 November 2007, there are 690 Tree Preservation Orders currently in place in Northern Ireland.

Derryinver Moss

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to designate Derryinver Moss, on the south shores of Lough Neagh, as an Area of Special Scientific Interest. (AQW 1388/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to designate Derryinver Bog as an Area of Special Scientific Interest. When judged against the ASSI selection criteria, Derryinver Bog does not qualify as an ASSI because of the extensive turf-cutting which has taken place on the bog. The site does, however, have some local nature conservation interest which has been recognised by Craigavon Borough Council in its Nature Conservation Strategy.

Patio Heater

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what quantity of carbon dioxide is produced by a standard 12.5kw propane patio heater during the course of a year. (AQW 1401/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment does not hold figures for carbon dioxide (CO₂) produced by a standard 12.5 kW propane heater during the course of a year. However the government funded Energy Saving Trust states that:

“a patio heater with output 12.5 kW will burn for approximately 13 hours on ‘high’ setting, before it uses its propane supply completely”.

This will produce 34.8 kg CO₂, the equivalent of 2.7 kg CO₂ per hour of operation.

These figures apply to a particular patio heater which has been reviewed and may not be applicable to all patio heaters.

Patio Heaters

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what action she intends to take in relation to the proliferation of patio heaters, following the introduction of the smoking ban. (AQW 1402/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Minister has no powers in relation to the proliferation of patio heaters.

Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if she will make a statement on the progress of the review of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. (AQW 1405/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A policy consultation document on proposals for updating and amending the Wildlife Order has been prepared. I will shortly be seeking the formal agreement of the Executive Committee to publish the document, as it contains cross cutting issues. Subject to this agreement, I would anticipate that the document will be published in early January for full public consultation.

Planning Applications

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications for single dwellings in the countryside, received since 16 March 2006, that were subsequently approved, in the categories (i) replacement dwelling; (ii) infill site; (iii) farm worker's dwelling; (iv) farm retirement dwelling; (v) substitution of a previous planning permission; and (vi) alternative proposals for a previously approved site.

(AQW 1406/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below details a breakdown of the planning applications for single rural dwellings received after 16 March 2006 and approved up to 5 September 2007 under draft PPS 14.

| Dwelling Type | Number Approved |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| (i) Replacement | 404 |
| (ii) Infill Site | 5 |
| (iii) Farm Worker's dwelling | 11 |
| (iv) Retirement dwelling | 39 |
| (v) Substitution | 50 |
| (vi) Alternative proposals | 194 |
| Total | 703 |

A further 500 approvals include full permissions (as opposed to reserved matters) approved on foot of an outline approval and new dwellings where other material factors were considered to outweigh draft PPS 14.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 842/08, to explain why her response made no reference to Mervyn Storey MLA, who signed a letter which is contained within the files for the private application for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 1412/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As I have stated before, no representations were received by Planning Service in respect of the Seaport Investments application. The only letter from a MLA on the

planning file is a copy of a letter signed by Mr Ian Paisley Jr. and Cllr Mervyn Storey MLA to the Secretary of State on 20 January 2005 listing matters of importance to the constituents in North Antrim. Unfortunately because of an oversight by my officials, I was not informed at the time of my answer to you in respect of AQW 842/08 that Mervyn Storey MLA had also signed the letter. I apologise on behalf of my officials for any misunderstanding.

The letter was copied to the file for information purposes only because it made a reference to, among several other issues, the tourism attraction of the Giant's Causeway not being fully exploited.

While the letter refers to the competition for the new Causeway Centre it does not specifically refer to the Seaport Investments application.

Planning Service did not treat this letter as a representation. The letter has been available to view through the open file system.

Planning Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to order a review into her department's handling of planning application E/2001/0113/F, in the light of critical comments from the Planning Appeals Commission in its August 2007 report on case 2006/A0339. (AQW 1416/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The original planning permission was granted on 19th May 2003 and development has been carried out. In these circumstances, there is no provision for me to review the decision.

Light Pollution

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to deal with light pollution, particularly in the Armagh city area, where it is affecting the work of the Armagh Observatory. (AQW 1468/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Light pollution is one of a number of issues presently under consideration by my Department as part of our work to bring forward stronger and more effective legislation to improve local environmental quality. One option to help tackle the light pollution problem is to extend statutory nuisance laws to include artificial light. This would allow district councils and members of the public to take action for statutory nuisance from artificial light where appropriate. It is our intention to consult on specific proposals in due course.

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the longest period of time her department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007.

(AQW 1485/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Since March 2007 the longest period of time my Department took to provide a full response to a letter from (i) a Member of Parliament was 26 working days; (ii) a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, 40 working days; (iii) a Councillor, 27 working days; and (iv) a member of the public, 65 working days.

Planning Applications

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will carry out an investigation into the planning application for 145-153 Kingsway, Dunmurry; and what is her assessment of the reasons for the delay in responding to the requests for a site meeting in relation to this issue. (AQW 1501/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As the decision to approve the planning application was issued in July 2007, following careful consideration of all material factors and consultation, I shall not be undertaking an investigation.

I understand you requested a site meeting via email on 30 August and on 6 September were offered an office meeting as the decision had issued. You subsequently wrote to the Divisional Planning Manager on 2 October outlining the reasons for a site meeting and this has now been offered with senior planning officials from the Downpatrick Divisional Office.

Seaport Investments Limited

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the communications that have taken place between Seaport Investments Limited and (i) the Planning Service; and (ii) other parts of her department, between 1 September 2007 and 6 November 2007.

(AQW 1537/08)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Communications with Planning Service over this period are listed as follows:

22nd October 2007 – E-mail from Seymour Sweeney, on behalf of Seaport Investments Ltd, to Planning Service regarding minute of meeting

held on 28th September 2007 between Mr Sweeney and Planning Service officials;

29th October 2007 - Letter from Seymour Sweeney, on behalf of Seaport Investments Ltd, to Planning Service regarding minutes of meeting held on 28th September 2007 between Mr Sweeney and Planning Service officials; and

1st November 2007 - Letter from Seymour Sweeney, on behalf of Seaport Investments Ltd, to Planning Service regarding a meeting scheduled for 5th November between Planning Service and Moyle District Council.

- (ii) Communication with other parts of my Department.

During this period, the Environment & Heritage Service also issued a discharge consent on 14 September and 2 annual consent compliance letters on 24 September. Mr Sweeney, on behalf of Seaport Investments Ltd, wrote a letter on 5 November about sampling/compliance monitoring issues.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail whether or not a planning application for a new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway can be approved, if the present visitors' centre remains in situ. (AQW 1538/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Currently my Department has only one planning application for a visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway. Part of the assessment of this application includes consideration of the need for the facility and its relationship with the existing visitor facilities. This is one of a number of material planning considerations which Planning Service will take account of in the processing of this application.

Flyposting

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to bring forward legislation on flyposting. (AQW 1576/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently considering fly-posting as part of our work to bring forward stronger and more effective legislation to improve local environmental quality. We are considering a number of options to allow more effective control of fly-posting. It is our intention to consult on specific proposals as soon as possible.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Ballyallaght Farm Cottages, Bushmills

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether or not Land Registry of Northern Ireland is responsible for any administrative irregularities at Ballyallaght Farm Cottages, Bushmills. (AQW 1492/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I can confirm that Land Registers NI is not responsible for any administrative irregularities at Ballyallaght Farm Cottages, Bushmills.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Music Therapy

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current level of music therapy service available to children and young people with psychiatric problems in the South Eastern Health and Social Services Board area; and to provide details on how this service is funded. (AQW 1348/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Within Health and Social Services, Music Therapy is provided to a number of Special Schools within Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust as part of their Arioso project which is funded by the Children's Fund. It is provided across all four Health and Social Services Board areas.

Maternity Units

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of childbirths required to make a maternity unit sustainable. (AQW 1358/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no absolute requirement regarding the number of births required to ensure the sustainability of a maternity unit. Rather, sustainability will depend on a unit's ability to provide safe, high quality services, in doing so, to recruit and retain staff with the skills and experience needed to provide appropriate levels of patient care.

Music Therapy

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the current level of music therapy service at Tor Bank Special School; and what steps he is taking to fund this service from September 2008. (AQW 1359/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Music Therapy is provided at Tor Bank Special School by the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust as part of their Arioso project which is funded by the Children and Young People's Funding Package. I recognise the real difference that the initiatives funded under the Children and Young People's Funding Package can make to the lives of children and young people and their families, and I would like to be able to continue to support this important work. However, until consultation on the draft Budget is concluded, and the budget is finalised, I cannot give any guarantees about the funding of individual initiatives. I recognise that existing initiatives need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Networking Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what networking services are currently ongoing between Altnagelvin, Tyrone County and the Erne Hospitals. (AQW 1360/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following services for the population of the Western Trust area are provided through networking arrangements between the three hospitals:

| | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| ENT | Paediatrics |
| Obstetrics and Gynaecology | Surgery |
| Renal services | Trauma and Orthopaedics |
| Ophthalmology | Dermatology |
| Orthodontics | Oral Surgery |
| Rheumatology | Haematology |
| Radiology | |

Blue-Light Ambulances

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of blue light ambulances that stopped at Tyrone County Hospital in the past 12 months. (AQW 1361/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the period 1 November 2006 to

31 October 2007 there were 1819 Emergency Vehicle attendances at Tyrone County Hospital.

Hospital Doctors

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of hospital doctors employed in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 1362/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of doctors in each grade employed in a hospital facility in the Western Health and Social Services Board area is detailed in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: HOSPITAL BASED MEDICAL STAFF IN THE WHSSB AREA⁽¹⁾, NOVEMBER 2007

| Grade | WTE ⁽²⁾ | Headcount |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Consultant (NC) | 165.37 | 169 |
| Specialty Registrar (StR) | 124.00 | 124 |
| Foundation House Officer ² | 9.00 | 9 |
| House Officer (PRE-REG) | 17.00 | 17 |
| Foundation House Officer ¹ | 16.00 | 16 |
| Staff Grade | 48.86 | 54 |
| Medical Officer | 1.30 | 2 |
| Senior House Officer | 23.00 | 23 |
| Specialist Registrar | 49.00 | 49 |
| Associate Specialist | 6.73 | 7 |
| Total | 460.26 | 470 |

Notes:

¹ These figures refer to staff in the Altnagelvin, Foyle and Sperrin legacy Trusts.

² WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Acute Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what portion of the health budget was spent on acute services broken down by (i) Health and Social Services Board area; and (ii) constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1364/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information for the last three years is available by HSS Board but figures are not collected by constituency.

ACUTE SPEND AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SPEND ON HOSPITALS, COMMUNITY HEALTH AND PERSONAL SERVICES, 2003-04 TO 2005-06

| HSS Board Area | 2003/04 % | 2004/05 % | 2005/06 % |
|----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Eastern Board | 42.3 | 42.6 | 42.2 |
| Northern Board | 44.5 | 42.8 | 43.9 |
| Southern Board | 41.0 | 41.5 | 41.6 |
| Western Board | 39.9 | 40.7 | 40.7 |

Figures exclude Capital Charges and Clinical Negligence

Where older people are treated by a General Medical consultant, with an interest in Geriatrics, their care is counted as being within the Acute programme rather than the Elderly programme. This gives rise to some variation and particularly affects the Northern Board.

Children and Young People

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by constituency, the expenditure previously committed by his department under the Children and Young People's package.[R] (AQW 1422/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has committed the amounts detailed below from the Children and Young People's Funding Package in 2006/07 and 2007/08.

| | 06/07 (£m) | 07/08 (£m) |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| Looked-after children and vulnerable young adults | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Child protection | 0.8 | 1.1 |
| Young Carers | - | 0.5 |
| Children with special needs and disabilities | 5.3 | 5.6 |
| Family support | - | 2.2 |
| Mental health services | 0.5 | 1.0 |
| Speech and language therapy | - | 1.0 |
| Wheelchair Services | - | 0.5 |
| Children's Fund | 1.0 | 5.9 |
| Out of school hours childcare | 0.7 | 0.9 |

Expenditure broken down by constituency is not available as the information is not held in a format which allows for such analysis.

Children and Young People

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by constituency, the projects under the Children and Young People's package that will (i) continue to receive funding under the draft budget proposals for 2008/09, and the amount of funding that each will receive; (ii) not continue to receive funding beyond 2008/09; and (iii) not receive funding beyond this financial year.[R] (AQW 1423/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I recognise the real difference that the initiatives funded under the Children and Young People's Funding Package can make to the lives of children and young people and their families, and I would like to be able to continue to support this important work.

However, until consultation on the draft Budget is concluded, and the budget is finalised, I cannot give any guarantees about the funding of individual initiatives.

I do recognise that existing initiatives need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Dermatology Services

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the hospitals in Northern Ireland at which dermatology services are available. (AQW 1441/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The hospitals in Northern Ireland at which dermatology services were available during 2006/07 are detailed in the table below.

| Hospitals which provide Outpatient Dermatology services | Hospitals which provide Inpatient Dermatology services |
|---|--|
| Altnagelvin Area Hospital | Altnagelvin Area Hospital |
| Roe Valley Hospital | Belfast City Hospital |
| Armagh Community Hospital | Causeway Hospital |
| Belfast City Hospital | Craigavon Area Hospital |
| Causeway Hospital | Lurgan Hospital |
| Craigavon Area Hospital | Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children |
| Lurgan Hospital | Royal Victoria Hospital |
| South Tyrone Hospital | Ulster Hospital |
| Downe Hospital | Antrim Hospital |
| Lagan Valley Hospital | Whiteabbey Hospital |
| Mater Infirmorum Hospital | |

| Hospitals which provide Outpatient Dermatology services | Hospitals which provide Inpatient Dermatology services |
|---|--|
| Daisy Hill Hospital | |
| Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children | |
| Royal Victoria Hospital | |
| Ards Hospital | |
| Bangor Hospital | |
| Ulster Hospital | |
| Antrim Hospital | |
| Mid Ulster Hospital | |
| Moyle Hospital | |
| Waveney Hospital | |
| Whiteabbey Hospital | |

Source: Departmental Returns KH03a and KH09

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11.

(AQW 1443/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department submitted bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel under the CSR process covering both unavoidable pressures and service development needs. My bids for resources, as adjusted for ongoing analysis during the CSR process, were £337m/£641m/£1002m for 2008/09 to 2010/11.

In the draft Budget, the Department has been allocated total funds of £3939m/£4064m/£4259m for 2008/09 to 2010/11. This represents uplifts over the 2007/8 baseline in the draft budget document of £134m/£259m/£454m.

The indicative allocation is insufficient to meet even unavoidable requirements of £236m/£460m/£700m. Therefore the major part of the efficiency savings of £118m/£233m/£343m identified by my Department will be required simply to maintain services at existing levels and meet existing commitments.

After meeting the inescapable pressures only £16m/£32m/£97m will be available to meet service developments.

The exact allocation of these resources will not be completed until the consultation period ends on 4 January 2008 and the budget is finalised. However, I would propose to invest in high priority areas such as

mental health and learning disability, cancer, stroke and specialist drugs in order to meet the Programme for Government targets.

Dermatology Units

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average number of patients treated in each dermatology unit in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1452/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average number of patients treated in each dermatology unit in Northern Ireland is not available.

The average annual number of (i) new outpatient appointment attendances; (ii) review outpatient appointment attendances and (iii) inpatient admissions within the dermatology specialty, for each hospital in Northern Ireland, for the five year period from 2002/03 to 2006/07, are listed below.

| Hospital | Outpatients | | Inpatients |
|--|--|---|--|
| | Average number of new outpatient appointment attendances | Average number of review outpatient appointment attendances | Average number of inpatient admissions |
| Belfast City | 4195.2 | 10746.2 | 5655.2 |
| Mater Infirmorum | 269.2 | 535.8 | - |
| Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children | 778.8 | 1159.4 | 22.2 |
| Royal Victoria | 3612.2 | 9165.2 | 206.2 |
| Belfast Trust | 8855.4 | 21606.6 | 5883.6 |
| Antrim | 918.4 | 1547.8 | 3 |
| Causeway Hospital | 1427.6 | 2245.2 | 111.6 |
| Mid Ulster | 532.6 | 1621 | - |
| Moyle | 436.2 | 857 | - |
| Waveney | 755 | 1465.6 | - |
| Whiteabbey | 851.8 | 1599 | 77.6 |
| Northern Trust | 4921.6 | 9335.6 | 192.2 |
| Ards | 620.2 | 641.2 | - |
| Bangor | 738.4 | 1195.6 | - |
| Downe | 441 | 535.8 | - |
| Lagan Valley | 815.4 | 924.2 | - |
| Ulster | 2208.8 | 3940.8 | 1711.6 |

| Hospital | Outpatients | | Inpatients |
|---------------------|--|---|--|
| | Average number of new outpatient appointment attendances | Average number of review outpatient appointment attendances | Average number of inpatient admissions |
| South Eastern Trust | 4823.8 | 7237.6 | 1711.6 |
| Armagh Community | 548 | 695 | - |
| Craigavon Area | 3433.8 | 4206.4 | 279.2 |
| Daisy Hill | 2046 | 2690.2 | - |
| Lurgan | 0 | 2.8 | 198.8 |
| South Tyrone | 1217.2 | 1848.4 | - |
| Southern Trust | 7245 | 9442.8 | 478 |
| Altnagelvin Area | 4575.4 | 5459 | 534.8 |
| Roe Valley | 531.4 | 369.4 | - |
| Western Trust | 5106.8 | 5828.4 | 534.8 |

Source: Departmental Returns KH03a and KH09

Note: Patients may have been referred for outpatient assessment more than once during a period. As a result, outpatient appointments attended does not equate exactly with the number of individual patients treated. Similarly, patients may have been admitted for treatment more than once in a given period, thus the number of admissions does not equate exactly with the number of patients treated.

Dermatology Services

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the staffing ratios in each dermatology unit in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1453/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Numbers of medical and qualified nursing, administrative and clerical and other staff (headcount and Whole-Time Equivalent (WTE)) who work in dermatology units in each NI Health and Social Care Trust are detailed in tables 1a and 1b below. It is not possible to determine numbers of staff who work solely in each dermatology unit, as staff can and do provide dermatology services in a number of these units within an individual Trust.

TABLE 1A. ALL STAFF WORKING IN DERMATOLOGY UNITS IN NI HSC TRUSTS, NOVEMBER 2007 - HEADCOUNT

| | Medical & Qualified Nursing | Admin & Clerical Staff | Other Staff | All Staff |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Belfast HSC Trust | 53 | 17 | 5 | 75 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 20 | 4 | 1 | 25 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 17 | 4 | 2 | 23 |
| South-Eastern HSC Trust | 19 | 5 | 2 | 26 |
| Western HSC Trust | 12 | 0 | 2 | 14 |
| Total | 121 | 30 | 12 | 163 |

TABLE 1B. ALL STAFF WORKING IN DERMATOLOGY UNITS IN NI HSC TRUSTS, NOVEMBER 2007 - WTE

| | Medical & Qualified Nursing | Admin & Clerical Staff | Other Staff | All Staff |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Belfast HSC Trust | 42.95 | 13.87 | 4.56 | 61.38 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 11.80 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 16.80 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 14.96 | 1.80 | 1.60 | 18.36 |
| South-Eastern HSC Trust | 7.97 | 5.00 | 1.30 | 14.27 |
| Western HSC Trust | 10.47 | 0.00 | 2.00 | 12.47 |
| Total | 88.15 | 24.67 | 10.46 | 123.28 |

Notes:

- 1 There are no dedicated Administration and Clerical staff in dermatology units in the Western HSC Trust. Administration and Clerical support for these units is supplied by a pool of staff who also work in other units within the Trust.
- 2 Includes nurse support staff.

Dermatology Units

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current ratio of discharges to new patients, for each dermatology unit in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1455/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the ratio of discharges to new patients treated in each dermatology unit in Northern Ireland is not available.

The ratio of discharges to (i) new outpatient appointment attendances; and (ii) inpatient admissions within the dermatology specialty, for each hospital in Northern Ireland, for 2006/07, are listed on the following page.

| Outpatients | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Hospital | Number of discharges during 2006/07 at the end of an outpatient episode in dermatology | Number of new outpatient appointments attended in Dermatology during 2006/07 | Ratio of discharges to new attendances |
| Belfast City | 4448 | 3817 | 1.2: 1 |
| Mater Infirmorum | 444 | 363 | 1.2: 1 |
| Royal Belfast Hospital Sick Children | 91 | 719 | 0.1: 1 |
| Royal Victoria | 2231 | 3441 | 0.6: 1 |
| Belfast Trust | 7214 | 8340 | 0.9: 1 |
| Antrim | 1064 | 859 | 1.2: 1 |
| Causeway | 1765 | 1202 | 1.5: 1 |
| Mid Ulster | 537 | 471 | 1.1 :1 |
| Moyle | 320 | 260 | 1.2: 1 |
| Waveney | 422 | 703 | 0.6: 1 |
| Whiteabbey | 769 | 588 | 1.3: 1 |
| Northern Trust | 4877 | 4083 | 1.2: 1 |
| Ards | 544 | 655 | 0.8: 1 |
| Bangor | 697 | 837 | 0.8: 1 |
| Downe | 448 | 587 | 0.8: 1 |
| Lagan Valley | 1249 | 822 | 1.5: 1 |
| Ulster | 2121 | 2002 | 1.1: 1 |
| South Eastern Trust | 5059 | 4903 | 1: 1 |
| Armagh Community | 599 | 636 | 0.9: 1 |
| Craigavon area | 3642 | 3455 | 1.1: 1 |
| Daisy Hill | 2091 | 1879 | 1.1: 1 |
| South Tyrone | 1418 | 1109 | 1.3: 1 |
| Southern Trust ¹ | 7750 | 7079 | 1.1: 1 |
| Altnagelvin ² | 4462 | 4372 | 1: 1 |
| Roe Valley | 525 | 554 | 0.9: 1 |
| Western Trust | 4987 | 4926 | 1: 1 |

Source: Health & Social Care Trusts, Departmental Return KH09.

- 1 Lurgan Hospital did not see any new dermatology outpatients during 2006/07.
- 2 Altnagelvin Hospital figures include outpatients seen at Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals.

| Inpatients | | | |
|---------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Hospital | Number of discharges during 2006/07 following an inpatient admission in dermatology | Number of admissions to hospital for Dermatology during 2006/07 | Ratio of discharges to admissions |
| Belfast City | 6560 | 6560 | 1:1 |
| RBHSC | 2 | 2 | 1:1 |
| Royal Victoria | 251 | 252 | 1:1 |
| Belfast Trust | 6813 | 6814 | 1:1 |
| Antrim | 5 | 5 | 1:1 |
| Causeway | 156 | 156 | 1:1 |
| Whiteabbey | 80 | 80 | 1:1 |
| Northern Trust | 241 | 241 | 1:1 |
| Ulster | 2159 | 2159 | 1:1 |
| South Eastern Trust | 2159 | 2159 | 1:1 |
| Craigavon Area | 280 | 292 | 1:1 |
| Lurgan | 219 | 211 | 1:1 |
| Southern Trust | 499 | 503 | 1:1 |
| Altnagelvin | 305 | 306 | 1:1 |
| Western Trust | 305 | 306 | 1:1 |

Source: Health & Social Care Trusts, Hospital Inpatients System

Specialised Mental-health Treatment

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's expenditure on sending children and young people from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland for specialised treatment for mental health problems, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1461/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The expenditure on sending children and young people from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland for specialised treatment for mental health problems in each of the last five years is as follows:

| | |
|---------|-------------|
| 2002/03 | £ 859,112 |
| 2003/04 | £ 708,362 |
| 2004/05 | £ 413,409 |
| 2005/06 | £ 1,004,444 |
| 2006/07 | £ 1,856,923 |

Compensation Claims

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 958/08, to detail the means through which the progress of compensation claims is monitored by his department. (AQW 1474/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The claims management process is devolved, with each HSC Board and Trust making its own arrangements for managing and progressing claims. In answering the previous question Trusts were asked to provide the relevant details.

The department is currently developing a new centralised claims database whereby following the end of each financial year, each HSC Trust completes a return to the Department, providing details of their compensation claims open at any time since April 2004, including the current status. This data is input into a database, managed by the DHSSPS, who use it to measure the progress including the duration of the claim, whether it is active, dormant or closed, and the expected date of settlement.

The Finance Directorate receive information from the Trusts, under the requirement of Financial Reporting Standard 12 – Provisions, Contingent Liabilities and Contingent Assets. This is used to determine the accounting treatment for a claim and not for monitoring purposes.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 619/08, to detail his department's expenditure on (i) Christmas cards; (ii) hotel reservations; and (iii) alcohol for the purposes of entertainment, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1476/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The amount spent on Christmas cards, hotel reservations and alcohol for entertainment purposes in each of the last five years is shown in the table below.

Information relating to expenditure on alcohol for the purpose of entertainment is not available for 2002/03 or 2003/04. The information relating to hotel reservations reflects fees incurred by the Department due to the cancellation of pre-bookings.

| | 02/03 £ | 03/04 £ | 04/05 £ | 05/06 £ | 06/07 £ |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Christmas cards | 1,808 | 1,713 | 1,844 | 251 | 643 |
| Hotel reservations | 0 | 0 | 130 | 153 | 1,054 |
| Alcohol for the purpose of entertainment | N/A | N/A | 182 | 145 | 315 |

Ulster Hospital Heating System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the double-up of new-born babies, due to the poor heating system at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 1484/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have delegated the responsibility for answering this question to the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. I understand that he replied as follows:

2 babies did have to go into individual incubators for a short period of time i.e. up to 4 hours, this was due to temperature control problems within the Unit until temperature could be stabilised and regulated. Temperature control is now working.

I trust this answers your queries satisfactorily on the provision of heating in the renal and maternity units at the Ulster Hospital.

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the longest period of time his department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1488/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) a Member of Parliament;
51 days delay
- (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly;
15 days delay
- (iii) a Councillor;
6 days delay
- (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007.
15 days delay

Occupational Therapists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of referrals to occupational therapists in (i) Strangford; (ii) Ards; and (iii) Northern Ireland, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1489/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of referrals to occupational therapists in Strangford and Ards is not collected centrally. However, information is available by the old Health and Social Services Trusts for Down Lisburn and Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trusts which include the Strangford and Ards areas respectively.

The information for these two Trusts and for Northern Ireland as a whole is detailed in the table overleaf for the years ending 30th June, 2005 to 2007, where a year refers to the period 1st July to 30th June.

During the year ending 30th June 2007, 50,384 referrals for assessment by occupational therapists were received by Trusts in Northern Ireland. During this period, the number of referrals received in respect of Down Lisburn (including Strangford) and Ulster Community & Hospitals (including Ards) HSS Trusts was 3,585 and 4,192 respectively.

Over the last three years, the number of referrals for assessment by occupational therapists in Northern Ireland has increased by 5%.

NUMBER OF REFERRALS FOR ASSESSMENT BY OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS DURING YEAR ENDING 30TH JUNE (2005 – 2007)

| Old HSS Trust | Year Ending 30 June 2005 | Year Ending 30 June 2006 | Year Ending 30 June 2007 | % Change between 2005 and 2007 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ulster Community & Hospitals (including Ards) | 4,458 | 4,401 | 4,192 | -6% |
| Down Lisburn (including Strangford) | 3,564 | 3,962 | 3,585 | 1% |
| Northern Ireland | 47,854 | 45,845 | 50,384 | 5% |

NHS Dentists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of dentists in (i) Strangford; and (ii) Northern Ireland, offering treatment through the National Health Service, in each of the past three years. (AQW 1491/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: Table 1 provides detail of the number of dentists registered to provide National Health Service treatments in (i) Strangford Parliamentary Constituency (PC) and (ii) Northern Ireland at 1st November for each of the past three years.

TABLE 1

| | Number of dentists registered to provide National Health Service treatments | | |
|------------------|---|------------|------------|
| | 1 Nov 2005 | 1 Nov 2006 | 1 Nov 2007 |
| Strangford PC | 39 | 37 | 41 |
| Northern Ireland | 752 | 770 | 803 |

Source: Central Services Agency

Note: These figures are based on the count of unique GDC Numbers, i.e. headcount, so dentists with multiple contracts have only been counted once.

Dermatology Services

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to change the current method through which dermatology services are delivered in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1493/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Significant reductions in waiting times have been achieved for all outpatient specialties including dermatology over the past year. At the end of March 2007, no patient was waiting longer than six months for a first outpatient appointment. I have set a target to reduce this further to a maximum of 13 weeks by March 2008 and my Department is working closely with Boards and Trusts to ensure this is achieved.

In addition, I am committed to ensuring patients have access to a range of services appropriate to their needs provided by the most appropriate healthcare professionals. Boards are therefore currently working to develop an expanded range of multi-disciplinary services that can best meet the needs of individual patients in a safe and timely manner. These new services are planned to become operational during 2008/09.

Ulster Hospital Heating System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the provision of heating for patients attending the renal unit at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 1496/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have delegated the responsibility for answering this question to the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. I understand that he replied as follows:

Further to your recent enquiries forwarded to the Minister, Mr McGimpsey I would comment as follows:

To ensure that an optimum level of heating provision was achieved in the Renal Unit, new thermometers for measuring the ambient temperature were installed in the Unit.

These are constantly monitored by the Ulster Hospital Maintenance Department and adjusted as necessary to reflect any changes in temperature.

Current heating levels are approximately 24 degrees, which is of a standard with heating found in inpatient wards in the Ulster Hospital.

Family Planning Association

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding his department has provided to the Family Planning Association (Northern Ireland) in each of the past five financial years. (AQW 1502/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has provided funding to the Family Planning Association (Northern Ireland) as follows:

| 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| £82,019 | £84,069 | £86,590 | £89,188 | £91,418 |

Funding

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail all funding his department has awarded to organisations working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 1510/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has provided funding, in the form of grants, to organisations working with the lesbian, gay and bisexual community for each of the last 5 years as follows:

| 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|---------|---------|---------|----------|----------|
| £39,535 | £40,524 | £41,740 | £101,910 | £106,058 |

Fire and Rescue Service

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the number of documented Fire and Rescue Service call outs in South Down, relating to Halloween; (ii) the overall cost of dealing with these incidents; and (iii) how this compares statistically with other constituencies in Northern Ireland, for each of the last three years. (AQW 1518/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service advises that there were 158 callouts (mobilised incidents) in South Down over the 2007 Halloween period. The estimated cost of dealing with these callouts was £16, 280.

Comparative information on callouts and costs by Parliamentary Constituency for each of the last three years is set out in the tables below.

NUMBER OF CALLOUTS

| Parliamentary Constituency | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| BelfastEast | 9 | 2 | 11 | 15 |
| BelfastNorth | 9 | 2 | 21 | 9 |
| BelfastSouth | 24 | 16 | 39 | 20 |
| BelfastWest | 18 | 15 | 13 | 9 |
| EastAntrim | 6 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| EastLondonderry | 29 | 10 | 20 | 16 |
| FermanaghandSouthTyrone | 49 | 38 | 52 | 55 |
| Foyle | 9 | 12 | 14 | 12 |
| LaganValley | 1 | 7 | 3 | 5 |
| MidUlster | 20 | 15 | 15 | 18 |
| NewryandArmagh | 111 | 78 | 95 | 82 |
| NorthAntrim | 29 | 35 | 38 | 23 |
| NorthDown | 3 | 1 | 9 | 5 |
| SouthAntrim | 11 | 10 | 16 | 13 |
| SouthDown | 109 | 63 | 124 | 158 |
| Strangford | 13 | 6 | 10 | 2 |
| Upper Bann | 9 | 10 | 18 | 14 |
| WestTyrone | 24 | 18 | 38 | 30 |

COSTS

| Parliamentary Constituency | 2004 £ | 2005 £ | 2006 £ | 2007 £ |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Belfast East | 871 | 139 | 1,265 | 1,214 |
| Belfast North | 887 | 364 | 2,545 | 792 |
| Belfast South | 2,679 | 1,837 | 5,402 | 2,025 |
| Belfast West | 1,975 | 1,472 | 1,494 | 722 |

| Parliamentary Constituency | 2004 £ | 2005 £ | 2006 £ | 2007 £ |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| East Antrim | 1,154 | 616 | 200 | 720 |
| East Londonderry | 3,506 | 1,785 | 2,951 | 2,259 |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 6,493 | 4,793 | 5,998 | 6,919 |
| Foyle | 1,289 | 1,005 | 1,388 | 1,271 |
| Lagan Valley | 67 | 950 | 469 | 511 |
| Mid Ulster | 2,875 | 2,030 | 2,039 | 2,416 |
| Newry and Armagh | 11,840 | 8,316 | 10,420 | 7,620 |
| North Antrim | 2,946 | 4,522 | 4,894 | 2,670 |
| North Down | 345 | 69 | 1,294 | 590 |
| South Antrim | 1,781 | 1,389 | 2,329 | 1,569 |
| South Down | 12,969 | 6,833 | 13,290 | 16,281 |
| Strangford | 1,265 | 734 | 1,657 | 200 |
| Upper Bann | 896 | 936 | 2,052 | 1,471 |
| West Tyrone | 3,214 | 1,795 | 4,278 | 3,460 |

Home-Start Schemes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to continue the provision of funding, through the Children and Young People's Fund, to Home Start schemes in Newcastle and Ballynahinch, in view of the fact that this funding will end in March 2008. (AQW 1523/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The existing Home Start schemes in Newcastle and Ballynahinch will continue to be supported by the Children's Fund component of the Children and Young People's Funding Package until March 2008, when the current round of funding is set to end.

You may know that some funding has been identified in the draft Budget to continue the important work of the Children's Fund, although not as much as I would have liked. As a result, I cannot guarantee that all existing projects will be supported in the future, or to the level that they have been in the past. It will not be possible to make firm decisions about individual projects until consultation on the draft Budget has been completed, and it has been finalised.

I do recognise that existing projects need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Agenda for Change

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the percentage of staff who have completed the matching process under Agenda for Change; and (ii) the percentage of staff now in receipt of the new pay rates under Agenda for Change, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1529/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The latest information available at 31 October 2007 is set out in the table below.

| Trust | Head Count of HSC Staff through the AfC matching process % | Head Count of HSC Staff through assimilation process for AfC rates of pay % |
|--|--|---|
| Belfast Health & Social Care Trust | 95 | 70 |
| Western Health & Social Care Trust | 99 | 68 |
| Northern Health & Social Care Trust | 100 | 80 |
| Southern Health & Social Care Trust | 93 | 73 |
| South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust | 90 | 60 |

GP Out-of-Hours Centres

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total cost for operating GP out-of-hours centres, and the cost of their operation in each of the Health and Social Services Board in Northern Ireland, in 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 1532/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of provision of GP Out of Hours Services in Northern Ireland over the three year period was as follows:

| 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|----------|---------|---------|
| £12.4 m* | £22.5m | £22.4m |

* The 2004/05 figure excludes the contributions made by GPs to the

costs of Out of Hours provision by Boards from 1st January 2005, when all GPs in Northern Ireland opted out of the responsibility under the new GMS Contract.

In 2005/06 and 2006/07 the funding also included bridging finance of £2.5m made available to Boards to set up the new out of hours services

The breakdown of the cost of providing Out of Hours for the four Boards during that period was as follows:

| Board | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Eastern | £4.6m | £8.3m | £7.9m |
| Northern | £3.2m | £5.2m | £5.1m |
| Western | £2m | £3.5m | £3.8m |
| Southern | £2.6m | £5.5m | £5.6m |
| Total | £12.4m | £22.5m | £22.4m |

Community Care Package

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1259/08, to break down the information provided, by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1547/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Pursuant to my answer to AQW 1259/08, information is detailed in the table below on the number of people living in the community who were waiting for a community care package at 30 June 2007, in each Health & Social Care Trust.

| HSC Trust | Less than 12 weeks | | 12 Weeks or more | | All persons Waiting |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | Number | % of Total Waiting | Number | % of Total Waiting | |
| Belfast HSC Trust | 79 | 61% | 50 | 39% | 129 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 57 | 57% | 43 | 43% | 100 |
| South Eastern HSC Trust | 36 | 58% | 26 | 42% | 62 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 4 | 67% | 2 | 33% | 6 |
| Western HSC Trust | 14 | 67% | 7 | 33% | 21 |
| Northern Ireland | 190 | 60% | 128 | 40% | 318 |

Source: DHSSPS Information returns CC5b.

Hygiene Standards

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify the policy or practices at the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, in relation to the wearing of jewellery or other accessories, to ensure the highest standards of hygiene and prevent cross-contamination in food storage and preparation areas; and to indicate the date that these policies or practices were introduced in each Trust property. (AQW 1551/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Within the former United Legacy Trust Hospitals, including Antrim, Whiteabbey, Mid Ulster, Braid Valley and Moyle, a Hotel Services Uniform Policy has been in place since September 2004, which was agreed by a Joint Working Group comprising Management and Staff Side Representatives.

Under the section in relation to the wearing of jewelry the following is permitted for general Support Services Staff:

- plain wedding band
- small pair of sleeper earrings
- suitable safe wearing watch

More specifically, members of Catering Staff and/or Domestic Services Staff involved in any food duties are not permitted to wear earrings or watches.

An updated policy was implemented in the former Causeway Legacy Trust in 2005, directing that the only jewelry permitted to be worn by any member of staff working in a food area is a plain wedding band or signet ring. This policy was also applied in the former Homefirst Trust.

A weekly Hygiene Audit is completed by Catering Managers/Supervisors as part of the HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) policy, and this includes a check that the uniform policy is being adhered to. Daily observational checks are also in place.

If any member of staff consistently fails to comply with this policy, this will lead to disciplinary action being taken.

Suicide

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in view of the recent suicides of teenagers from Strabane and North Belfast and the role that prescription drugs are playing in some suicides, what steps he is taking to alert the public to this danger. (AQW 1553/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs, funded by my department, has

ensured that a range of education, prevention, intervention and treatment programmes have been put in place to reduce the level of alcohol and drug related harm in Northern Ireland, including the harm related to the misuse of “over-the-counter” and prescription drugs.

These programmes support and complement the work undertaken in schools that educates children and young people about the potential impact that the misuse of illicit and prescribed drugs can have on their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Occupational Therapists

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occupational therapists in each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1556/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on numbers of occupational therapists by parliamentary constituency is not collected centrally. Table 1 below provides details of numbers of occupational therapists and occupational therapy support staff (headcount and Whole-Time Equivalent (WTE)) in each Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland. These staff are available to provide services across all parliamentary constituencies within the Trust area.

TABLE 1: OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS/OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY SUPPORT IN NI HSC TRUSTS, SEPTEMBER 2007

| | Occupational Therapists | | Occupational Therapy Support | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------|------------------------------|--------|
| | Headcount | WTE | Headcount | WTE |
| Belfast HSC Trust | 222 | 201.46 | 34 | 31.43 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 173 | 153.92 | 51 | 44.03 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 150 | 131.13 | 14 | 11.83 |
| South-Eastern HSC Trust | 101 | 84.09 | 19 | 16.40 |
| Western HSC Trust | 108 | 98.54 | 12 | 10.49 |
| Total | 754 | 669.14 | 130 | 114.18 |

Source: Human Resources Management System

Lung Cancer Treatment

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who have been refused Tarceva for the treatment of lung cancer; and to provide a timeframe

within which this treatment will become available on the health service. (AQW 1593/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have contacted the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust about the availability of this therapy and they have advised that they are unaware of any formal requests for its use having been submitted to Health and Social Care Boards. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recently issued a final appraisal determination in relation to the cost and clinical effectiveness of Tarceva. That determination was that the drug should not be recommended for use in the NHS. That outcome is currently under appeal and NICE expect revised guidance to be issued in April 2008, at the earliest. The Department will review the guidance for its applicability to Northern Ireland when it becomes available.

Sustainable Seafood Procurement Policy

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he will give to the introduction of a sustainable seafood procurement policy. (AQW 1612/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Finance and Personnel is currently developing a Sustainable Procurement Action Plan for the public sector in Northern Ireland which I anticipate will assist with the introduction of policies which will include sustainable food producers. As purchase of fish for health and social care for the region involves around £67,000 per annum, the constraints of both EU procurement regulations and value for money requirements make it difficult to procure from smaller local sources. However following a successful EU funded pilot involving Sperrin Lakeland Trust and DARD, my Department is currently discussing with DARD how local sustainable food producers can be brought within the ambit of public procurement and it is anticipated that consideration will be given to local fish producers.

Breast Cancer

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) women; and (ii) men who are living with breast cancer. (AQW 1633/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information was supplied by the NI Cancer Registry which was established in 1994. Therefore information on people diagnosed with breast cancer prior to 1993 is not available.

From NI Cancer Registry data, there were 50 men and 7,549 women living in Northern Ireland who were

diagnosed with breast cancer between 1993 and 2005 that were still alive at the end of 2005. This may represent an undercount of the actual number of people living with breast cancer as those diagnosed prior to 1993 are not included.

Notes: Incidence of breast cancer are identified using version 10 of the international classification of diseases and related health problems (ICD10). The code used for breast cancer is C50.

Draft Budget

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the ranking order of bids submitted by his department to the Department of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the draft Budget. (AQW 1635/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department submitted a number of bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel under the CSR process covering both inescapable pressures and service development needs.

By definition the inescapable bids were to cover unavoidable pressures so as to maintain services at existing levels and meet existing commitments. While these previously were originally listed from numerically they were not ranked in order of importance or priority as they are all considered unavoidable.

The service development bids were submitted so as to address a range of issues identified by my Department in consultation with colleagues in the Health Service. Mental health and learning disability was ranked as the top service development priority.

INESCAPABLE BIDS

| |
|---|
| Pay at 3% and Pay Reform - inflationary uplift in line with DoH and linked to associated Efficiency Savings together with costs of Agenda for Change and incremental drift. |
| Non Pay at 2.7% - inflationary uplift excluding prescription and hospital drugs in line with DoH |
| Pharmaceutical Services (incl. Prescription and Sec Care drug inflation) – Meet 9% uplift in line with rest of UK |
| Amended NHS Pension (Superannuation) Scheme—meet increased employer's contributions as with rest of UK |
| Pandemic Flu Emergency Provision — NI's share of UK wide costs including vaccines and antivirals. |
| Medical Workforce Training and Tuition Fees - provide an additional 15 GPs in training by 2010-11 compared to 50 in 2007-08 and Regulation of Healthcare Professionals |
| Enhanced Life Savings Renal Services to meet additional demand from ageing population |
| Child Protection – Meet legislative requirements in respect of Child Protection vetting for HPSS bodies |

| |
|--|
| Children with Complex Needs - Provide services for children to be cared for at home rather than hospital setting |
| Blood Safety – ensure quality standards are met and variant CJD filtration techniques are in place |
| Revenue Consequences of capital investment – the additional revenue consequences of capital developments including ICT. |
| GP Contract – new pressures arising from the Darzi review of the NHS including extending opening hours of GP surgeries and providing extra capacity. |
| Additional acute costs - to provide for additional locum medical staff and additional nursing and ambulance services to provide safe and effective services. |
| Mainstreaming Children and Young People's Package - to implement wide ranging service improvements for children and families, employing an additional 250 staff within the HPSS and around 150 in the voluntary sector through contractual commitments. |
| Demographic Pressures in Primary and Community Services - increase capacity within the community sector to deal with the aging of our population. |

SERVICE DEVELOPMENT BIDS

| Rank | |
|------|---|
| 1 | Mental Health- Bamford (1)- incl. enhanced community services for mental health and learning disability |
| 2 | Cancer Control- enhances bowel and breast screening and a HPV vaccination programme (cervical cancer) |
| 3 | Long-Term Conditions- Early Identification and Intervention as well as enhanced support & palliative care |
| 4 | Access to Specialist Hospital Drugs expected to be licensed over CSR period- cancer, MS, arthritis, Crohn's |
| 5 | Cardiovascular Health & Well Being- improved treatment (surgery, angiograms, stenting procedures etc) |
| 6 | Improve the life chances of children leaving care by providing enhance support services |
| 7 | Public Health Improvement (focus on disadvantaged)- obesity, smoking, drugs, alcohol, suicide & sexual health |
| 8 | Disability- Wheelchairs, Respite/Community Care for those with Physical/Sensory Disability & Therapy Provision |
| 9 | Access to Acute Services- enhanced regional surgical specialities to meet increased demand |
| 10 | Free Personal Care in residential and nursing homes |
| 11 | Enhanced Cancer Services to increase survival rates (more oncologists, radiotherapy & lymphoedema services) |
| 12 | Reduce the number of children in care through enhanced family support services |
| 13 | Free Prescriptions for All to be introduced on a phased basis |
| 14 | Quality and Safety- NICE best practice guidelines, equipment decontamination, more effective complaints process |
| 15 | Elective Care Access- reducing patient journey times for hospital treatment from max 47 wks (08) to 39 wks (11) |

| Rank | |
|------|---|
| 16 | Stroke- all persons suffering from stroke to be treated in specialist stroke unit and better access to scanning |
| 17 | Mental Health- Bamford (2) further development of community services and implement Muckamore Action Plan |
| 18 | Developing Core Services- increase residential & domiciliary care tariffs |
| 19 | Universal Free Eye Examinations i.e. including private tests |
| 20 | Improve provision for children in care- more & better foster carers with more appropriate placements |
| 21 | Fire- additional full-time and retained fire-fighters & enhanced training |
| 22 | Health Protection- antenatal screening, extension of immunisation programmes, MRSA screening, AAA screening |
| 23 | Research and Development- enhance capacity and increase research into public/mental health policy |

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Beragh Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) at what level of capacity Beragh Waste Water Treatment Works is currently operating; and (ii) the number of new build homes that can be accommodated before its capacity is reached.
(AQW 1301/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that they are currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to reassess the availability of headroom at all 1124 wastewater treatment works across Northern Ireland based on the most up to date demographic information and planning projections.

The programme of work is to be completed during 2008 and is being undertaken to a prioritised programme.

Beragh Wastewater Treatment Works is presently operating at approximately 65% of consented capacity and as such, based on Council derived occupancy rate, the works can further accommodate approximately 370 properties. Further work remains to be completed as part of the review to confirm this initial assessment.

I have asked the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water to contact you directly with the findings of the final assessment for Beragh WwTW when available.

Fintona Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) at what level of capacity

Fintona Waste Water Treatment Works is currently operating; and (ii) the number of new build homes that can be accommodated before its capacity is reached.
(AQW 1305/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that they are currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to reassess the availability of headroom at all 1124 wastewater treatment works across Northern Ireland based on the most up to date demographic information and planning projections.

The programme of work is to be completed during 2008 and is being undertaken to a prioritised programme.

Whilst the actual performance of the biological process used to treat wastewater will depend on a range of factors, the initial findings of the review indicate that Fintona Wastewater Treatment Works is presently operating at approximately 78% of consented capacity and as such, based on Council derived occupancy rate, the works can further accommodate approximately 212 properties. Further work remains to be completed as part of the review to confirm the initial assessment.

I have asked the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water to contact you directly with the findings of the final assessment for Fintona when available.

Zebra Crossings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of zebra crossings supplied by his department; and (ii) the full installation cost of each of these crossings, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 1333/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am advised by my Department's Roads Service that the total number of zebra crossings constructed in each of the last 3 financial years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 is detailed in the table below.

| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| No. of Zebra Crossings | 4 | 3 | 7 |

With regards to the second part of your question, I should explain that the individual cost of providing each zebra crossing is not readily available. However, taking into consideration factors such as the site, width of the road, distance to a source of electricity and the need for alterations to the existing infrastructure, the generic cost of establishing a zebra crossing is approximately £15,000.

Consultancy Firms

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the consultancy firms, other than PriceWaterhouseCoopers, that have been employed by Northern Ireland Water from 1 April 2007.

(AQW 1340/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the following consultancy firms, other than PriceWaterhouseCoopers, have been employed by Northern Ireland Water from 1 April 2007:

| |
|--|
| ADJUST PROCUREMENT SOLUTIONS LTD |
| AJ MCCANN CONSULTANTS LTD |
| ALVAREZ & MARSAL EUROPE LIMITED |
| BDO STOY HAYWARD |
| BEING COMMUNICATION LIMITED |
| BESPOKE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT LIMITED |
| BHB FIRE AND SPECIALIST TRAINING CONSULTANTS |
| BLACK & VEATCH LTD |
| BSG CIVIL ENGINEERING LIMITED |
| BTW SHIELLS |
| BUILDING DESIGN PARTNERSHIP LIMITED |
| CAPITA |
| CHANDLERKBS |
| CONSTRUCTION CONSULTANCY SERVICES |
| CONSTRUCTION SUPERVISORY SERVICES LIMITED |
| CONSULT NBI LIMITED |
| CONTRACTAUDITLINE |
| CONTRACTING OUT LLP |
| DELOITTE |
| DLA PIPER RUDNICK GRAY CARY UK LLP |
| DORAN CONSULTANT |
| DP CONTRACTING LTD |
| DUNDAS & WILSON CS LLP |
| EC HARRIS & PARTNERS |
| ENTEC |
| ERNST & YOUNG LLP |
| EWAN GROUP PLC |
| FABER MAUNSELL LTD |
| FUJITSU SERVICES LTD |
| GLOVER SITE INVESTIGATION |
| HALCROW MANAGEMENT SCIENCES LIMITED |
| HYDER CONSULTING LIMITED |
| INDEPENDENT OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH LIMITED |

| |
|---|
| INTERIM MANAGEMENT ASSIGNMENTS (NI) LTD |
| INTRA CONSULTING |
| IT PROJECT RECOVERY LIMITED |
| JACOBS UK LTD |
| JOHN FAWELL |
| JOHN GRAHAM (DROMORE) LTD |
| JOHN W SMITH |
| KIRKWOOD MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS LTD |
| KPMG |
| MCADAM DESIGN |
| MCAULEY & BROWNE |
| MERCER HUMAN RESOURCE CONSULTING |
| MMC ASSOCIATES |
| MOTT MACDONALD GROUP |
| MOUCHEL PARKMAN SERVICES LIMITED |
| MULHOLLAND & DOHERTY |
| MWH UK LTD |
| NEUEDA |
| NICHOLAS O DWYER & PARTNERS |
| NICK OWEN ASSOCIATES LTD |
| NTUITION LTD |
| OLLAVE LTD |
| PETER J GRAHAM CONSULTANCY LTD |
| PIPELINE SIMULATION LTD |
| PRACTICAL PLANNING LIMITED |
| R ROBINSON AND SONS |
| RPS KIRK MCCLURE & MORTON (RPS KMM) |
| SACKER & PARTNERS |
| SCOTT WILSON |
| SERVICE & SYSTEM SOLUTIONS (SX3) LTD |
| STRATEGIC PLANNING |
| THE EVENT-FUL CONSULTANCY LTD |
| THE HELM CORPORATION LTD |
| WATERPEOPLE LIMITED |
| WDR & RT TAGGART |
| WEBER SHANDWICK |
| WHITE YOUNG GREEN |
| WILLIAMS IND SERVICES LTD |
| WJ MCDOWELL&PARTNERS |
| WRC PLC |
| WS ATKINS CONSULTANTS LTD |
| YORKSHIRE WATER |

Design, Build, Finance and Operate 2 Scheme

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) whether or not all land acquisition has been completed for the Design, Build, Finance and Operate 2 scheme; (ii) the cost of this land acquisition; and (iii) whether or not this expenditure falls within the original budget allocated to the project. (AQW 1342/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that:

- (i) the Vesting Orders covering all the lands required to be vested for the Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) 2 scheme are now operative and that agreement has been reached with a small number of other landowners where land is being purchased by agreement;
- (ii) the District Valuer's current estimate of land costs for the schemes in DBFO Package 2 is £68.1 million; and
- (iii) the estimated cost of this land acquisition represents a significant increase over the previous estimates. This reflects the dramatic increase in land values across the North in the last few years.

School Area Speed Limits

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to include Loughview Integrated Primary School, Castlereagh, in a pilot scheme to implement a 20 mph speed limit in the vicinity of schools. (AQW 1343/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: You will be aware that the issues surrounding Loughview Integrated Primary School were the subject of an Adjournment Debate in the Assembly on 16 October 2007, when I agreed that my Department's Roads Service would progress the required legislation to reduce the speed limit in the immediate vicinity of the school from 60mph to 40 mph.

Since I took office, I have received many requests to reduce the speed limits for traffic outside schools, and I can assure you that I take the issue of child safety at schools very seriously. Roads Service has installed a range of measures outside many schools to improve safety, including the provision of enhanced electronic signing at Loughview Integrated Primary School.

In addition, Roads Service has been researching the possibility of introducing part-time speed limits at schools at key times when children are arriving or leaving and has been preparing to pilot schemes at a small number of schools, to determine their effectiveness

in reducing vehicle speeds. The PSNI has agreed to ensure enforcement at these locations where the proposal is that a speed limit of 20 mph will be applied. However, these pilot schemes will be especially aimed at schools on roads where the national speed limit applies and where traffic speeds are high. Consequently, at present I have no plans to include Loughview Integrated Primary School within this programme.

Park and Ride Schemes

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to develop park and ride schemes at Bangor and Holywood. (AQW 1349/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan proposes the establishment of local park-and-ride sites for each of the main transport corridors into Belfast. These would be serviced by bus or rapid transit and would be supplemented by strategic sites which would make use of existing bus services and/or train services in the corridors which have rail routes.

Tillysburn has been identified as an appropriate location for a local bus-based park-and-ride site, to be served by a dedicated bus service into Belfast city centre.

Whilst my Department's Roads Service has no plans to provide a bus-based Park and Ride at Bangor or Holywood, it is intended that the proposed Tillysburn Park and Ride facility would be complemented by strategic rail-based park-and-ride facilities at railway stations and halts along the Bangor and Holywood transport corridor. This will provide a number of opportunities for car users to transfer to Public Transport for the rest of their journey into Belfast. In this regard, I am advised that Northern Ireland Railways proposes to provide park and ride facilities at Bangor Railway Station (with 120 spaces) and Holywood Railway Station (with 15 spaces) which are due to open in 2011.

Free Public Transport

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of providing free public transport to people who are under 60 and in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 1350/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently 104,353 persons aged under 60 and in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. I estimate that the total cost of providing free public transport to these individuals would be approximately £3.5 million per annum, with set up costs of £172,500. This estimate is based on the assumption that the take up rate of the concession would be 33 percent (compared to under ten percent for the current half fare scheme for those

in receipt of either mobility component of Disability Living Allowance) but that their use of public transport would be about the same.

It should be noted that my Department already spends about £600,000 a year providing the current half fare scheme. Moreover some people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, ie those who are under the age of five, those who are blind or those who are war disabled, are already eligible for free public transport.

Speed Restrictions

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken to reduce the speed of traffic on the Lower Braniel Road in East Belfast. (AQW 1356/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service receives many requests for the provision of traffic calming measures and although funding allocated to this type of work has increased over the years, demand still outweighs our capacity to meet all such requests and priorities have to be established. In prioritising this work, Roads Service attempts to concentrate the available resources in those areas where the need is greatest, in a fair and equitable manner.

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 consideration 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 and 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.

An assessment of Lower Braniel Road for the provision of traffic calming measures was conducted in August 2005 and indications showed that it scored sufficiently to be included in the traffic calming programme of works. However, during the legislative process, objections were received from a number of local residents and despite the efforts of Roads Service officials to resolve the issues raised, none of the residents were prepared to withdraw their objections.

This scheme is one of a number for which Roads Service has received objections and officials are

currently reviewing the details of all affected schemes to see how best they can be progressed.

I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager for Eastern Division to write to you and advise you of the outcome when the review of the Lower Braniel Road proposals has been completed.

Kilns Road, Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to provide a new footpath on the Kilns Road, Ballycastle, adjacent to Bunscoil an Chaistil; and to realign this road in order to improve road safety. (AQW 1365/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am pleased to inform you that my Department's Roads Service has proposals to realign the 'S' bend on the Kilns Road near Bunscoil an Chaistil which will include the relocation of its junction with Glentaisie Drive. It is also proposed to provide an adjacent footway on Kilns Road which will link to Glentaisie Drive, Altamanam Park and Broombeg View.

The proposals have been brought forward in association with Bunscoil an Chaistil who have agreed to make a funding contribution to the scheme. The scheme is presently at design stage and progress will be subject to land acquisition and the realisation of significant partnership funding, upon which agreement in principle has been reached, from the relevant funding body at Bunscoil an Chaistil.

Street Lighting

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to pilot solar-powered street lighting. (AQW 1389/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service regularly monitors developments in solar power technology for street lighting operations. At present, the available combinations of photo-voltaic cells (i.e., cells which convert light into electrical energy) and lamp types do not offer a viable solution for street lighting purposes. However, rapid developments in the efficiency of photo-voltaic cells and light sources such as LEDs (light emitting diodes), means that solar powered street lighting is likely to become a workable option in future. Roads Service officials will continue to monitor advances and will introduce trials at the earliest opportunity, when the technology can meet the needs of street lighting operations.

For your information, Roads Service already takes advantage of solar power for a number of other uses, including some traffic sign lighting applications and traffic counting equipment.

Road Structural and Maintenance Schemes

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the roads structural and maintenance schemes, particularly in rural areas, affected by his department's moratorium on expenditure. (AQW 1397/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has no moratorium on structural maintenance expenditure.

I would also point out that as part of the financial management process carried out by Roads Service a contingency plan, which addresses pressures within the capital budget, is in place. This should not, however, prevent Roads Service from meeting the targets established for the delivery of its capital programme.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the expenditure of his department's agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies on consultancy services; and to provide a breakdown of this expenditure, in the last year. (AQW 1398/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A breakdown of the expenditure incurred on external consultancy by the Department for Regional Development's agencies, during the 2006/07 financial year is set out below. The Department for Regional Development is not responsible for any Non Departmental Public Bodies.

DEPARTMENT: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

| Category Description | Expenditure 2006/07 £m |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Policy appraisal and review | 4.62 |
| Strategic management | 1.0 |
| Organisational development | 2.01 |
| Performance management | 0.06 |
| Accountancy | 0.26 |
| Feasibility study | 0.14 |
| Marketing | 0.04 |
| Other | 2.73 |
| Total | 10.86 |

Safety Barrier on the Newry to Omeath Road

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give urgent consideration to

the erection of a safety barrier on the main Newry to Omeath road, at Fathom Line on the canal side.

(AQW 1436/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: An analysis of statistics available to my Department's Roads Service indicates that accidents have occurred at random locations along the 7 km stretch of roadway from Newry to the Border.

Preliminary investigations suggest that a scheme to provide a barrier along the entire length of the road would cost in excess of £2 million and, in addition, while detailed surveys have not been conducted, it is considered that there may be a number of technical difficulties in providing such a barrier.

I have however asked Roads Service to investigate, with PSNI colleagues, the most recent accident when a car careered off the road into the canal, and to determine what localised action, if any, can be taken to improve safety on this stretch of road.

Road Safety Barriers

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he will give to the provision of road safety barriers at Lagmore Avenue in Dunmurry. (AQW 1503/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised me that following a road traffic accident on Lagmore Avenue, an assessment for the provision of a safety barrier to the rear of 286 Lagmore Meadows was carried out in accordance with the Department's current Road Restraint Risk Assessment Process (RRRAP). This concluded that a road restraint system could not be justified at this location.

As a result of your question, Roads Service has conducted a review of the assessment, taking into account the fact that Lagmore Avenue is 1.25km in length with a 30mph speed limit and has traffic calming measures. I am advised that following consideration of all factors, Roads Service remains of the opinion that Lagmore Avenue does not meet the requirements for the provision of a road restraint, and accordingly, there are currently no plans to provide such a system along this stretch of road.

Water Supply at Lyngrove Hill, Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will carry out an investigation into the ongoing problems experienced by residents of Lyngrove Hill in Glenavy, in relation to water supply

in the area; and what steps will be taken by NI Water in order to rectify the situation as soon as possible.
(AQW 1508/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a number of complaints about low water pressure were received in April this year from the residents of Lyngrove Estate, Glenavy. An extensive investigation carried out by Northern Ireland Water identified a hydraulic problem affecting a length of main in the distribution system. A scheme for the replacement of this length of main has been approved and it is anticipated it should be completed within the next 3 months. Northern Ireland Water is confident that this will rectify the problem.

Hedge Cutting

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will confirm that (i) approval was given to the recent cutting of verges and hedges along the B80 road from Enniskillen to Tempo; (ii) consultation on this work was carried out with property owners; and (iii) the cutting of hedges during October is in accordance with his department's guidelines.
(AQW 1531/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that the recent cutting of verges and hedges along the B80 road from Tempo to Enniskillen was carried out by my Department's Roads Service. All the material cut was growing either on, or in some cases, across public verges, within Roads Service's control. As such, no approval was required and consequently, it was not necessary to consult with any property owners.

Roads Service is acutely aware of the likely safety implications when an estimated 10,000 spectators congregate in this area for the Tempo Stage of Rally Ireland. In an effort to minimise the conflict between pedestrians and passing traffic, Roads Service wished to encourage parking well off the carriageway.

While the Department's guidelines would, for environmental reasons, endeavour to have all such work carried out in early spring, public safety took priority in this case.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Shared Future Housing

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to designate the Loughview housing estate in Holywood as a 'shared future' housing area.
(AQW 1335/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): There are currently no plans to designate Loughview Estate in Holywood as a "Shared Future" housing area. The Housing Executive does however have a social regeneration strategy for the Loughview Estate. Consultation is currently underway with the community to prepare a Neighbourhood Vision & Action Plan for the estate.

External Maintenance and Refurbishment Schemes

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the last five years, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's expenditure on external maintenance and refurbishment schemes, in each of the 36 areas within the Coleraine Borough Council area.
(AQW 1429/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer to the reply I gave my honourable Friend and Member for West Tyrone, Allan Bresland MLA, in AQW 643/08 on 15 October 2007, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Social Housing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to ensure that the maximum amount of social housing is included in the Carvill Group's proposals for the development of the old Sirocco Works in Belfast, which includes almost 2200 residential units.
(AQW 1437/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Carvill Group has recently submitted a Master Plan for the development of the former Sirocco site outlining proposals which include around 2,200 residential units. Detailed planning applications will not be made until early in 2008. The Carvill Group is currently engaged in consultation about the provision of social accommodation within this development on a 'shared future' basis.

Houses of Multiple Occupation

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of registered Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in South Belfast; (ii) when she expects to complete the register of HMOs in South Belfast; and (iii) the number of streets in South Belfast that currently exceed the proposed limits for the number of registered HMOs.
(AQW 1440/08)

The Minister for Social Development: According to the HMO database, the number of HMOs currently

specified for registration in South Belfast is 2130. The number of HMOs in South Belfast registered under the Northern Ireland HMO Registration Scheme to date is 356. All of the HMOs specified for registration are scheduled to be completed by February 2013. I do not find this timetable acceptable and have asked the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to review the HMO strategy and to increase the rate of registration.

The draft HMO Plan for Belfast, as issued by the Planning Service, seeks to manage the spread of HMOs throughout Belfast and sets a limit on the number of HMOs permissible in various parts of South Belfast. With the information available it is likely that most, if not all of the streets in South Belfast exceed the proposed limits for the number of HMOs.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1451/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Documents detailing a breakdown of the Department for Social Development's Resource and Capital bids have been placed in the Assembly Library. The tables below show a summary of the bids made, the allocation given to the Department and the allocation expressed as a percentage of bids made.

SUMMARY OF RESOURCE BIDS

| | 08/09 £'000 | 09/10 £'000 | 10/11 £'000 |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Housing | 16,490 | 23,699 | 29,574 |
| Urban Regeneration | 6,697 | 7,233 | 5,424 |
| Social Security Agency | 50,616 | 39,861 | 46,670 |
| Child Support Agency | 225 | 967 | 8,256 |
| Core Department | 800 | 1,300 | 1,700 |
| Total Bids Made | 74,828 | 73,060 | 91,624 |
| Allocation from the Department of Finance & Personnel | 31,700 | 42,000 | 59,900 |
| Percentage of bids met | 42.4% | 57.5% | 65.4% |

SUMMARY OF NET CAPITAL BIDS

| | 08/09 £'000 | 09/10 £'000 | 10/11 £'000 |
|--------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Housing | 300,143 | 319,617 | 372,576 |
| Urban Regeneration | 216,553 | 179,615 | -23,549 |

| | 08/09 £'000 | 09/10 £'000 | 10/11 £'000 |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Social Security Agency | 28,992 | 14,816 | 7,164 |
| Total Bids Made | 545,688 | 514,048 | 356,191 |
| Allocation from the Strategic Investment Board | 153,736 | 145,311 | 223,375 |
| Percentage of bids met | 28.2% | 28.3% | 62.7 % |

Pension Credit

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that all pensioners in Northern Ireland who are entitled to pension credit actually receive it. (AQW 1554/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In May of this year, following the successful Benefit Uptake Programmes in 2005/06 and 2006/07 which resulted in an additional £7 million for pensioners, I launched the Social Security Agency's 2007/08 Benefit Uptake programme. This year's programme will include a number of targeted exercises designed to increase Pension Credit uptake, including:

- the offer of a full benefit assessment to 5,000 clients to ensure they are receiving their entitlement to the Guaranteed element of Pension Credit;
- a focused mailshot to over 60,000 clients in receipt of State Pension to ensure they are aware of their possible entitlement to the savings element of Pension Credit; and
- contact with 15,500 new State Pension clients who will be advised of their potential eligibility to Pension Credit. Those deemed more at risk will receive follow-up contact to further encourage the making of a claim.

The Agency also provides a range of services to ensure that older people are advised of their potential entitlement to benefits. These include outreach services, participation in local promotional activity, the production of specific publications, some in minority ethnic languages, and general assistance with advice and information through our network of local and centralised offices.

Fuel Poverty

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not she will undertake focused research to establish the links between fuel poverty and winter deaths. (AQW 1555/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department published its report "Fuel Poverty, Climate and Mortality" as a Northern Ireland Statistics and

Research Agency Occasional Paper on 15 November 2007, a copy of which has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Right to Buy Scheme

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses that have been sold by each NI Housing Executive district office area under the 'right to buy' scheme in the last five years. (AQW 1561/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties sold to tenants under the Statutory House Sales Scheme is as follows:

HOUSE SALES BY NIHE DISTRICT OFFICE 2002/03 - 2006/07

| | 02/03 | 03/04 | 04/05 | 05/06 | 06/07 | 5yr Total |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|
| Belfast 1 | 296 | 197 | 77 | 75 | 48 | 693 |
| Belfast 2 | 205 | 136 | 72 | 76 | 66 | 555 |
| Belfast 3 | 365 | 204 | 117 | 114 | 69 | 869 |
| Belfast 4 | 271 | 201 | 92 | 60 | 82 | 706 |
| Belfast 5 | 156 | 95 | 42 | 40 | 73 | 406 |
| Belfast 6 | 110 | 104 | 72 | 72 | 78 | 436 |
| Belfast 7 | 202 | 142 | 67 | 45 | 64 | 520 |
| | | | | | | |
| Bangor | 127 | 170 | 66 | 77 | 36 | 476 |
| Newtownards | 172 | 232 | 130 | 77 | 85 | 696 |
| Castlereagh | 215 | 205 | 125 | 78 | 81 | 704 |
| Lisburn | 251 | 284 | 120 | 113 | 107 | 875 |
| Dairy Farm | 254 | 214 | 110 | 82 | 76 | 736 |
| Downpatrick | 193 | 202 | 104 | 59 | 49 | 607 |
| | | | | | | |
| Banbridge | 124 | 117 | 75 | 45 | 23 | 384 |
| Newry | 266 | 312 | 131 | 115 | 77 | 901 |
| Armagh | 135 | 151 | 58 | 59 | 50 | 453 |
| Lurgan/ Brownlow | 124 | 168 | 91 | 74 | 55 | 512 |
| Portadown | 49 | 84 | 40 | 35 | 47 | 255 |
| Dungannon | 141 | 119 | 59 | 50 | 45 | 414 |
| Fermanagh | 166 | 135 | 88 | 86 | 69 | 544 |

| | 02/03 | 03/04 | 04/05 | 05/06 | 06/07 | 5yr Total |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------------|
| Ballymena | 147 | 167 | 141 | 105 | 66 | 626 |
| Antrim | 168 | 173 | 121 | 113 | 93 | 668 |
| Newtownabbey 1 | 123 | 130 | 65 | 53 | 70 | 441 |
| Newtownabbey 2 | 117 | 115 | 94 | 60 | 57 | 443 |
| Carrick | 176 | 156 | 74 | 47 | 64 | 517 |
| Larne | 66 | 82 | 36 | 30 | 39 | 253 |
| Ballycastle | 39 | 54 | 34 | 36 | 23 | 186 |
| Ballymoney | 73 | 79 | 54 | 41 | 37 | 284 |
| Coleraine | 133 | 108 | 85 | 80 | 53 | 459 |
| | | | | | | |
| Waterloo Place | 222 | 204 | 103 | 57 | 52 | 638 |
| Waterside | 148 | 138 | 80 | 82 | 73 | 521 |
| Collon Terrace | 206 | 242 | 126 | 95 | 76 | 745 |
| Limavady | 111 | 96 | 56 | 57 | 26 | 346 |
| Magherafelt | 119 | 103 | 51 | 57 | 43 | 373 |
| Strabane | 181 | 153 | 82 | 68 | 70 | 554 |
| Omagh | 111 | 84 | 60 | 57 | 47 | 359 |
| Cookstown | 92 | 96 | 55 | 52 | 32 | 327 |
| Total | | | | | | 19,482 |

Shared Water Supply Pipes

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his department's policy in relation to the maintenance of shared water supply pipes in Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing developments, but where some homes are now privately owned. (AQW 1589/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive responds promptly to repair requests relating to burst or damaged pipes within the curtilage of any dwelling in its ownership. It will contribute an appropriate proportion of any expense incurred by a private owner in repairing a common supply pipe which also serves its dwellings.

Northern Ireland Water has advised me that it has no responsibility for the maintenance of shared water supply pipes in Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing developments, whether or not the property is private or social.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 23 November 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Victims' Groups

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 617/08, to detail what issues relating to victims of the Troubles were discussed during the deputy First Minister's meeting with the Disabled Police Officers' Association. (AQW 1481/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The deputy First Minister met representatives of the Disabled Police Officers' Association on 21st May 2007. This was their first meeting and as such was very much exploratory in nature. The meeting was constructive and the deputy First Minister offered to meet the group again in the future.

LGBT Funding

Mr Wells asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail all funding it has awarded to organisations working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 1512/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Details are as follows:

| Year | Amount (£) |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| 2003/2004 | £1,000 |
| 2004/2005 | £2,200 |
| 2005/2006 | £3,500 |
| 2006/2007 | £50,622.52 |
| 2007/2008 (to end October 2007) | £50,500 |

Former Secretary of State, Peter Hain, awarded a short-term financial package of £230,000 to the LGBT sector to roll out over two years (06/07 and 07/08).

No new funding arrangement has been agreed.

Junior Ministers

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether or not the visits of the junior Minister to China and Zurich earlier this year were in an official capacity, or if these were private trips. (AQW 1542/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Junior Ministers Paisley and Kelly have not made any official visits to China or Switzerland.

Draft Programme for Government 2008-11

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to identify one key goal in the draft Programme for Government 2008-11, within each Government Department, that will promote good relations. (AQW 1579/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government aims to provide a strategic framework and focus across Government to address the key challenges the Executive face and grasp the opportunities available to build a better future for everyone. Those challenges are cross-cutting and they can only be addressed by a joined-up and co-ordinated approach across Government, rather than a narrow focus on departmental areas of responsibility. Recognising this, the key goals outlined in the Programme for Government are not framed along departmental lines, but are goals for the entire Executive.

Every one of the priorities and key goals in the draft Programme for Government, will contribute to the Executive's aim of building a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in years to come. The Executive's priority is to promote tolerance, inclusion and health and wellbeing as set out in the Programme for Government.

Every Government Department has a statutory duty to promote good relations under section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, as the deputy First Minister stated during oral answers to questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 22 October, "we will bring forward detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration". We will bring forward detailed plans early in the New Year.

The Executive recognises that effectively promoting good relations requires action not only to promote tolerance, but also to address inequalities, disadvantage and exclusion both at a local and regional level, and ensure that everyone can contribute to and benefit from increased prosperity and live in sustainable, safe and attractive environments.

This approach is reflected throughout the draft Programme for Government document and is directly addressed under a number of the key goals and the associated PSA framework. Delivery of the overall Programme for Government will therefore, contribute to the promotion of good relations.

Byron Review - Children and New Technology

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether or not it has been contacted by the Byron Review - Children and New Technology; and if it intends to respond to any such request. (AQW 1675/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are aware of the Byron Review looking at the risks to children and young people from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games.

We are very supportive of Dr Byron's review. However we have not been contacted by her and so we cannot say how we would respond until we have had sight of any request.

Pledge of Office

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is its assessment of whether or not all members of the Executive are abiding by the terms of the Pledge of Office in relation to (i) commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means; (ii) actively encouraging everyone in the community to co-operate fully with the PSNI in tackling crime in all areas; and (iii) actively supporting all the policing and criminal justice institutions. (AQW 1798/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: All members of the Executive affirmed the Pledge of Office on taking up their portfolios on 8 May 2007. All Ministers continue to abide by the terms of that pledge.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Community Facilities at Seskinore Forest, Co. Tyrone

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to upgrade community facilities at Seskinore forest, Co. Tyrone. (AQW 1382/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): My Department has no plans to upgrade facilities at Seskinore Forest. The buildings are no longer required by Forest Service for operational purposes. Following an expression of interest competition, Forest Service has engaged with a local Community Group regarding its interest in the future use of the buildings and this remains on-going. In the meantime the Community Group secure permission on an ad hoc basis to use the facilities.

Forestry

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the level of support available to farmers who are interested in forestry. (AQW 1385/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, my Department's Forest Service can provide grant aid and advice to help farmers create new woodland and manage existing woodland.

Standard grants are available for creation of conventional woodland at £1,850 per hectare for broadleaves and £1,250 per hectare for conifers. Support for establishment of Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) willow is available, for up to 40% or 50% of eligible costs, up to a ceiling of £1,000 per hectare.

In addition, some farmers may be eligible for annual payments to compensate for agricultural income forgone by creating woodland. Payments are made for 15 years for broadleaf woodland and 10 years for conifer woodland. The payment rates for new applicants vary depending on their land category: Arable or improved land outside a Less Favoured Area (LFA) receives £270 per hectare, in a Disadvantaged Area (DA) it receives £220 per hectare and in a Severely Disadvantaged Area (SDA) it receives £160 per hectare. Unimproved land outside a LFA is ineligible for payments, in a DA it receives £60 per hectare, and in a SDA it receives £60 per ha hectare.

Support is also available for farmers with existing woodlands in the form of a Woodland Environment

Grant which assists significant enhancement of biodiversity at 50% of agreed costs and a Sustainable Forestry Operations Grant which assists environmental improvements over a five year period.

Tourism on the Foyle River System

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the role of the Loughs Agency in promoting tourism on the Foyle river system. (AQW 1392/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Part 6 of Annex 2 of The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 provides the Loughs Agency with the following functions:

- 1 Promotion of development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough for commercial and recreational purposes.
 - 1.1 This function is restricted to marine, fishery and aquaculture matters and will include the preparation of a strategic plan for commercial and recreational development of the Foyle and Carlingford Areas, and the promotion (including grant aid) and co-ordination of the delivery of the development strategy.
2. Existing functions of the Foyle Fisheries Commission in regard to inland fisheries conservation, protection, management and development, and equivalent functions in respect of Carlingford Lough.
 - 2.1 The Body will exercise the functions formerly exercised by the Foyle Fisheries Commission, which will be dissolved, and corresponding functions in relation to the Carlingford Area. Legislation will be introduced to provide for the exercise of an inland fisheries development function in relation to the Foyle and Carlingford Areas.
3. Development and licensing of aquaculture.
4. Development of marine tourism.
 - 4.1 This function will include the preparation of a strategic plan for marine tourism in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas and the promotion and marketing of those areas (including grant aid) and co-ordination of the delivery of the development strategy.

In fulfilment of its functions, the Loughs Agency has prepared, and is to deliver, a Marine Tourism Development Strategy in partnership with local authorities; port authorities; regional tourism bodies, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board; Board Failte and Tourism Ireland Ltd; yacht and power boat clubs; the Marine Coastguard Agency; the Environment and Heritage Service and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The

draft Strategy was consulted on in 2006. This Strategy makes provision for the strategic development of angling in the Foyle river system and is to be considered by the North/South Ministerial Council at the next Sectoral meeting.

Agri-Food and Biosciences

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the exchanges that have taken place between her Department and the Department of Agriculture in the Republic of Ireland on issues relating to agri-food and biosciences, since May 2007; and what plans she has to work towards the development of an all-island institute to deal with programmes common to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1411/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: At this point in time, I have no plans to seek to develop an all-island institute in relation to agri-food and biosciences programmes, nor have there been any exchanges between my Department and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin since May 2007 on this.

However, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is very active in maintaining and developing links with scientific bodies throughout Ireland in pursuit of mutually beneficial research and scientific opportunities.

Castleberg Nursery

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's intentions in relation to future production at Castleberg nursery. (AQW 1432/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department intends to cease plant production at Castleberg nursery by April 2008. The decision to cease plant production was taken in May 2006, and production has been progressively run down since then. The reasons for the decision included cost issues, improving efficiencies and increased operational flexibilities.

No redundancies were envisaged due to the scope to offer alternative forest work and this remains the case. An implementation plan dealing with the impacts of the closure has been developed and discussed in detail with all staff involved.

Construction of Gabions

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her department has to

construct gabions on Killyclogher Burn at the rear of Knockmore bungalows, to prevent the further erosion of properties at this location. (AQW 1433/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has no plans, at present, to construct gabions on the Killyclogher Burn as the erosion is not affecting dwellings and the level of expenditure to provide further bank protection to the properties at Knocknamoe Bungalows could not be deemed cost beneficial and therefore not justified.

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the longest period of time her Department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1483/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Our figures cover the period 8th May 2007 to date. The figures stated are working days and cover the 4 categories mentioned above.

| From | Days taken to Reply |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| MP | 31 |
| MLA | 73 |
| Councillor | 36 |
| Member of the Public | 59 |

Coastline Defences

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to state which agency within her Department is responsible for identifying areas of land around the coastline of Northern Ireland that are susceptible to the impact of rising sea levels; and to detail the location of these areas. (AQW 1565/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD's Rivers Agency, acts as the drainage and flood defence authority for Northern Ireland with the primary aim of reducing risk to life and damage to property from flooding from rivers and the sea. The Agency is currently developing coastal flood risk maps in the context of the broader requirement for mapping all flood risk areas across Northern Ireland. The first series of maps will be at a strategic level denoting the undefended floodplains ie the areas at risk of flooding from the present day sea levels and in the absence of current sea defences. These maps are expected to be available in Spring 2008. A second series of maps will

then be produced which will detail sea defences that provide a measure of protection from sea inundation.

Bovine Tuberculosis and Brucellosis

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the effectiveness of her Department's strategy in combating bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis in the North Antrim constituency. (AQW 1567/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The information in my response relates to my Department's Coleraine and Ballymena Divisional Veterinary Office areas, as my Department does not hold information on a constituency basis.

The Bovine Tuberculosis (TB) programme in the North is based on the detection of diseased or high risk animals, the compulsory removal of these animals from their herd of origin to slaughter, and the restriction of movements of cattle from infected herds until they are tested clear. Generally, individual animals that test positive are removed rather than the whole herd.

Since 2002, there has been clear evidence of a significant decline in the incidence of TB here. The herd incidence peaked in 2002 at 9.93% and has now dropped to 5.23% as at the end of September. For the period September 2004 to September 2007, the overall herd incidence for TB has fallen by 48% across the Coleraine and Ballymena Divisions.

The brucellosis control programme in the North is based on the detection of diseased or high risk animals, compulsory removal of these animals for slaughter, removal of all in-contact animals, group or whole herd depopulation, and immediate restriction of all movements from or to infected herds until they are depopulated or tested clear. Generally whole herds are depopulated when infected animals are detected.

Over the last few years, there has been clear evidence of significant decline in the incidence of brucellosis from its peak at the start of 2002 when the herd incidence reached 1.43%. Overall, the trend remained downwards until 2006-07 when specific localised disease clusters halted the decline. This recent rise peaked in October 2006 at 0.6% but has since levelled off. The annual herd incidence for brucellosis at the end of September 2007 was 0.52%, and the incidence across the Coleraine and Ballymena Divisions was 0.24%.

Based on the current figures, my assessment is that overall my Department's strategy has been effective in combating Bovine TB and brucellosis in the North Antrim area.

Tuberculosis and Brucellosis in Livestock

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of confirmed cases of tuberculosis or brucellosis in livestock in North Antrim in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1571/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

THE ANNUAL NUMBER OF CONFIRMED TUBERCULOSIS CASES IN NORTH ANTRIM

| | |
|---------|----|
| 2006-07 | 40 |
| 2005-06 | 61 |
| 2004-05 | 96 |

THE ANNUAL NUMBER OF CONFIRMED BRUCELLOSIS CASES IN NORTH ANTRIM

| | |
|---------|---|
| 2006-07 | 2 |
| 2005-06 | 0 |
| 2004-05 | 1 |

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

National Memorial Committee

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a timescale within which the National Memorial Committee will report.

(AQW 1371/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The National Memorial Committee was launched on 15 October 2003. It is a committee which is independent of Government and as such is outside the remit of my Department. Questions relating to this committee should be directed to the committee chair, Mr David Campbell. Mr Campbell can be reached at National Memorial Committee, Room 10, Third Floor, Interpoint Building, 20-24 York St, Belfast, BT14 1AQ.

TABLE 1: RESOURCE BIDS

| Bid | Title | Resource amount required | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| | | 2008-09 £m | 2009-10 £m | 2010-11 £m | Total £m |
| Resource Consequentials* | Relates to ISNI 2 capital projects (inc PRONI non cash costs) | 5.337 | 5.883 | 10.315 | 21.535 |
| | | 5.337 | 5.883 | 10.315 | 21.535 |

National Memorial Committee

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the terms of reference for the National Memorial Committee. (AQW 1372/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The National Memorial Committee was launched on 15 October 2003. It is a committee which is independent of Government and as such is outside the remit of my Department. Questions relating to this committee should be directed to the committee chair, Mr David Campbell. Mr Campbell can be reached at National Memorial Committee, Room 10, Third Floor, Interpoint Building, 20-24 York St, Belfast, BT14 1AQ.

National Memorial Committee

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the current membership of the National Memorial Committee. (AQW 1373/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The National Memorial Committee was launched on 15 October 2003. It is a committee which is independent of Government and as such is outside the remit of my Department. Questions relating to this committee should be directed to the committee chair, Mr David Campbell. Mr Campbell can be reached at National Memorial Committee, Room 10, Third Floor, Interpoint Building, 20-24 York St, Belfast, BT14 1AQ.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his Department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1445/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that this question was due for answer on the 20 November, and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

The Department's resource bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review were as follows:

| Bid | Title | Resource amount required | | | |
|--|--|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | 2008-09 £m | 2009-10 £m | 2010-11 £m | Total £m |
| Olympics 2012 & Sports Strategy | Sport Strategy (including Olympics) | 11.825 | 21.323 | 25.447 | 58.595 |
| | | 11.825 | 21.323 | 25.447 | 58.595 |
| Culture and Linguistic Diversity and Waterways Programmes | Sign Language | 0.500 | 0.500 | 0.500 | 1.500 |
| | Ulster Scots Agency - St. Andrews Agreement | 0.750 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 2.750 |
| | Waterways Ireland | 0.000 | 0.020 | 0.150 | 0.170 |
| | Foras na Gaeilge | 0.443 | 0.443 | 0.443 | 1.329 |
| | Ulster Scots Agency | 1.851 | 2.913 | 3.226 | 7.990 |
| | ILBF - to increase provision to 100hrs per annum | 1.000 | 2.305 | 4.000 | 7.305 |
| | Irish Language Act - DCAL unit | 0.141 | 0.185 | 0.000 | 0.326 |
| | | 4.685 | 7.366 | 9.319 | 21.370 |
| Creative Northern Ireland | Parity funding for Arts Council | 6.731 | 7.017 | 7.258 | 21.006 |
| | Creative Accreditation Scheme | 0.120 | 0.240 | 0.420 | 0.780 |
| | Cultural Production Fund | 2.498 | 2.498 | 2.498 | 7.494 |
| | Creative Industries Seed Fund | 1.000 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 5.000 |
| | | 10.349 | 11.755 | 12.176 | 34.280 |
| Priority Funding Skills and Science Children and Young People | Skills and Science (Armagh Observatory) | 0.205 | 0.215 | 0.225 | 0.645 |
| | Skills and Science (Armagh Planetarium) | 0.200 | 0.200 | 0.200 | 0.600 |
| | Skills and Science (W5) | 0.824 | 0.848 | 0.874 | 2.546 |
| | Libraries - Bookstart/Young Adults | 2.000 | 2.000 | 2.000 | 6.000 |
| | Schools Film Club | 0.200 | 0.200 | 0.200 | 0.600 |
| | Mainstream Creative Learning Centres | 0.565 | 0.565 | 0.565 | 1.695 |
| | Creative Youth Partnerships | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 3.000 |
| | Children & Young People (Sport NI) | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.300 |
| | Sound and Vision (W5) | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.300 |
| | | 5.194 | 5.228 | 5.264 | 15.686 |
| Accessing and Connecting | Connecting Collections - Digitisation NMNI | 0.600 | 0.880 | 0.920 | 2.400 |
| Collections - Digitisation | Digitisation - Libraries | 0.500 | 0.500 | 0.500 | 1.500 |
| | Annual Digitisation Exercise - PRONI | 0.103 | 0.109 | 0.115 | 0.327 |
| | New Accommodation - AWAKEN - PRONI | 0.050 | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.250 |
| | E-CATNI write-off and IT res conseq - PRONI | 0.226 | 0.220 | 0.213 | 0.659 |
| | Front Line Services - PRONI | 0.215 | 0.345 | 0.477 | 1.037 |

| Bid | Title | Resource amount required | | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| | | 2008-09 £m | 2009-10 £m | 2010-11 £m | Total £m |
| | | 1.694 | 2.154 | 2.325 | 6.173 |
| RPA and Reform | Library Authority Start-up costs | 6.150 | 6.300 | 2.310 | 14.760 |
| | RPA bid - FCB into dept. incl receipts | 0.755 | 0.783 | 0.813 | 2.351 |
| | Shared Service Centre - Computer/ICT costs | 0.000 | 0.350 | 0.350 | 0.700 |
| | Digital Preservation Repository | 0.162 | 0.184 | 0.206 | 0.552 |
| | AOAP Non Cash Costs | 0.511 | 0.493 | 0.466 | 1.470 |
| | Admin Costs | 0.168 | - | - | 0.168 |
| | | 7.746 | 8.110 | 4.145 | 20.001 |
| Salmon and Eel management | European Fisheries Fund | 0.750 | 0.750 | 0.750 | 2.250 |
| | Salmon and Eel management plans | 0.475 | 1.337 | 1.625 | 3.437 |
| | Public Angling Estate | 0.075 | 0.083 | 0.091 | 0.249 |
| | | 1.300 | 2.170 | 2.466 | 5.936 |
| Lifelong Learning | Maximising Access to NI Library Service | 4.700 | 4.100 | 4.300 | 13.100 |
| | | 4.700 | 4.100 | 4.300 | 13.100 |
| Overall Total | | 52.830 | 68.089 | 75.757 | 196.676 |

The Department's capital bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review were as follows:

TABLE 2: CAPITAL BIDS

| Bid | Title | Capital Amount Required | | | CSR |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | 2008/09 £m | 2009/10 £m | 2010/11 £m | Total £m |
| Libraries | Receipts | - 1.000 | - 1.000 | - 1.000 | - 3.000 |
| | Minor Capital | 0.500 | 0.500 | 0.500 | 1.500 |
| | Vehicle Replacement | - | 0.260 | 0.280 | 0.540 |
| | New Library Authority | 8.913 | 15.442 | 15.791 | 40.146 |
| | Belfast Central Library | - | - | 11.500 | 11.500 |
| | | 8.413 | 15.202 | 27.071 | 50.686 |
| Arts & Creativity | Old Museum Arts Centre | 3.737 | 3.949 | - | 7.686 |
| | Gallery Provision | 1.710 | 0.750 | - | 2.460 |
| | Lyric Players Theatre | 2.500 | 2.500 | 2.500 | 7.500 |
| | Crescent Arts Centre | 2.248 | 1.250 | - | 3.498 |
| | Arts Council minor capital | 0.041 | 0.031 | 0.031 | 0.103 |
| | North West challenge | 2.400 | - | - | 2.400 |
| | Oh Yeah | 1.000 | - | - | 1.000 |
| | Arts Infrastructure | 1.600 | 2.100 | 10.600 | 14.300 |
| | | 15.236 | 10.580 | 13.131 | 38.947 |

| | | | | | |
|----------------|---|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Museums | Receipts | - 4.600 | - | - | - 4.600 |
| | Ulster Museum Refurb | 3.135 | - | - | 3.135 |
| | Minor Capital | 0.050 | 0.250 | 0.250 | 0.550 |
| | Armagh O&P Oper | 0.050 | 0.050 | 0.050 | 0.150 |
| | W5 Renewals | 0.400 | 0.400 | 0.400 | 1.200 |
| | Resurfacing car park | 0.250 | - | - | 0.250 |
| | Capital Maintenance | 1.200 | 2.800 | 1.200 | 5.200 |
| | Collections Resource Centre | - | 1.000 | 11.600 | 12.600 |
| | Cultra Manor | - | 1.945 | - | 1.945 |
| | Armagh Ob Library | - | 1.500 | 1.500 | 3.000 |
| | Accessing and Connecting Collections | 0.080 | 0.040 | - | 0.120 |
| | UM Redevelopment (Galleries) | 1.500 | 1.500 | - | 3.000 |
| | UFTM Visitor Centre | 0.240 | 2.340 | 5.000 | 7.580 |
| | UAFP - Visitor Centre (including gallery) | 0.160 | 2.340 | 4.200 | 6.700 |
| | New World Area | - | 2.000 | - | 2.000 |
| | Retail and Commercial Investment | - | 1.255 | - | 1.255 |
| | | 2.465 | 17.420 | 24.200 | 44.085 |
| Sports | House of Sport Refurbishment | 0.200 | - | - | 0.200 |
| | Soccer Strategy | 2.667 | - | - | 2.667 |
| | Tollymore | 3.270 | 0.707 | - | 3.977 |
| | Multi-Sports Stadium | 10.000 | 30.000 | 30.000 | 70.000 |
| | 50 m pool | 7.500 | 6.500 | 1.000 | 15.000 |
| | 2012 Sports Facilities | 7.500 | 12.500 | 18.000 | 38.000 |
| | North Belfast Learning | - | 0.152 | - | 0.152 |
| | SCNI Capital | 0.071 | 0.104 | 0.085 | 0.260 |
| | Safe Sports Grounds | 5.900 | 4.500 | 4.500 | 14.900 |
| | Sports Strategy Implementation 2007 -17 | 5.000 | 7.000 | 12.000 | 24.000 |
| | SINI Capital | 4.000 | 0.250 | 0.250 | 4.500 |
| IWIF | Waterways Ireland HQ | 2.400 | 0.200 | - | 2.600 |
| | Waterways Ire Cap | 1.027 | 1.027 | 1.027 | 3.081 |
| | Recurring Fisheries | 0.154 | 0.277 | 0.154 | 0.585 |
| | Recurring Water Rec | 0.123 | 0.123 | 0.123 | 0.369 |
| | Movangher Bridge | 0.205 | - | - | 0.205 |
| | Canal Restoration | - | - | 1.500 | 1.500 |
| | | 3.909 | 1.627 | 2.804 | 8.340 |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| PRONI | Digital Preservation repository | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.100 | 0.300 |
| | New Accommodation | 11.000 | 14.000 | 1.700 | 26.700 |
| | Sale of Site (Balmoral) | - | - | - 6.500 | - 6.500 |
| | Gen Equip & IT refurb | 0.200 | 0.200 | 0.200 | 0.600 |
| | Accessing and Connecting Collections | 0.025 | 0.025 | 0.025 | 0.075 |
| | | 11.325 | 14.325 | - 4.475 | 21.175 |
| DCAL | DCAL Computers | 0.045 | - | - | 0.045 |
| | | 0.045 | - | - | 0.045 |
| Total Bids | | 87.501 | 120.867 | 128.566 | 336.934 |

Comment

The nature of the CSR settlement is such that DFP did not specifically approve or reject these bids but acknowledged that it was appropriate to increase the total funding available to the Department to discharge its functions.

Additional funds were subsequently allocated across the objective and spending areas as detailed in the tables 3 and 4 below.

These allocations are based on Ministerial and Departmental priorities, some of which are described in the summary of the draft Programme for Government.

TABLE 3: CURRENT RESOURCE ALLOCATION

| Unit of Service | Resource Amount Required | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| | 2008-09 £m | 2009-10 £m | 2010-11 £m | Total £m |
| Sports | 1.500 | 3.000 | 7.000 | 11.500 |
| Culture and Language Diversity | 0.800 | 1.100 | 1.350 | 3.250 |
| Museums | 1.361 | 1.704 | 2.800 | 5.865 |
| Library Authority | 1.250 | 3.000 | 4.000 | 8.250 |
| Public Records Office (NI) (inc non cash costs) | 0.500 | 1.434 | 3.200 | 5.134 |
| Arts | 1.000 | 1.500 | 4.250 | 6.750 |
| Inland Fisheries and Inland Waterways | 1.489 | 1.762 | 2.300 | 5.551 |
| Total | 7.90 | 13.50 | 24.90 | 46.30 |

TABLE 4: CURRENT NET CAPITAL ALLOCATION

| Unit of Service | Capital Amount Required | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| | 2008-09 £m | 2009-10 £m | 2010-11 £m | Total £m |
| Libraries | 3.100 | 12.500 | 13.000 | 28.600 |
| Arts | 15.100 | 8.500 | 8.900 | 32.500 |
| Museums | 0.300 | 0.700 | 16.600 | 17.600 |
| Sport | 31.200 | 36.500 | 44.600 | 112.300 |
| IWIF | 3.500 | 1.600 | 1.300 | 6.400 |
| PRONI | 11.300 | 14.300 | (4.500) | 21.100 |

| Unit of Service | Capital Amount Required | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| | 2008-09 £m | 2009-10 £m | 2010-11 £m | Total £m |
| Total | 64.500 | 74.100 | 79.900 | 218.500 |

I trust you find this information helpful.

LGBT Community Funding

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail all funding awarded by (i) the Northern Ireland Events Company; and (ii) the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, to organisations working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, since 1 April 2001. (AQW 1511/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The table below details the support provided by the Northern Ireland Events Company; and the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, to organisations working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, since 1 April 2001:

| Source | Recipient | Year | Award |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|------|---------|
| Northern Ireland Events Company | Belfast Pride Festival | 2006 | £3,000 |
| | Belfast Pride | 2007 | £6,110 |
| Arts Council for Northern Ireland | Queer Space | 2005 | £7,500 |
| | Cara Friend | 2006 | £10,000 |

In addition the Arts Council has provided funding to the following organisations, who work with marginalised LGBT communities, as part of their programme activity: the Gasyard, Wheelworks and New Belfast Community Arts Initiative

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the longest period of time his Department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1604/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The longest period of time taken to provide a Ministerial reply is as follows:

- a Member of Parliament – 24 working days
- a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly – 25 working days
- a Councillor – 10 working days
- a member of the public – 43 working days

Sport and Recreation Facilities

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will provide information in relation to the provision of sport and recreation facilities in Northern Ireland, compared to the provision of such facilities in (i) Great Britain; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1614/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) has undertaken a comparison of the availability of sport and recreation facilities in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The table below indicates the comparative shortfall in NI based on regions of the UK of similar population size and area. Figures for the Republic of Ireland are not yet available and no comparison can therefore be made currently.

| Facility Type | Shortfall |
|--|-----------|
| Athletics Tracks | - 6 |
| Athletics Tracks (with indoor training facilities) | - 1 to -2 |
| Grass Pitches | - 225 |
| Synthetic Pitches | - 100 |
| Swimming Pools (25m) | - 20 |
| Swimming Pools (50m) | - 1 to -2 |
| Indoor Tennis Centres | - 4 |
| Sports Halls (+12 court size) | - 1 to -2 |
| Sports Halls (+ 3 court size) | - 50 |
| Ski Slopes | - 4 |
| Ice Rinks | - 1 |
| Velodrome | - 1 |

Media Coverage of Gaelic Games

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken, and will take in the future, to ensure that Gaelic games are given fair coverage on television and radio stations. (AQW 1673/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that this question was due for answer on 16 November 2007 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

I have met with the BBC's Local Management Team and sought to encourage them to programme locally based material.

Media Coverage of Gaelic Games

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will meet with the BBC to discuss the lack of coverage it gives to Gaelic games, when compared to the coverage of other sports. (AQW 1674/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that this question was due for answer on 16 November 2007 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

I have met with the BBC's Local Management Team and sought to encourage them to programme locally based material.

Heath and Safety at Football Stadia

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the reasons why the £20 million fund for improving heath and safety at football stadia was not used; and to state how much of this fund was surrendered. (AQW 1857/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is no £20 million fund for improving health and safety at football stadia in Northern Ireland. Rather, in 1998, it was estimated that the cost of bringing major sports grounds here (Soccer, Rugby and Gaelic Games) up to GB safety standards would be in the region of £20 million. No funding in respect of this matter has been surrendered.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of money available for the Northern Ireland Events company for the next three years. (AQW 1912/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is proposed that the functions of the Northern Ireland Events Company will transfer to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board from 1 April 2008. The draft budget for 2008/2011 provides the following money for the promotion of events:

| 2008/09 | 2009/10 | 2010/11 |
|---------|---------|---------|
| £2.355m | £2.255m | £1.655m |

EDUCATION

Wi-Fi Technology in Schools

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education what advice her Department has sought regarding the possible health impact on children, prior to authorising the installation of wi-fi technology in primary schools.

(AQW 871/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Health Protection Agency (HPA), which has responsibility for providing advice to central Government and devolved Administrations on protecting people from radiation hazards, including exposure to electromagnetic fields, has consistently advised that it does not believe that there are health issues associated with the use of wireless computer networks. As a result, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) continues to recommend the deployment of wireless networks in schools. This reflects advice from international expert groups and is also consistent with advice issued by the World Health Organisation and an expert group established and funded by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources in the South of Ireland. The health and wellbeing of children and young people in our schools is always paramount, and my Department will keep the situation under constant review.

Educational Psychologists

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children currently on the waiting list for assessment by an educational psychologist, in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1308/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the following numbers of children are waiting to see an educational psychologist.

| | |
|-------|-----|
| BELB | 361 |
| NEELB | 427 |

| | |
|-------|-----|
| SEELB | 382 |
| SELB | 244 |
| WELB | 189 |

These figures are in regard to children with a variety of need, including Stage 3 (non-statutory assessments) and Stage 4 (statutory assessments) of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, reviews at Stage 3 and Stage 5 of the Code of Practice, special testing at transfer stage between primary and post-primary, pre-school and examination arrangements.

Special Needs Provision

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money allocated to each Education and Library Board for special needs provision; and to provide a breakdown of this allocation, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 1312/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below shows how much funding has been reported by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in their accrued expenditure reports to the Department of Education as having been allocated to special needs education in the North of Ireland in each of the last five years. The response provided is rounded to the nearest million.

| | BELB | NEELB | SEELB | SELB | WELB | Total |
|-----------|------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|
| 2001/2002 | 19m | 16m | 23m | 17m | 16m | 91m |
| 2002/2003 | 21m | 18m | 27m | 19m | 18m | 103m |
| 2003/2004 | 26m | 21m | 32m | 22m | 23m | 124m |
| 2004/2005 | 28m | 22m | 31m | 25m | 27m | 133m |
| 2005/2006 | 27m | 27m | 35m | 26m | 27m | 142m |

Over the same five year period additional funding of approximately £17m has been allocated by the Department of Education to support statemented pupils in the voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated sectors.

School Transport

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of school transport for pupils attending (i) maintained; (ii) controlled; (iii) Irish-medium; (iv) integrated; and (v) voluntary grammar schools, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 1345/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to his earlier question AQW 1272/08 which was published in the Official Record on 8 November 2007.

Wi-Fi Technology in Schools

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to advise parents of the installation of wi-fi units at primary schools attended by their children. (AQW 1366/08)

The Minister of Education: The Health Protection Agency (HPA), which has responsibility for providing advice on protecting people from radiation hazards, including exposure to electromagnetic fields, has consistently advised that it sees no reason why wi-fi should not continue to be used in schools. This reflects advice from international expert groups and is also consistent with advice issued by the World Health Organisation and an expert group established and funded by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources in the South of Ireland. Within the EU, all countries follow a Council Recommendation of 1999, based on guidelines set by the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) for limiting exposure to electromagnetic fields.

Primary schools are being offered wi-fi connectivity to make the most effective use of the new equipment currently being provided. However, any school which does not wish to use wi-fi has the option of declining it. My Department will continue to keep the position under review and will consider how information about wi-fi can be made more accessible to parents.

Slemish College, Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to providing a sports hall at Slemish College, Ballymena. (AQW 1367/08)

The Minister of Education: The school has also raised with the Department the lack of sports facilities on site and officials have visited the school and are considering the issues, and will keep the school informed.

At the request of Slemish College, my Department arranged for its professional advisers to visit the school to assess the condition of its accommodation. The buildings were found, in general, to be in a fair to good condition considering the various ages of the buildings and the temporary nature of the construction. Some roofing problems were identified and the school has been advised to make a minor works application to the Department to address the problems.

Slemish College, Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail what assurances Slemish College has been given, either by her Department or the North Eastern

Education and Library Board, that there would be an annual increase of ten, on the maximum number of pupils allowed to attend the school in each year. (AQW 1368/08)

The Minister of Education: In response to a written request from Slemish College, approval has been granted for an increase in the school's 2008/09 enrolment number from 710 to 720. This brings the school up to its agreed long term enrolment figure. No further increases to the school's enrolment number can be approved unless the long term enrolment position changes. There remains however the flexibility to approve temporary variations to the approved enrolment number in response to unavoidable in-year pressures.

Slemish College, Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to replacing temporary buildings at Slemish College with a permanent building. (AQW 1370/08)

The Minister of Education: The school has also raised with the Department the lack of sports facilities on site and officials have visited the school and are considering the issues, and will keep the school informed.

At the request of Slemish College, my Department arranged for its professional advisers to visit the school to assess the condition of its accommodation. The buildings were found, in general, to be in a fair to good condition considering the various ages of the buildings and the temporary nature of the construction. Some roofing problems were identified and the school has been advised to make a minor works application to the Department to address the problems.

Special Needs Assessment

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the stage of a child's education at which it is determined that a special needs assessment should be carried out. (AQW 1378/08)

The Minister of Education: Special education legislation does not prescribe a particular stage at which a school should determine that a special needs assessment is carried out. Ordinarily schools have a duty to identify and make special education provision for pupils with special educational needs.

Under the legislation Education and Library Boards, (ELBs), are responsible for identifying, assessing and, in appropriate cases, making special educational provision for children in their areas for whom they are responsible. Generally this applies when a child is a registered pupil at a grant-aided school, or has attained the age of 2 years, is not over compulsory school age

and has been brought to the attention of the ELB as having, or probably having, special educational needs.

The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, issued by the Department of Education in 1998, and the Supplement to the Code of Practice, issued in September 2005, give detailed, practical guidance to schools and ELBs on how to identify, assess and, where appropriate, statement children with special educational needs. It sets out a 5-stage approach of which Stages 1-3 are school-based, although at Stage 3 support can be sought from outside the school. At Stage 4 the ELB considers the need for a statutory assessment. The Statement itself is provided at Stage 5.

Montessori Teaching Qualification

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education if she intends to recognise Montessori teaching qualifications, in line with other European countries. (AQW 1380/08)

The Minister of Education: Montessori qualifications are currently regarded as not suitable for gaining approval to work as a qualified teacher in a grant-aided school in the North of Ireland. The same position applies in mainstream primary or post-primary schools in England, Scotland or Wales. The position in the South of Ireland is that the Teaching Council for Ireland recognises two Montessori Qualifications but the recognition is for the purposes of employment as a learning support or resource teacher, not as a qualified teacher in the mainstream primary or post-primary sector.

If someone with a Montessori qualification wishes to teach in the North of Ireland (or indeed in England, Scotland or Wales) they would not be granted recognition as a qualified teacher and could not be registered with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) or other GTCs within Britain. Moreover, the EU Directive on mutual recognition of teaching qualifications would only offer such applicant recognition to work in the same capacity that they were currently recognised in elsewhere.

That the Montessori qualification is recognised in the South of Ireland raises the potential of a referral to the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC).

Centre of Excellence for Autism

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education to give an update on the plans for a centre of excellence for autism at Middletown, Co. Armagh. (AQW 1435/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer the member to my answer given to Trevor Lunn, the member for Lagan Valley, published in the official records on 19 October 2007.

Montessori Teaching Qualification

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education if she will give recognition to the Montessori teaching qualification, for the purposes of employment as a learning support or resource/substitute teacher. (AQW 1438/08)

The Minister of Education: Montessori qualifications are not regarded as suitable for gaining approval to work as a qualified teacher in a grant-aided school in the North of Ireland. A person with a Montessori qualification does not meet the standard for a qualified teacher and therefore cannot substitute for a qualified teacher.

I understand that in the South of Ireland the Teaching Council for Ireland does recognise two Montessori Qualifications, which are delivered there, for the purposes of employment as a learning support or resource teacher, not as a qualified teacher in mainstream primary or post-primary.

Pre-School Children

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of additional places for pre-school children in the Upper Bann area that will be funded by her department in the next three financial years, broken down by each school and/or nursery in the constituency. (AQW 1460/08)

The Minister of Education: There is no indication at the moment if the number of funded places available for pre-school children in the Upper Bann area needs to be increased.

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 633/08, to detail whether scientific evidence that points to an alternative scientific explanation for the origin and development of life on earth, other than Darwinian evolution, is classified by (i) her department; and (ii) the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment as 'evidence based' or 'belief'. (AQW 1471/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties. Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Scientific Explanations of the Origin and Development of Life

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 812/08, if she will confirm that the opportunities offered in the revised curriculum for exploration of alternatives to evolutionary views are not limited to classes in religious education, but will also cover scientific explanations for alternative views being taught in science-related classes.

(AQW 1472/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties. Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Pupils in Irish Language Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 505/08, to detail the number of pupils enrolled in each (i) grant aided; and (ii) independent Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1473/08)

The Minister of Education: The latest available school enrolment information relates to the 2006/07 academic year.

PUPILS AT GRANT AIDED IRISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS 2006/07

| School name | Pupils |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin | 134 |
| Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain | 65 |
| Scoil an Droichid | 89 |
| Coláiste Feirste | 489 |
| Gaelscoil na Bhfál | 213 |
| Gaelscoil an Lonnáin | 44 |
| Gaelscoil na Móna | 66 |
| Bunscoil Phobal féirste | 303 |
| Gaelscoil an Damba | 27 |
| Bunscoil an Tsléibhe Dhuibh | 176 |
| Scoil na Fuisgeoige | 134 |
| Bunscoil an Traonaigh | 22 |
| Gaelscoil Eadain Mhóir | 116 |
| Bunscoil Cholmcille | 163 |
| Gaelscoil na Speiríní | 21 |
| Gaelscoil uí Neill | 104 |
| Bunscoil an Chastil | 71 |
| Bunscoil an Iúir | 84 |
| Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche | 54 |
| Gaelscoil na gCrann | 38 |
| Gaelscoil uí Dhocartaigh | 117 |

PUPILS AT INDEPENDENT IRISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS 2006/07

| School name | Pupils |
|--------------------------|--------|
| Gaelscoil na Daróige | 16 |
| Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach | 9 |

Source: NI School Census.

Note: Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes.

Scientific Explanations of the Origin and Development of Life

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 812/08, to outline the

advantages of presenting science-related matters in a religious education class, rather than in a science class. (AQW 1477/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties. Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Scientific Explanations of the Origin and Development of Life

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 812/08, if she will confirm that teachers are permitted to use their professional judgement in relation to presenting alternative scientific explanations for evolutionary views in science class, if (i) they choose to do so; or (ii) if requested to do so by a pupil or pupils in their class, under the flexibility offered by the revised curriculum. (AQW 1479/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties. Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This

aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 635/08, if she will confirm that science teachers are permitted to use their professional judgement on whether or not alternative scientific theories of the origin and development of life, other than evolution, are sufficiently evidence-based to teach in their classes. (AQW 1507/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties. Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 633/08, to detail what advice she has received from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on the differentiation between 'evidence' and 'belief'. (AQW 1509/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties.

Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 635/08, to detail whether or not she has sought or received advice from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on the definition of an 'evidence-based approach to scientific theories'. (AQW 1514/08)

The Minister of Education: I will reiterate the points I have explained in previous responses. The revised curriculum offers greater opportunities for alternatives to evolution views to be explored. It also provides the flexibility for teachers themselves to determine how to teach, using their professional judgement about the approaches to be used. Any issues regarding a school's teaching should be raised in the first instance through representation to the Board of Governors.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory duty to advise me on the school curriculum. In providing its advice, CCEA takes account of the views of interested parties. Its professional advice is that there must be a distinction between teaching an evidence based approach to scientific theories and knowledge in science lessons, and exploring other beliefs about how the world came into existence in other subjects such as RE. This aligns with professional advice provided to schools by the Association for Science Education (ASE).

School Fees

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the annual fees for each pupil attending the Royal Belfast Academical Institution. (AQW 1534/08)

The Minister of Education: Details of the annual fees charged by the Board of Governors for preparatory department and secondary department pupils attending the school are as follows:

| Education Phase | Annual Fee |
|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Secondary Department (Years 8 – 14) | £736 |
| Preparatory Department: | |
| Years 1 – 3 | £2,560 |
| Years 4 – 7 | £2,950 |

Preparatory School Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the amount of money allocated by her department to preparatory schools; and (ii) the percentage this funding represents of the total funding that those schools receive. (AQW 1535/08)

The Minister of Education: Under the Local Management of Schools Common Funding Formula (CFF) arrangements, part funding totalling £1.81m (0.18% of the total CFF budget) has been provided to preparatory departments (all of which are attached to grammar schools) during the current financial year (2007/08). As a proportion of the total budgets for schools with preparatory departments, the average was 2.71% of those schools' total delegated budget distributed through the CFF in 2007/08.

Free School Meals

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils at preparatory schools who are in receipt of free school meals. (AQW 1536/08)

The Minister of Education: Based on the October 2006 School Meals Census there was a total of two preparatory school children in receipt of free school meals in the year 2006/07.

School Travelling Expenses

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education, if a development proposal to close St. Aloysius High School in Cushendall is published, to detail whether or not she will allow immediate payment of travelling expenses to all those pupils not currently entitled to this payment under her department's transport to school rules, who will be required to travel to Cross and Passion College, Ballycastle. (AQW 1539/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education must await the final outcome of the development proposal process in relation to St Aloysius High School before the North-Eastern Education and Library Board can consider any alternative transport arrangements to other schools, including Cross and Passion College. The publication of a development proposal is not enough to warrant the introduction of alternative/interim arrangements.

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school leavers aged 16 who have enrolled in further education courses, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1595/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

DESTINATION OF YEAR 12 SCHOOL LEAVERS⁽¹⁾ 2000/01 TO 2005/06

| | 2000/01 | 2001/02 | 2002/03 ⁽³⁾ | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Institution of Further Education | 5206 | 5211 | N/A | 4919 | 5063 | 5158 |
| Employment ⁽²⁾ | 1997 | 1925 | N/A | 1697 | 1307 | 1416 |
| Training | 5072 | 4630 | N/A | 4370 | 4073 | 4094 |
| Unemployment | 726 | 803 | N/A | 670 | 738 | 489 |
| Unknown | 187 | 191 | N/A | 336 | 320 | 306 |
| Total Year 12 Leavers | 13188 | 12760 | N/A | 11992 | 11501 | 11463 |

1. The data excludes special and independent schools
2. Employment refers to full and part time employment
3. Data for 2002/3 are not available due to technical difficulties in schools.

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school leavers aged 16 who have entered full-time employment, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1596/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

DESTINATION OF YEAR 12 SCHOOL LEAVERS⁽¹⁾ 2000/01 TO 2005/06

| | 2000/01 | 2001/02 | 2002/03 ⁽³⁾ | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Institution of Further Education | 5206 | 5211 | N/A | 4919 | 5063 | 5158 |
| Employment ⁽²⁾ | 1997 | 1925 | N/A | 1697 | 1307 | 1416 |
| Training | 5072 | 4630 | N/A | 4370 | 4073 | 4094 |
| Unemployment | 726 | 803 | N/A | 670 | 738 | 489 |
| Unknown | 187 | 191 | N/A | 336 | 320 | 306 |
| Total Year 12 Leavers | 13188 | 12760 | N/A | 11992 | 11501 | 11463 |

1. The data excludes special and independent schools
2. Employment refers to full and part time employment
3. Data for 2002/3 are not available due to technical difficulties in schools.

A-Level Students

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who have stayed on at school to study for A levels in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1599/08)

The Minister of Education: Information on the number of pupils who have stayed on at school to study for A levels are not available. Figures detailing pupil numbers in Year 13 for each of the last five years have been provided. These figures may include pupils re-sitting Year 12.

NUMBER OF PUPILS IN YEAR 13 2002/03 – 2006/07

| Year | Number of pupils |
|---------|------------------|
| 2002/03 | 13,782 |
| 2003/04 | 14,134 |
| 2004/05 | 14,262 |
| 2005/06 | 14,239 |
| 2006/07 | 14,030 |

Source: NI school census.

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who have left school aged 16 in each of the last five years. (AQW 1600/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below provides the details requested.

DESTINATION OF YEAR 12 SCHOOL LEAVERS⁽¹⁾ 2000/01 TO 2005/06

| | 2000/01 | 2001/02 | 2002/03 ⁽³⁾ | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Institution of Further Education | 5206 | 5211 | N/A | 4919 | 5063 | 5158 |
| Employment ⁽²⁾ | 1997 | 1925 | N/A | 1697 | 1307 | 1416 |
| Training | 5072 | 4630 | N/A | 4370 | 4073 | 4094 |
| Unemployment | 726 | 803 | N/A | 670 | 738 | 489 |
| Unknown | 187 | 191 | N/A | 336 | 320 | 306 |
| Total Year 12 Leavers | 13188 | 12760 | N/A | 11992 | 11501 | 11463 |

1. The data excludes special and independent schools
2. Employment refers to full and part time employment
3. Data for 2002/3 are not available due to technical difficulties in schools.

School Meals

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to introducing a sustainable seafood procurement policy, in relation to the provision of school meals. (AQW 1611/08)

The Minister of Education: Procurement of food for schools must be undertaken in the context of European and Government procurement requirements and in a way which is designed to ensure value for money and that the appropriate specifications regarding food content and quality are met. At present the North-Eastern Education and Library Board administers the contract for the supply and delivery of fresh fish to the school meals service for all five Education Boards.

The current contract, which is due to expire on 31 July 2008, does not have an element of sustainable development written into it. However, the Board has advised that for future contracts it will explore with suppliers what opportunities might be available to incorporate sustainability into the tender conditions and what impact this would have on supply.

The creation of the new Education and Skills Authority will also provide an additional opportunity to see if further improvements can be made to the procurement arrangements.

Educational Psychologists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of whole time equivalent educational psychologists in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1651/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer the Member to my reply to AQW 1313/08, submitted by the Member for Strangford, Michelle McIlveen, which was placed in Hansard as a written answer on 9 November 2007.

Maghera High School

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the need for the retention of Maghera High School for the Protestant community in Maghera. (AQW 1701/08)

The Minister of Education: Maghera High School falls within the remit of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) and its future is therefore a matter for the NEELB in the first instance.

The NEELB is consulting locally on the future of the school and that a number of proposals have been put forward for discussion. The NEELB has indicated

that a decision on the way forward which takes account of the educational needs of the children is likely to be taken by March next year.

Any proposal to close or amalgamate the school would require the NEELB to publish a statutory Development Proposal. Publication must be preceded by consultation with the Board of Governors, staff and parents of the school and also neighbouring schools likely to be affected by the proposal. Once published, there is a further 2-month period during which representations including objections can be made to the Department. At the end of this period a decision is made taking into consideration all pertinent issues and representations made.

I have had no discussions on the school.

Classroom Assistants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what steps she will take to bring about the immediate recommencement of negotiations, in order to resolve the classroom assistants' dispute on terms and conditions of employment. (AQW 1705/08)

The Minister of Education: I welcome the fact that one union has accepted the substantially improved offer, which was tabled on 28 September, and two others are currently in the process of balloting their members.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment any further at this time while the balloting process is ongoing. However I sincerely hope that an agreed settlement will be reached in the very near future so as to ensure the classroom assistants receive the money they are entitled and to avoid further disruption to the education of our children.

Maghera High School

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education what discussions she has had in relation to the future of Maghera High School. (AQW 1706/08)

The Minister of Education: Maghera High School falls within the remit of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) and its future is therefore a matter for the NEELB in the first instance.

The NEELB is consulting locally on the future of the school and that a number of proposals have been put forward for discussion. The NEELB has indicated that a decision on the way forward which takes account of the educational needs of the children is likely to be taken by March next year.

Any proposal to close or amalgamate the school would require the NEELB to publish a statutory

Development Proposal. Publication must be preceded by consultation with the Board of Governors, staff and parents of the school and also neighbouring schools likely to be affected by the proposal. Once published, there is a further 2-month period during which representations including objections can be made to the Department. At the end of this period a decision is made taking into consideration all pertinent issues and representations made.

I have had no discussions on the school.

St Joseph's Primary School, Ahoghill

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils currently enrolled at St Joseph's Primary School, Ahoghill; and whether or not enrolment has decreased since the announcement of a possible amalgamation with St Patrick's Primary School, Aughercloney. (AQW 1731/08)

The Minister of Education: St Joseph's Primary School, Ahoghill currently (2007/08) has an enrolment of 18 pupils. The enrolment figure has not decreased since the announcement of a possible amalgamation with St Patrick's Primary School, Aughercloney.

Club Bank System

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which the report into the club bank system, commissioned by her department, will be published. (AQW 1733/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education has not commissioned a report into the club bank system.

However, in 2004 the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) commissioned a report on the operation of the club bank in the integrated sector. In January 2005 the Department of Education provided the IEF with £1,331.67 towards the cost of the report.

Publication of the report is a matter for the IEF.

Childcare

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to outline what provision has been made for pre-school and after-school childcare in Northern Ireland in the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011. (AQW 1742/08)

The Minister of Education: The Executive's Draft Programme for Government proposals were published on 25th October and are subject to public consultation until 4th January.

The detailed implications for pre-school and after-school childcare will be made known at the conclusion of the process.

Transfer System

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of whether or not it is more appropriate for pupils to transfer from primary to post-primary education at age 14, rather than at age 11. (AQO 825/08)

The Minister of Education: I recognise the significance of 14 as an age when many young people already make choices about their career pathway. I recognise too the opportunities that young people are increasingly able to access post-14 as schools expand the range of courses on offer in accordance with the requirements of the Entitlement Framework. I think that focusing on the potential of this important educational decision point can help in developing new and better alternatives for the future of post-primary education. I will be bringing forward proposals that reflect this.

Transfer System

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans she has in relation to the future transfer arrangements for children moving from primary to post-primary education. (AQO 869/08)

The Minister of Education: I am still considering the nature of the proposals for new transfer arrangements. It is well known that I do not favour academic selection and the proposals I will bring forward will be child-centred in nature. They will reflect my belief that young people, advised by their parents and teachers, and informed by careers education, information and guidance, can have a developed, mature and informed sense of their preferred educational and career pathway by age 14. I want a post-primary system which, particularly after the age of 14, matches provision to young people's needs through a mature and consensual process, as opposed to one that matches 11 year olds to different types of school on the basis of inherently limited tests.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what discussions and communications she has had with Trades Union representatives of classroom assistants, since 1 October 2007. (AQO 844/08)

The Minister of Education: I have met with a broad range of people involved and affected by the

Classroom Assistants action, including trade union representatives. I have not been involved in negotiations, this is not my role.

A significantly improved offer was formally put by the employers to Trade Union Side on 28 September 2007. In effect the employers offered a further £15 million to buy out classroom assistants' terms and conditions. This additional £15 million equates to the amount of additional arrears that classroom assistants would have received if their job evaluation arrears were calculated on the 32.5 hour divisor from 1995 to 2003 when all other staff moved to a 36 hour working week.

Each Classroom Assistant will receive one of two monetary amounts. Those staff with five years service or less will receive a one off payment estimated at £1,613 and those staff with more than five years service will receive an estimated payment of £2,478.

These payments will be on top of what is due to classroom assistants as a result of the job evaluation exercise, the estimated cost of which (including arrears) is approx £25m.

Like everyone else I wish to see an early resolution to the dispute and I have written directly to all Classroom Assistants highlighting my wish for an early resolution to the dispute.

The indications are that, on Thursday 15 and Friday 16 November, most special schools were able to provide services for children who attended, with only five schools closed. A number of other schools have experienced impacts due to industrial action, but this is a greatly improved situation compared to last month when it was reported that 27 special schools were forced to close.

I have also paid tribute to school principals, teachers, classroom assistants and other staff who are continuing to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children.

Capital Build Programmes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the primary school capital build programmes that have been approved in the East Antrim constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQO 885/08)

The Minister of Education: No primary school projects in the constituency were approved for funding in the past five years. Over that period the North Eastern Education and Library Board has brought forward three major works projects for primary schools as requiring capital funding in the East Antrim constituency for an amalgamation of Kilcoan and Mullaghduh Primary Schools at Islandmagee, Woodburn PS and Whiteabbey PS.

Modern Language Provision

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to develop modern language provision in primary schools. (AQO 874/08)

The Minister of Education: I believe that introducing children at an early stage to a second language can have huge benefits. That is why I announced that we would develop a new programme that would support primary schools in offering Spanish and Irish.

From January, we will therefore provide a network of peripatetic language tutors who will work in a number of schools alongside teachers, to help build their confidence in language teaching. That programme will add to the good work already going on in some primary schools, including that supported through the CCEA Primary Languages pilot, or by the Boards or local companies.

It will also allow for the support of the languages of newcomers, for example Polish, which is key to the development of our increasingly diverse society.

Inclusion and Diversity Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to develop the new Inclusion and Diversity Service; and to outline whether or not these plans will include a north/south dimension. (AQO 872/08)

The Minister of Education: The Inclusion and Diversity Service brings together services across the five education and library boards in relation to the education of children whose first language is not English. Since being established in April 2007, it has set up new services: interpreting, translating and a multi-lingual website for parents, which was launched in June 2007 in St Mary's High School, Newry.

The Inclusion and Diversity Service has recently advised the Department that schools are using the interpretation and translation services and are finding them extremely useful with regard to parent/teacher communication. In addition, during our public consultation we received very positive feedback on these services from parents.

The Inclusion and Diversity Service will begin a new initiative in January 2008 placing Diversity coordinators in clusters of schools. This will facilitate capacity building by working with the schools on whole school and classroom issues e.g. induction, parent/school communication, intercultural awareness, language support.

Other work will include Intercultural Awareness programmes for teachers.

It is widely recognised that there are many shared challenges and opportunities both North and South, specifically in the areas of diversity and inclusion. The Regional Advisor, who is leading the service, has a strong record on North South collaboration.

The launch of Together Towards inclusion: Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School in December 2007 will be the culmination of three years of such collaboration. It is the first time that a tool for education has been developed on a cross border basis that will be mainstreamed into schools on the island of Ireland. Further North/South collaboration is planned to produce a post-primary Toolkit. In addition, work will be carried out on the creation of dual language texts and podcasts. The new service will further support the development of North/South links.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education what plans she has for sectoral representation in the Education and Skills Authority. (AQO 879/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and Skills Authority will be a modern, professional organisation, staffed with appropriately skilled and experienced individuals to enable it to deliver high quality services that will support the delivery of high quality education for all our young people.

The membership of the Authority will not include sectoral representation. No individual, group or organisation; sectoral or otherwise, will have an automatic membership of the ESA. Appointments will be made through an open and transparent process; and sectoral representatives will have the same opportunities to apply as anyone else, providing they meet the relevant criteria and qualifications.

I recognise that sectoral interests will continue to have a key role to play under the new arrangements and will provide modest financial support for each of the sectors to enable them to source the professional support necessary to enable them to contribute effectively to the new arrangements.

It is proposed that all sectoral interests will be represented on the Education Advisory Forum, which will provide policy advice to my Department.

Teachers

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce 10% planning, preparation, and assessment time for teachers in Northern Ireland. (AQO 843/08)

The Minister of Education: The introduction of Planning, Preparation and Assessment Time is one of a number of measures recommended by the “Curran 2” report to increase teachers’ productive time. The Department estimated the total cost of these measures at over £80m a year.

The Executive’s Draft Budget proposals for the next three years were announced on 25 October. I am currently considering the detailed implications of the proposed allocations for Education, including the scope for developments in relation to teachers’ productive time.

Management of Staff in Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which the review of the management of staff in schools, as announced on 24 September 2007, will commence. (AQO 877/08)

The Minister of Education: This will be an important and wide-ranging review, and it is right that I give careful consideration to its scope, its terms of reference and its methodology. Work on these issues is under way in my Department and I will make an announcement in due course, to include details of the proposed timeframe for the review.

School Buildings

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education what progress is being made in relation to the need to replace ageing school buildings in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency. (AQO 835/08)

The Minister of Education: Building work is currently underway for two new replacement schools for Carnalridge P.S., Portrush and the amalgamation of Burnfoot/Dungiven/Largy primary schools. Planning is also underway for a new replacement school building for Ballykelly P.S.

A proposed major capital scheme at Dominican College, Portstewart is at Economic Appraisal stage, while a Feasibility Study is being undertaken to examine the future requirements of Coleraine Academical Institution and Coleraine Girls’ High School. A capital scheme for Coleraine College is on hold because of current uncertainties on the provision which will be required for the longer term in the area.

Classroom Assistants

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not the amount of money available for

settling the classroom assistants' dispute is £40.2 million or £45 million. (AQO 865/08)

The Minister of Education: I can confirm that the estimated cost of the Management Side offer is £40.2 million. This is made up of an estimated £25.2 million to meet the cost of re-grading and arrears arising from the full implementation of the Job Evaluation process, plus a further £15 million in recognition of the change to historical terms and conditions of service.

Currently, there is £30m available for a settlement within the education budget. I will be considering the scope for accommodating the balance from within existing resources but, to the extent that this is not possible, funding will have to be sought in the context of the December monitoring round.

I have written personally to all Classroom Assistants highlighting my wish for an early resolution to the dispute.

The indications are that, on Thursday 15 and Friday 16 November, most special schools were able to provide services for children who attended, with only five schools closed. A number of other schools have experienced impacts due to industrial action, but this is a greatly improved situation compared to last month when it was reported that 27 special schools were forced to close.

I have also paid tribute to school principals, teachers, classroom assistants and other staff who are continuing to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children.

I hope this return continues so the education of all children can get back to normal.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to improve industrial relations with classroom assistants, following a settlement of the current industrial dispute. (AQO 876/08)

The Minister of Education: It is clearly important that there should be good industrial relations and well founded arrangements for the employer / employee interface. I have sought to facilitate this throughout the current difficulties, whilst recognising that it is not my role to be part of the negotiating structures.

In relation to the current dispute, I can confirm that the estimated cost of the Management Side offer is £40.2 million. This is made up of an estimated £25.2 million to meet the cost of re-grading and arrears arising from the full implementation of the Job Evaluation process, plus a further £15 million in recognition of the change to historical terms and conditions of service.

I have written personally to all Classroom Assistants expressing appreciation of the work that they do and highlighting my wish for an early resolution to the dispute.

The indications are that, on Thursday 15 and Friday 16 November, most special schools were able to provide services for children who attended, with only five schools closed. A number of other schools have experienced impacts due to industrial action, but this is a greatly improved situation compared to last month when it was reported that 27 special schools had to close.

I have also paid tribute to school principals, teachers, classroom assistants and other staff who are continuing to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children.

I hope this return continues so the education of all children can get back to normal.

Cross-Border Educational Exchanges

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to encourage and support cross-border educational exchanges involving schools, youth groups, and teachers. (AQO 873/08)

The Minister of Education: Under the Good Friday Agreement (1998), education is identified as one of the areas suitable for 'Common Policy, Separate Implementation' co operation. In December 1999, the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) agreed a programme of work for co-operation in the education sector including school, youth and teacher exchanges.

Following discussions with the two Departments, the North South Exchange Consortium (NSEC) was formed, comprising the British Council, Léargas and the Youth Council. At the request of the two Departments, the Consortium developed and presented proposals to both education departments on an outline design and structure for a Joint Delivery Agency.

I have agreed with my Ministerial counterpart in the South to carry out, in tandem with the Department of Education and Science, a formal review of the North South Exchange Consortium initiative.

The purpose of the review is to provide both Departments of Education with recommendations which will identify a range of options for future progress.

Both departments remain committed to improving cooperation in the area of school and youth exchange. Both Departments are keen to establish the appropriate vehicle for taking forward this important work.

School Holiday Timetables

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the feasibility of implementing a change to school holiday timetables, to allow a longer break at Christmas and a shorter break in the summer. (AQO 817/08)

The Minister of Education: It could be feasible to make a change to the statutory school holiday schools provided that there would be no reduction in the number of school days of operation and that the change is supported by schools, school teachers and parents.

Classroom Assistants

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of school days lost by primary school pupils, as a result of industrial action by classroom assistants. (AQO 875/08)

The Minister of Education: This information is not available. The Department is not aware of any primary schools being closed due to industrial action by classroom assistants. Individual pupils may have been absent from primary school during the industrial action by classroom assistants because of health and safety risks but the attendance records held by schools may not necessarily show this.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the longest period of time his department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1329/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The longest response times, from receipt of the correspondence, are as follows:

- Member of Parliament – 69 working days
- Member of Northern Ireland Assembly – 37 working days

- Councillor – 23 working days
- Member of public – 23 working days

Educational Psychology

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in view of the shortfall in educational psychologists, what steps he is taking to encourage school leavers with the required qualifications to consider educational psychology as their chosen profession. (AQW 1354/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department offers impartial, client-centred careers information, advice and guidance to all young people and adults. The Department for Employment and Learning looks to the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in Northern Ireland to provide up-to-date Labour Market Information and analysis of employer skills needs. The relevant SSCs in this instance are Lifelong Learning UK and Skills for Health. Neither of these Councils have yet identified educational psychology as a particular skills need. The Department will continue to work with both SSCs and will keep the issue under review.

New Deal

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of participants in the New Deal who have obtained employment through the programme; and (ii) how this translates by way of percentage, in each constituency, for each of the last five years. (AQW 1381/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of participants in the New Deal who have gained employment through the programme over the last five years is 20,195. This covers the period April 2001 to March 2006, as these are the latest available figures by financial year. The numbers and percentages by constituency for each of these years are detailed in the attached tables.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS MOVING INTO UNSUBSIDISED EMPLOYMENT (1), (2) THROUGH NEW DEAL FOR 18 TO 24 YEAR OLDS AND NEW DEAL 25+ BETWEEN APRIL 2001 AND MARCH 2002 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------|------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| Belfast East | 342 | 107 | 31% | 391 | 86 | 22% | 733 | 193 | 26% |
| Belfast North | 525 | 157 | 30% | 665 | 88 | 13% | 1190 | 245 | 21% |
| Belfast South | 323 | 102 | 32% | 270 | 47 | 17% | 593 | 149 | 25% |
| Belfast West | 580 | 176 | 30% | 778 | 103 | 13% | 1358 | 279 | 21% |
| East Antrim | 231 | 111 | 48% | 345 | 81 | 23% | 576 | 192 | 33% |

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| East Londonderry | 470 | 199 | 42% | 536 | 136 | 25% | 1006 | 335 | 33% |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 306 | 137 | 45% | 529 | 139 | 26% | 835 | 276 | 33% |
| Foyle | 1023 | 326 | 32% | 901 | 171 | 19% | 1924 | 497 | 26% |
| Lagan Valley | 154 | 56 | 36% | 177 | 44 | 25% | 331 | 100 | 30% |
| Mid Ulster | 288 | 143 | 50% | 344 | 107 | 31% | 632 | 250 | 40% |
| Newry And Armagh | 426 | 147 | 35% | 579 | 124 | 21% | 1005 | 271 | 27% |
| North Antrim | 344 | 161 | 47% | 442 | 106 | 24% | 786 | 267 | 34% |
| North Down | 162 | 77 | 48% | 212 | 71 | 33% | 374 | 148 | 40% |
| South Antrim | 230 | 104 | 45% | 248 | 52 | 21% | 478 | 156 | 33% |
| South Down | 392 | 181 | 46% | 414 | 85 | 21% | 806 | 266 | 33% |
| Strangford | 251 | 103 | 41% | 356 | 85 | 24% | 607 | 188 | 31% |
| Upper Bann | 256 | 88 | 34% | 409 | 76 | 19% | 665 | 164 | 25% |
| West Tyrone | 463 | 196 | 42% | 593 | 134 | 23% | 1056 | 330 | 31% |
| Missing Postcode ⁽³⁾ | 175 | 49 | 28% | 160 | 31 | 19% | 335 | 80 | 24% |
| Total | 6941 | 2620 | 38% | 8349 | 1766 | 21% | 15290 | 4386 | 29% |

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS MOVING INTO UNSUBSIDISED EMPLOYMENT (1), (2) THROUGH NEW DEAL FOR 18 TO 24 YEAR OLDS AND NEW DEAL 25+ BETWEEN APRIL 2002 AND MARCH 2003 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| Belfast East | 328 | 105 | 32% | 336 | 61 | 18% | 664 | 166 | 25% |
| Belfast North | 646 | 192 | 30% | 893 | 112 | 13% | 1539 | 304 | 20% |
| Belfast South | 351 | 100 | 28% | 374 | 68 | 18% | 725 | 168 | 23% |
| Belfast West | 822 | 179 | 22% | 1228 | 126 | 10% | 2050 | 305 | 15% |
| East Antrim | 280 | 114 | 41% | 262 | 64 | 24% | 542 | 178 | 33% |
| East Londonderry | 436 | 181 | 42% | 526 | 129 | 25% | 962 | 310 | 32% |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 307 | 106 | 35% | 617 | 130 | 21% | 924 | 236 | 26% |
| Foyle | 1036 | 311 | 30% | 1293 | 187 | 14% | 2329 | 498 | 21% |
| Lagan Valley | 176 | 54 | 31% | 229 | 54 | 24% | 405 | 108 | 27% |
| Mid Ulster | 270 | 142 | 53% | 296 | 95 | 32% | 566 | 237 | 42% |
| Newry And Armagh | 407 | 139 | 34% | 618 | 127 | 21% | 1025 | 266 | 26% |
| North Antrim | 360 | 155 | 43% | 460 | 121 | 26% | 820 | 276 | 34% |
| North Down | 218 | 74 | 34% | 285 | 75 | 26% | 503 | 149 | 30% |
| South Antrim | 269 | 113 | 42% | 279 | 69 | 25% | 548 | 182 | 33% |
| South Down | 385 | 176 | 46% | 472 | 103 | 22% | 857 | 279 | 33% |
| Strangford | 235 | 87 | 37% | 384 | 82 | 21% | 619 | 169 | 27% |
| Upper Bann | 328 | 128 | 39% | 428 | 92 | 21% | 756 | 220 | 29% |
| West Tyrone | 539 | 221 | 41% | 849 | 168 | 20% | 1388 | 389 | 28% |
| Missing Postcode ⁽³⁾ | 193 | 53 | 27% | 156 | 32 | 21% | 349 | 85 | 24% |
| Total | 7586 | 2630 | 35% | 9985 | 1895 | 19% | 17571 | 4525 | 26% |

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS MOVING INTO UNSUBSIDISED EMPLOYMENT (1), (2) THROUGH NEW DEAL FOR 18 TO 24 YEAR OLDS AND NEW DEAL 25+ BETWEEN APRIL 2003 AND MARCH 2004 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| Belfast East | 409 | 97 | 24% | 332 | 64 | 19% | 741 | 161 | 22% |
| Belfast North | 734 | 198 | 27% | 506 | 83 | 16% | 1240 | 281 | 23% |
| Belfast South | 402 | 108 | 27% | 266 | 45 | 17% | 668 | 153 | 23% |
| Belfast West | 901 | 205 | 23% | 896 | 103 | 11% | 1797 | 308 | 17% |
| East Antrim | 315 | 102 | 32% | 248 | 67 | 27% | 563 | 169 | 30% |
| East Londonderry | 463 | 177 | 38% | 435 | 117 | 27% | 898 | 294 | 33% |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 378 | 135 | 36% | 498 | 129 | 26% | 876 | 264 | 30% |
| Foyle | 1125 | 318 | 28% | 715 | 112 | 16% | 1840 | 430 | 23% |
| Lagan Valley | 154 | 54 | 35% | 137 | 34 | 25% | 291 | 88 | 30% |
| Mid Ulster | 226 | 107 | 47% | 228 | 59 | 26% | 454 | 166 | 37% |
| Newry And Armagh | 425 | 149 | 35% | 436 | 91 | 21% | 861 | 240 | 28% |
| North Antrim | 332 | 126 | 38% | 312 | 87 | 28% | 644 | 213 | 33% |
| North Down | 222 | 85 | 38% | 246 | 114 | 46% | 468 | 199 | 43% |
| South Antrim | 301 | 137 | 46% | 216 | 57 | 26% | 517 | 194 | 38% |
| South Down | 404 | 158 | 39% | 321 | 102 | 32% | 725 | 260 | 36% |
| Strangford | 279 | 103 | 37% | 229 | 46 | 20% | 508 | 149 | 29% |
| Upper Bann | 318 | 141 | 44% | 270 | 53 | 20% | 588 | 194 | 33% |
| West Tyrone | 452 | 175 | 39% | 530 | 131 | 25% | 982 | 306 | 31% |
| Missing Postcode ⁽³⁾ | 216 | 75 | 35% | 140 | 32 | 23% | 356 | 107 | 30% |
| Total | 8056 | 2650 | 33% | 6961 | 1526 | 22% | 15017 | 4176 | 28% |

TABLE 4: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS MOVING INTO UNSUBSIDISED EMPLOYMENT (1), (2) THROUGH NEW DEAL FOR 18 TO 24 YEAR OLDS AND NEW DEAL 25+ BETWEEN APRIL 2004 AND MARCH 2005 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------|------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| Belfast East | 328 | 67 | 20% | 337 | 60 | 18% | 665 | 127 | 19% |
| Belfast North | 562 | 143 | 25% | 488 | 85 | 17% | 1050 | 228 | 22% |
| Belfast South | 322 | 98 | 30% | 268 | 58 | 22% | 590 | 156 | 26% |
| Belfast West | 887 | 193 | 22% | 621 | 85 | 14% | 1508 | 278 | 18% |
| East Antrim | 273 | 84 | 31% | 247 | 56 | 23% | 520 | 140 | 27% |
| East Londonderry | 466 | 176 | 38% | 409 | 118 | 29% | 875 | 294 | 34% |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 282 | 103 | 37% | 518 | 97 | 19% | 800 | 200 | 25% |
| Foyle | 1000 | 293 | 29% | 709 | 118 | 17% | 1709 | 411 | 24% |
| Lagan Valley | 136 | 44 | 32% | 131 | 33 | 25% | 267 | 77 | 29% |
| Mid Ulster | 207 | 98 | 47% | 195 | 66 | 34% | 402 | 164 | 41% |
| Newry And Armagh | 373 | 124 | 33% | 458 | 87 | 19% | 831 | 211 | 25% |
| North Antrim | 285 | 114 | 40% | 269 | 79 | 29% | 554 | 193 | 35% |
| North Down | 216 | 78 | 36% | 213 | 81 | 38% | 429 | 159 | 37% |

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| South Antrim | 207 | 90 | 43% | 186 | 53 | 28% | 393 | 143 | 36% |
| South Down | 385 | 174 | 45% | 375 | 90 | 24% | 760 | 264 | 35% |
| Strangford | 262 | 102 | 39% | 254 | 65 | 26% | 516 | 167 | 32% |
| Upper Bann | 296 | 120 | 41% | 248 | 47 | 19% | 544 | 167 | 31% |
| West Tyrone | 528 | 222 | 42% | 616 | 135 | 22% | 1144 | 357 | 31% |
| Missing Postcode ⁽³⁾ | 191 | 57 | 30% | 104 | 13 | 13% | 295 | 70 | 24% |
| Total | 7206 | 2380 | 33% | 6646 | 1426 | 21% | 13852 | 3806 | 27% |

TABLE 5: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS MOVING INTO UNSUBSIDISED EMPLOYMENT (1), (2) THROUGH NEW DEAL FOR 18 TO 24 YEAR OLDS AND NEW DEAL 25+ BETWEEN APRIL 2005 AND MARCH 2006 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary Constituency | New Deal 18 to 24 | | | New Deal 25+ | | | Total | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work | Leavers | Found Work | % Found Work |
| Belfast East | 221 | 66 | 30% | 195 | 28 | 14% | 416 | 94 | 23% |
| Belfast North | 536 | 125 | 23% | 462 | 53 | 11% | 998 | 178 | 18% |
| Belfast South | 293 | 77 | 26% | 238 | 56 | 24% | 531 | 133 | 25% |
| Belfast West | 821 | 151 | 18% | 759 | 74 | 10% | 1580 | 225 | 14% |
| East Antrim | 246 | 104 | 42% | 247 | 69 | 28% | 493 | 173 | 35% |
| East Londonderry | 448 | 138 | 31% | 348 | 75 | 22% | 796 | 213 | 27% |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 227 | 100 | 44% | 394 | 85 | 22% | 621 | 185 | 30% |
| Foyle | 988 | 246 | 25% | 794 | 91 | 11% | 1782 | 337 | 19% |
| Lagan Valley | 149 | 40 | 27% | 130 | 32 | 25% | 279 | 72 | 26% |
| Mid Ulster | 192 | 99 | 52% | 199 | 54 | 27% | 391 | 153 | 39% |
| Newry And Armagh | 349 | 122 | 35% | 433 | 94 | 22% | 782 | 216 | 28% |
| North Antrim | 355 | 146 | 41% | 278 | 63 | 23% | 633 | 209 | 33% |
| North Down | 210 | 81 | 39% | 209 | 67 | 32% | 419 | 148 | 35% |
| South Antrim | 185 | 93 | 50% | 182 | 52 | 29% | 367 | 145 | 40% |
| South Down | 289 | 124 | 43% | 296 | 71 | 24% | 585 | 195 | 33% |
| Strangford | 251 | 86 | 34% | 196 | 47 | 24% | 447 | 133 | 30% |
| Upper Bann | 199 | 76 | 38% | 213 | 59 | 28% | 412 | 135 | 33% |
| West Tyrone | 488 | 170 | 35% | 542 | 117 | 22% | 1030 | 287 | 28% |
| Missing Postcode ⁽³⁾ | 157 | 43 | 27% | 113 | 28 | 25% | 270 | 71 | 26% |
| Total | 6604 | 2087 | 32% | 6228 | 1215 | 20% | 12832 | 3302 | 26% |

Notes:

- (1) Those recorded by the Department as having moved or having been placed into unsubsidised employment, plus those who have been recorded as having terminated their JSA claim in order to go into a job within 13 weeks of leaving New Deal. This will undercount the total number going into a job as some participants who move into a job will not, for whatever reason, record this as the reason for termination of their JSA claim.
- (2) A participant is only ever counted once as moving into unsubsidised employment.
- (3) Individuals were attributed to Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all individuals had a correct or complete postcode

Comprehensive Spending Review

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1446/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The individual Resource and Capital bids for the Department for Employment and Learning are provided in Annexes A and B respectively. Annex C provides the proposed Capital and Resource allocations to this Department as contained in the Draft Budget 2007 document.

ANNEX A

| DEL Resource Bids | 2008/09 £m | 2009/10 £m | 2010/11 £m |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Skills for Prosperity | 12.9 | 20.7 | 26.2 |
| National Learner Registration Service | 3.0 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| Careers Information Advice and Guidance | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| Adult Apprenticeships (Net of EU Income) | 2.0 | 11.0 | 23.0 |
| ICT as Third Essential Skill | 3.1 | 3.6 | 4.7 |
| FE Sector Learner Engagement and Support | 7.3 | 7.3 | 7.3 |
| Career Academy in FE / Individual Learner Profiles | 2.0 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| Critical Sector Initiatives | 8.0 | 8.0 | 8.0 |
| Foreign Direct Investment / Employer Support Programme for FE | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 |
| Sector Skills Development Budget | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| Student Finance – Maintenance Grants | 4.0 | 7.0 | 8.0 |
| British and Irish Sign Language Tutors and Interpreters in NI | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| Student Finance – Notional Student Loans Subsidy | 7.5 | 14.5 | 16.8 |
| Student Finance - Further Education (FE) Awards | 1.1 | 1.7 | 2.2 |
| University College – Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Funds | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.6 |
| NI European Social Fund Programme 2007-13 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 6.3 |
| Essential skills of literacy and numeracy (Leitch Review) | 23.7 | 32.2 | 32.9 |
| Recurrent Higher Education Research Funding | 3.8 | 16.3 | 19.7 |

| DEL Resource Bids | 2008/09 £m | 2009/10 £m | 2010/11 £m |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Increase in PhD provision | 1.4 | 4.0 | 6.8 |
| Pathways to Work for Incapacity Benefit Claimants | 9.3 | 11.3 | 11.8 |
| Pathways to Work for Lone Parents | 2.0 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| New Deal 25+ (targeting the economically inactive) | 1.7 | 1.7 | 1.7 |
| Steps to Work | 15.7 | 15.8 | 15.8 |
| Revised Service Delivery Model | 1.9 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| Labour Relations Agency | 1.3 | 1.5 | 1.6 |
| Industrial Tribunal and Fair Employment Tribunal (OITFET) | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.7 |
| Strategy and Action Plan for Migrant Workers | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| PEACE II Matched Funding | 2.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Student Finance – Maintenance Grants (lower Threshold) | 0.5 | 1.0 | 1.5 |
| Student Finance – Maintenance Grants (full parity with GB) | 2.5 | 5.0 | 7.5 |
| Total | 131.7 | 189.7 | 222.8 |

| DEL Capital Bids | | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|
| Description of Bid | £000'S | | |
| | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 |
| Belfast Institute - PPP | - | - | 3,255 |
| Belfast Institute - Springvale | - | 5,000 | 5,000 |
| East Antrim Institute | 7,000 | - | - |
| East Down Institute - PPP | - | - | 2,730 |
| Fermanagh College | 2,100 | - | - |
| Lisburn Institute - PPP | - | - | 1,890 |
| North Down Institute | 9,500 | 9,000 | - |
| Capital Programmes | 6,000 | 6,000 | 4,500 |
| North West Institute | - | - | 5,350 |
| Armagh College - PPP | 110 | 110 | 110 |
| Causeway Institute - PPP | 115 | 115 | 115 |
| North East Institute-Antrim | 2,700 | 2,700 | - |
| North West Institute | 6,900 | 6,900 | - |
| Learning & Teaching Infrastructure (LTC) | 8,500 | 8,500 | 8,500 |
| Strategic Investment Funding (SRIF) | 5,000 | 5,000 | 5,000 |
| University College Strategic Capital Invest Fund | 1,500 | 2,000 | 1,500 |

| DEL Capital Bids | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Description of Bid | £000'S | | |
| | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 |
| HEI Strategic Capital Investment Fund | 4,000 | 7,000 | 6,000 |
| Central Vacancy Taking | 250 | - | - |
| Minor Capital Works | 400 | 150 | 150 |
| Workforce and Economic Development | 1,500 | 750 | 500 |
| | 55,575 | 53,225 | 44,600 |

ANNEX C

| Indicative Allocations Proposed in Draft Bdgct | | | |
|--|---------|---------|--------------|
| Years | 2008/09 | 2009/10 | 2010/11 |
| Capital | £40.7m | £38.7m | £44.6m (net) |
| Resource | £34.8m | £91.5m | £156.5m |

Further Education Teaching Staff

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the risks to the quality assurance of qualifications in the further education sector as a result of the continued industrial action of teaching staff. (AQW 1572/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The refusal of lecturers to mark registers, or engage in course reviews and self evaluation as part of their industrial action, presents an element of risk to quality assurance in Further Education Colleges. That risk remains low, however, and Colleges will apply whatever measures they consider necessary to protect teaching and learning and the interests of students.

Essential Skills Programme

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of (i) 16-18 year olds; (ii) 18-35 year olds; and (iii) over 35 year olds, who have participated in the Essential Skills programme in each of the last five years. (AQW 1597/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of individuals within the categories (i) 16-18 year olds; (ii) 18-35 year olds; and (iii) over 35 years olds, who have participated in the Essential Skills programme in each of the last five years, is detailed in the table below.

| Academic Year ¹ | Age Band | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| | (i) 16 - 18 | (ii) 18 - 35 | (iii) Over 35 |
| 2002/03 ² | 345 | 1,013 | 906 |

| Academic Year ¹ | Age Band | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| | (i) 16 - 18 | (ii) 18 - 35 | (iii) Over 35 |
| 2003/04 | 1,913 | 2,235 | 1,665 |
| 2004/05 | 2,369 | 2,530 | 2,458 |
| 2005/06 | 4,103 | 2,611 | 2,446 |
| 2006/07 | 5,957 | 2,362 | 1,839 |

Source: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), Enrolment Database.

Notes:

Figures are correct as at 23rd October 2007.

Age has been calculated as age at start of Essential Skills course.

In order to answer this question, 2,314 individuals aged 18 years old are included in both age bands (i) and (ii).

- 1 Academic year is defined as 1st September to 31st August.
- 2 Please note the Department launched the Essential Skills Strategy and Action Plan in October 2002 therefore academic year 2002/03 is not comparable to more recent academic years.

Maintenance Grants

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will carry out a review of (i) the levels of maintenance grants available to students in further and higher education; and (ii) whether or not current grant levels are deterring people, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, from taking up places in third level education. (AQW 1613/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

With the introduction of variable tuition fees from September 2006, the levels of maintenance grants were increased substantially to mitigate the impact on less well off students.

While it is too early to gauge the impact of the new arrangements, I have already made clear that a review of variable fees and wider student finance will commence in AY2008/09. The review will look particularly at participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the Belfast Metropolitan College's plans to develop a new campus in the Titanic Quarter, what plans he has for the Tower Street/ Newtownards Road campus. (AQW 1659/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The development of the new campus at Titanic Quarter is primarily to replace the Belfast Metropolitan College's Brunswick Street and College Square East premises. Some limited consolidation of other provision, including some from Tower Street, will take place. Tower St will still be required, at least in the medium term, and its

longer term future will be considered by the Governing Body of Belfast Metropolitan College as part of an overall estates strategy for East Belfast.

Redundancies at Regency Spinning, Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he has taken since the announcement of redundancies at Regency Spinning in Newtownards. (AQW 1779/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following the announcement that Regency Spinning was placed into Administration on 8 November 2007, Newtownards JobCentre together with Ards Borough Council arranged a redundancy clinic at the Crepe Weavers on Thursday 15th November. Participating in that event were:

- JobCentre including Careers and Disablement Advisory Service;
- Social Security Agency;
- Ards Borough Council;
- Local Enterprise Agencies;
- North Down & Ards College of Further & Higher Education under the umbrella of the South Eastern Regional College ; and
- Ards Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) who were invited expressly to provide assistance to Polish migrant workers.

Unfortunately only five members of Regency staff attended the clinic.

Mechanisms have been put in place to ensure that both Social Security Agency (SSA) and JobCentre staff identify former Regency Spinning Ltd employees when they visit their offices in order to advise them of the services available to them and offer them appointments to discuss their situation. The DEL information packs which would have been handed to everyone at the redundancy clinic, together with a letter inviting them to meet with DEL staff to discuss options, is being included with Invest NI literature and is being posted to all the workforce.

In addition to information on training DEL provision, the pack includes information on local vacancies and a separate leaflet on Production Operative vacancies and information on New Deal Travel to Interview Scheme and European Employment Services.

By 14th November 2007, 87 former employees of Regency Spinning Ltd had made application to the Department for Employment and Learning for statutory redundancy and insolvency payments under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. All claims received are being examined to establish

entitlement to statutory redundancy and insolvency payments under the Order. Payments for eligible claims will be made within the normal timescales.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Reconnect Grants Programme

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to continue the Reconnect Grants programme after March 2008. (AQW 1351/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): My Department has no plans to continue Reconnect in its current form, beyond the end of March 2008.

The Reconnect Grants programme is funded through the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund which expires on 31 March 2008. A further £2m of funding is included in the Executive's Draft Budget in 2008/09 to allow the programme to remain open to applications until 31 March 2008, and applicants to claim until September 2008.

The Reconnect programme will be evaluated during 2008 to assess if it has met its objectives in terms of bringing about a steep change in the use of renewable sources, creating a self sustaining market, reducing demand for grid electricity and increasing competitiveness.

Government continues to support micro-generation through:

- the reduction in the standard VAT rate to 5%;
- grants from the UK wide Low Carbon Building Programme;
- the availability of Renewable Obligation Certificates; and

In addition DFP is considering revising the building regulations to make renewables mandatory in the new build sector.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to involve MLAs in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency, in relation to his plans to ensure that every assistance is offered to Seagate workers affected by the loss of jobs at the Limavady plant. (AQW 1417/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I greatly appreciate the many efforts that are being made by all the MLAs in the East Londonderry constituency in support of the workforce at Seagate's Limavady plant since the closure announcement.

I have received numerous representations from a wide variety of stakeholders with regard to the future of employees at the Limavady plant. Invest NI and the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) are working in close liaison in the best interests of the workforce. To this end, meetings have already occurred between senior officers from Invest NI and DEL and the Company's senior management to develop a comprehensive and focused plan of action.

The Department for Employment and Learning has well-established procedures in place to assist those facing redundancy. These procedures will be put in place to match the timetable for closure and the needs of the workforce. A senior official has been identified to co-ordinate the range of services available, including those available from Invest NI, the Social Security Agency and the Further Education Regional College.

I will ensure that the MLAs in East Londonderry are fully briefed and kept up-to-date on progress.

Grant-Aid

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of grant-aid paid to Seagate in Limavady for plant and machinery; and what steps he will take to ensure that this equipment will not be shipped abroad until he is satisfied that all refundable grants have been paid. (AQW 1419/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Seagate's operation at Limavady has drawn down a total of £ 21.3 million of grant support against plant and machinery since its establishment in 1996. In the 4 year timeframe leading up to proposed closure, in mid 2008, the grant paid out against plant and equipment will have totalled £4.2 million. Of the balance of £17.1 million of assistance, £16.1 million was provided before the end of 2002.

In the case of multinational companies such as Seagate, Invest NI's assistance agreements are structured in such a manner as to minimise risk to the public purse by requiring a parent company guarantee in respect of any liabilities that may arise.

As a consequence recovery of grant monies to be repaid will be enforced, if necessary, via the mechanism of the parental guarantee. This avoids the necessity of having to continually track and update charges over plant and machinery as items are bought and discarded.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail whether or not he has received any assurances that redundancy payments will be paid to employees who opt to leave their employment at the Seagate factory in Limavady, prior to its closure. (AQW 1420/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With regard to redundancy, it must be recognised that, beyond reference to statutory minimum requirements, the terms of a redundancy package are entirely a matter for the company to agree in consultation with the employees.

It is my understanding that this process of consultation is currently ongoing between Seagate management and employees. As a result, until such deliberations are complete, it is not possible to be definitive regarding any of the details pertaining to the proposed redundancy settlement.

I would suggest that any requests for information concerning the structure of the proposed redundancy package should, in the first instance, be addressed to the company at Limavady.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1450/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has been briefed on DETI's bids submitted in the Comprehensive Spending Review and the allocations made against these bids in the Draft Budget 2008-2011 and in the Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

The papers relating to this detailed briefing have been placed in the Assembly Library and are available for inspection.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what instructions he has given to Invest NI, in relation to addressing the particular problems facing Seagate employees in Limavady. (AQW 1456/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have instructed Invest NI to engage with their counterparts in Department for Employment &

Learning (DEL) and to undertake work as necessary to understand the existing skills and particular needs of the workforce at Limavady so that an action plan can be developed which will best serve these employees in addressing the challenges that lie ahead.

In so doing, Invest NI and DEL will be cognisant of current and future alternative opportunities within the North West area and will seek to equip former Seagate employees with a range of skills that will be commensurate with those opportunities. Invest NI's Entrepreneurship programmes will be of key interest to those former Seagate employees who may decide that starting their own business is the best way forward post Seagate.

I have also instructed Invest NI to continue to promote NI as a location for inward investment and to be particularly mindful of the needs of the North West – and the opportunities presented – when a significant number of skilled people are no longer employed by Seagate Technology Media (Ireland) Ltd.

Trade Missions

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of (i) trade missions to (a) Europe; (b) the USA; and (c) Asia, that took place in 2003/04; 2005/06; and 2006/07; and (ii) businesses located in Upper Bann that have participated in such missions. (AQW 1458/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Over the last five years, Invest NI has organised 252 trade missions to Europe, USA and Asia. The table below provides a breakdown by location and financial year, as well as outlining the number of businesses located in Upper Bann that participated.

Trade Missions

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of businesses owned or led by women, that have been included in trade missions to Europe and the USA, in (i) 2002/03; (ii) 2003/04; (iii) 2004/05; (iv) 2005/06. (AQW 1459/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI does not keep records of the gender of the owners or management of businesses which participate in its trade missions. However, based on the information available, the table below provides an estimate of participation in trade missions by businesses owned or led by women.

| | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | Totals |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Europe | 32 | 29 | 32 | 21 | 34 | 148 |
| USA | 6 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 23 |
| Asia | 9 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 36 |
| Totals | 47 | 37 | 43 | 34 | 46 | 207 |

Renewable Energy Installation Academy

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will give an assurance that his department will continue to fund the Renewable Energy Installation Academy when its Interreg funding expires in March 2008. (AQW 1467/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Renewable Energy Installers Academy (REIA) is funded through the EU Interreg programme until December 2007. At present my Department is seeking approval from DFP to offer additional funding up to £105,000 to this project to allow certain aspects of this pilot programme to continue until March 2008. Beyond that, the need for further Government intervention would be subject to detailed evaluation of the existing programme, the submission and approval of a full business case, and confirmation of funding being available.

While a new round of Interreg funding will be available after April 2008, EU regulations state that a project cannot receive EU funding more than once. Any new projects coming forward under Interreg IV will be subject to a competitive call.

The Renewable Energy Installers Academy has performed well and has already exceeded the agreed targets for training. However, the availability of a self-financing UK wide Microgeneration Certification Scheme, being launched by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) in May 2008, will have to be factored into any future case for funding. Officials have already been in discussion with BERR as to how the REIA can dovetail into this UK-wide scheme.

North-South Interconnector Cable

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the costings for undergrounding the north-south interconnector cable, in relation to the section that falls within Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1497/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

A costing study, commissioned by Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE), is currently being carried out to provide a best estimate of the costs of undergrounding the section of the proposed north-south interconnector falling within Northern Ireland. The outcome of the study is not expected until mid-December 2007 and its findings will be made public as part of NIE's planning application.

Ballance House, Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to provide funding to Ballance House in Glenavy, as the birthplace of a former Prime Minister of New Zealand, in light of its potential as a tourist attraction. (AQW 1560/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board did not receive an application from Ballance House, Glenavy requesting funding from the 2006 – 2008 tourism development financial assistance scheme (TDS). The operational guidelines and criteria are being developed for the 2008 – 2011 TDS capital grant scheme and this will be opened in 2008.

NITB support the Greater Belfast Regional Tourism Partnership to develop packages, provide information and promote local attractions across the council areas of Belfast, Lisburn, Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey. The Ballance House falls within the Lisburn City Council area and can benefit from a range of promotional, visitor servicing and product development activity. Further information on the opportunities can be sourced from Lisburn City Council Tourism Development Department or from Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

Ferry Routes

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what proposals he is bringing forward to make ferry routes between Scotland and Northern Ireland more competitive, particularly for tourists seeking short breaks and for business travellers. (AQW 1577/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The development of ferry services, which may have the effect of improving competition by increasing choice and thereby impacting upon price competitiveness is a matter for the commercial judgement of ferry operators, having regard to prevailing market opportunities.

Northern Ireland tourism, however, particularly benefits from the private sector ferry services operating

in the Irish Sea. These provide ferry connections between Belfast and Stranraer, and Larne to Troon and Cairnryan.

My Department in 2007, through the remit of Tourism Ireland, invested £250,000 in marketing Northern Ireland in Scotland as a 'must see', short-break destination. Planned investment in a similar Great Britain-wide marketing activity in 2008 will be £500,000.

Ferry Prices

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland on the issue of bringing down ferry prices for travel across the Irish Sea, particularly for tourists bringing their car for a short break. (AQW 1578/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The issue of ferry prices for travel across the Irish Sea is a matter of commercial judgement for the private sector companies which supply the service. For this reason I have not discussed this with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost to his department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1646/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The information requested is not held. In common with all NI Departments, DETI does not calculate or record information on the cost of individual FOI requests.

**Redundancies in
Regency Spinners, Newtownards**

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to assist employees of Regency Spinners in Newtownards who are being made redundant. (AQW 1698/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I have received a number of expressions of concern with regard to the employees being made redundant at Regency Spinning Ltd, Newtownards. In order to provide the most efficient response to the situation it is important that Invest NI (INI) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) continue to work in close liaison with the company. Consequently officers from DEL, INI and the Company's senior management

have been in liaison to develop a focused plan of action for the affected workforce.

In conjunction with Ards Borough Council, Newtownards Jobcentre and Invest NI organised a redundancy clinic at the Crepe Weavers plant in Newtownards on Thursday 15th November 2007.

Participating in that event were:

- Jobcentre including Careers and Disablement Advisory Service;
- Social Security Agency (SSA);
- Ards Borough Council;
- Ards Business Clinic (Local Enterprise Agency);
- North Down & Ards College of Further & Higher Education under the umbrella of the South Eastern Regional College ;
- Ards Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

Ards CAB had been invited expressly to provide assistance to the Polish Migrant Workers (9% of workforce) as they are delivering a pilot project for Migrant Workers including translation services funded by the Local Strategic Partnership.

In view of the low turnout for the redundancy clinic on Thursday 15 November 2007, Invest NI and DEL will issue a letter to the home address of each affected employee highlighting their self employment options and the offer of an appointment with Jobcentre staff.

This letter will also include an information pack on local vacancies, the New Deal Travel to Interview Scheme and European Employment Services. A separate leaflet on Production Operative vacancies at Axminster Contract Carpets Ltd, Kennedy Way Industrial Estate, Belfast will also be included.

As at 20th November 2007, 87 former employees of Regency Spinning Ltd have made application to the Department for Employment and Learning for statutory redundancy and insolvency payments under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. All claims received are being vetted to establish entitlement to statutory redundancy and insolvency payments under the Order. Payments for eligible claims will be made within the normal timescales

As at 20th November 2007 approximately 67 of the total redundant work force had made claim applications for Job Seekers Allowance.

I will of course keep MLA's in the Strangford constituency informed as appropriate and continue to utilise the offices of all relevant stakeholders in the best interests of the workforce.

Draft Budget

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will define the term 'the greater south-east', with reference to the private sector productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom average, as set out in the Minister of Finance and Personnel's speech on the draft Budget, which was delivered to the Assembly on 25 October 2007.

(AQW 1709/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The 'Greater South East' refers to the East, London and South East regions of England. This captures the London Commuter Belt.

The private sector productivity goal, in the draft Programme for Government, excludes the Greater South East, as these regions do not represent an appropriate comparator for the Northern Ireland economy.

The Greater South East has a markedly different economic structure to Northern Ireland, with a large concentration of high value-added financial and business services.

Gross Value Added

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will report on the level of gross value added in Northern Ireland compared to the United Kingdom average, minus the greater south-east, in the last ten years.

(AQW 1710/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Over the ten year period, 1995 – 2005, Northern Ireland's Gross Value Added (GVA) increased from £14.4bn to £24.5bn, representing an increase of 70%.

During the same period, GVA in the UK (excluding the Greater South East) increased from £377.7bn to £612.1bn, representing an increase of 62%.

Northern Ireland's GVA per capita – a standard measure of economic prosperity – increased from 88% of the UK (excluding the Greater South East) average in 1995 to 90% in 2005.

Planning Applications

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the number of planning applications for large-scale wind farms will ensure that Northern Ireland will meet its renewable energy targets by 2012.

(AQW 1715/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

My response on 18 September to your previous written question (AQW 51/08) included an assessment of 361MW of renewables production capacity as being

needed to meet the 2012 target, of which 332 MW would come from wind.

Applications currently with the Planning Service involve just over 1,000 MW of capacity. Taken with existing installed capacity and projects that have already received planning approval and are at different stages of development, these applications, if developed, will be more than sufficient to meet the 2012 target.

InterTradeIreland

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give a timescale within which the ongoing InterTradeIreland mapping of research and development centres and technology centres will be completed; and what steps he will take in relation to the content of the report. (AQO 911/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The research phase of the study has now been completed and the report is being finalised with a view to publication by the end of the year. The recommendations and how they might be implemented will be considered by Departments in the New Year.

Invest NI

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 1526/08, to detail the number of offers made by Invest NI to possible inward investors to visit (i) Fermanagh District Council; (ii) Dungannon District Council; (iii) Omagh District Council; (iv) Strabane District Council; and (v) Cookstown District Council, for the years 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 1865/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI promotes and markets Northern Ireland as an entity. Invest NI does not pre-determine or promote specific locations within Northern Ireland for visits by a potential investor: this decision is taken by the investor. The focus of Invest NI's international sales and marketing effort is to aggressively promote all areas of Northern Ireland as attractive and viable locations for new inward investment opportunities, in what is a very competitive global market.

Invest NI does however work closely with the company when preparing a draft visit programme to ensure that the locations to be visited meet their requirements and also provide the best opportunity for Invest NI to sell the Northern Ireland proposition.

Tourism

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to increase the number of tourists from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. (AQO 840/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Tourism Ireland Ltd is responsible for marketing Northern Ireland in the important Great Britain market. The organisation is currently undertaking an intensive programme of promotional activities in Great Britain. For example, the short breaks campaign, which took place in September/ October 2007, featured Londonderry and Belfast in advertising, direct marketing and in a new short breaks brochure produced by Tourism Ireland. Tourism Ireland has also invested £250,000 during autumn 2007 in activity in Scotland, focusing specifically on Northern Ireland.

For spring of next year, Tourism Ireland is working closely with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to invest [an incremental] £500,000, funded jointly by Tourism Ireland and NITB to build on interest generated by the 2007 campaign and by the core Tourism Ireland activity in 2008. More specific details of this spring 2008 activity will be announced towards the end of this year.

Given the importance of ensuring that positive, "good news" stories about Northern Ireland appear continually in the GB media, Tourism Ireland continues to encourage publicity. To date in 2007, there have been 128 media visits from GB to Northern Ireland.

The wider Tourism Ireland activities of increasing tourism to the island of Ireland, and supporting Northern Ireland in realising its tourism potential, will, of course, continue in parallel with these initiatives in Great Britain.

Seagate Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on alleviating the threat to the economy of Limavady and the north west, as a result of the recent announcement of job losses the Seagate factory. (AQO 848/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Firstly, let me once again express my deep concern for the workforce at Seagate's plant in Limavady. Every effort is being made by my Department, alongside other Departments, to help them identify potential opportunities for employment and to address any barriers that they may face.

- Since the company's announcement, we have been working closely with DEL on a number of key initiatives including;

- liaison with the company's HR Department to determine the composition, skills profile and geographical location of the employees;
- provision of group sessions, in conjunction with the Social Security Agency, Further Education College and others, to provide advice and guidance on benefits, training and education opportunities, careers guidance and potential employment opportunities;
- The possibility of on-site Job Clinics with one to one guidance and counselling including a jobsearch facility, advice on completion of application forms and CVs, interview techniques and information on training or employment programmes;
- a Redundancy Information Pack for each individual containing information on services, programmes, child and working tax credits, jobsearch information and local opportunity information.
- Facilitation of a Training Needs Analysis by North West Regional College to determine the training needs of the workforce and identification of appropriate courses/training to re-skill or up-skill employees.
- The possibility of holding a Jobs Fair in the spring has also been discussed with Seagate and the company was quite positive. The local council has also indicated its willingness to assist in this regard.
- Invest NI will also concentrate its efforts in encouraging prospective investors, both externally and locally-owned, to actively consider the area as a location for future investment.
- Invest NI remains strongly committed to the North West region, where there have been high levels of activity and investment during the past five years. It has offered financial assistance of £95 million in support of 1,965 projects in the North West, leveraging a total investment commitment of £432 million. The first phase of the North West Action Plan has delivered positive economic impacts. For instance, the Timber Quay building in Londonderry, which received substantial financial assistance, has been an outstanding success. This has now been fully let and has proven to be a catalyst for further private sector development in the city. In the last 18 months alone, we have also seen major investment commitments by key global companies such as Fujitsu, Northbrook and Firstsource.

Job Creation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs that have been created in Northern Ireland, with the support of Invest NI, since the restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007. (AQO 820/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Since 8 May 2007, 899 new jobs have been promoted through inward-investment projects supported by Invest NI. These include 402 jobs in Fujitsu Services and 149 in Bank of Ireland Security Services.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Start a Business Programme, which is provided by Invest NI in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland offered assistance to 1,504 individuals to start their own business. The expected employment associated with these is around 2,000.

Although Invest NI does not measure the number of jobs promoted in relation to its support for existing indigenous businesses, it is important to note that this element of the agency's work will also ultimately lead to greater wealth creation and better employment opportunities. An excellent example is the recent Norbrook investment in Newry, which promises to deliver almost 300 high quality jobs.

Northern Ireland has made a considerable improvement in its labour market performance. The unemployment rate, at 3.8%, is the lowest of all the UK regions and the current number of employee jobs, 718,190, is the highest on record.

Research and Development

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to encourage small and medium sized enterprises to invest more resources in research and development.

(AQO 829/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Invest NI continues to use all available media channels to raise awareness and promote the benefits of business-related R&D. These include client testimonials, editorial, press releases and case studies showcasing client success.

Invest NI offers a wide range of advice and financial incentives to encourage the local business community to increase their investment in R&D, product and process development, and technology-transfer. It is seeking European approval to enhance its portfolio of R&D schemes in line with the new EU State Aid Guidelines. This will provide an opportunity to increase the range of interventions that can be delivered to small and medium sized enterprises.

For example, a small business will qualify for up to 45% of cost incurred to carry out near-market product or process development. In addition, a 15% bonus is available for project collaboration. These rates may be further enhanced if an SME undertakes "industrial research". In these circumstances, an SME will qualify

for up to 70% of costs incurred with an additional 10% available for collaboration.

Under the EU Structural Funds 'Competitiveness & Employment Programme 2007 to 2013', over £150M of EU and Invest NI support will be specifically directed towards research and technological development activities in Northern Ireland, further demonstrating our long term commitment to investment in R&D.

The Executive has also made a commitment to increase Invest NI's R&D budget from £18 million in 2007/08 to £22 million in 2010/11.

Creative Arts Industry

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the support that Invest NI is giving to the creative arts industry in Northern Ireland. (AQO 828/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The creative arts industry encompasses a range of sectors including software development, architecture and the performing arts.

Invest NI's sectoral priorities within the industry are software development, digital content, film & television, and music.

In the three years to 31 March 2007, Invest NI provided 68 offers of financial assistance totalling £20 million to its clients in this industry. This in turn leveraged an additional £72m of private sector investment.

In addition, in the four years to 31st March 2007, Invest NI provided £10.7 million to support the Northern Ireland Screen Commission's strategy for the development of the local film and television industry. A further £12.4 million has been approved to support its costs over the next three years.

Invest NI support for the music sector is channelled through the Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission. In January 2007, Invest NI and the Arts Council for Northern Ireland jointly supported the Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission's three-year business skills development programme '*Music, It's The Business*'. Invest NI has also provided additional support for the export marketing activities of the Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission.

Invest NI also supports the activities of Craft NI and will continue to consider support for individual export-focused creative businesses that meet its eligibility criteria.

United States of America/Northern Ireland Investment Conference

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the

preparations for the United States of America/Northern Ireland Investment Conference in 2008; and to detail the key objectives of this conference. (AQO 831/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department and Invest NI are actively planning for this conference.

On 15 and 16 October 2007, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I welcomed an inward mission of 17 US companies led by US Ambassadors Tuttle from London and Foley from Dublin. The visit provided an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of US investment to the development of the NI economy and to demonstrate that we are "open for business" in preparation for the investment conference to be held in Belfast next year. The feedback from all who participated in the visit was very positive and they were impressed with the Northern Ireland business messages and the solutions we can provide for international businesses.

Last week, to follow up the Ambassadors' visit to Northern Ireland, I travelled to the East Coast of the United States. During this visit, I met with key business and political stakeholders, including Paula Dobriansky at the State Department. This allowed me to successfully raise the profile of the conference and to encourage senior business executives to participate. When the First Minister and deputy First Minister visit the United States early next month, they too will take the opportunity to reinforce this message.

In addition, the US Administration has plans to bring one further inward delegation to Northern Ireland, probably in February 2008. Arrangements are still to be finalised for this future visit.

The key objective of the conference will be to showcase a new Northern Ireland, governed by a stable Devolved Administration, that is pro-business and proactive in meeting the needs of international business.

Enterprise Promotion

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to promote enterprise in areas of higher unemployment and with higher levels of social deprivation. (AQO 819/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has a number of programmes that specifically seek to promote enterprise in areas of higher unemployment and social deprivation. This includes providing assistance and advice to business via the Start a Business Programme, the Social Entrepreneurship Programme and the Export Start scheme, alongside support to existing client companies within such areas. Invest NI has also had the opportunity to pilot a number of projects on the theme of Exploring

Enterprise in areas of high deprivation through the Renewing Communities Action Plan. This work consists of a comprehensive package of pre-start support and advice. It is aimed at encouraging a greater awareness of and participation in enterprise in targeted areas in East, South and North Belfast, the Greater Shankill area and Rathcoole.

Invest NI also uses other initiatives to proactively promote areas of disadvantage. Invest NI's land acquisition strategy, for example, involves intervention in the commercial property market to develop land for industrial use in areas where there is clear evidence of market failure. Traditionally these tend to be areas of high unemployment and social deprivation.

Invest NI has also sought, with some success, to encourage potential inward investors to consider locating in nTSN areas. Between 2002 and 2007, 74% of first-time inward investment projects assisted by Invest NI located in nTSN areas. In addition, 50% of all the financial assistance offered by the agency during this period was to clients located in such areas.

However, it is important to note that, in the delivery of its broader programmes, the majority of Invest NI's assistance is demand-led and does not have a specific geographical focus.

Job Promotion

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs promoted in the software, information, communication and technology sectors in Northern Ireland in the past year. (AQO 807/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the financial year 2006/07 Invest NI offered £5.95 million of assistance to 9 inward-investment projects in the software, information, communication and technology sectors. This leveraged a total investment commitment of £43.3 million, promoted 604 new jobs and secured 33 existing jobs.

Job Creation

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will confirm that the target to create 6,500 new jobs, as set out in PSA 3, is a net or gross figure; and to indicate the comparable targets for creating new jobs from indigenous businesses. (AQO 860/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The target is a gross figure and relates to jobs promoted as a result of financial assistance offered to support mobile inward investment projects from Invest NI's externally-owned clients. The £1.2 billion overall

investment target proposed in PSA 1 includes the investment associated with promoting the 6,500 FDI jobs. The inclusion of a specific job target for inward investment activity provides a common national and regional measurement of performance.

There is no comparable job target for indigenous businesses, defined as Invest NI's locally-owned clients. Invest NI's primary focus is to contribute to improving Northern Ireland's manufacturing and private services productivity. It has been set challenging targets as described in PSA 1.

These include measurements relating to growth in a number of priority areas.

In relation to sales and exports, we aim to:

- maintain the Compound Annual Growth Rate in external sales per employee of 6% for Invest NI manufacturing clients;
- increase the growth rate for Invest NI tradable service clients to 4% by the end of the three year planning cycle;
- increase, by 3 percentage points, export sales as a percentage of total sales by Invest NI client companies, excluding the top 25 exporting companies.

A target of £345m for total annual wages and salaries has been set to reflect growth from locally-owned clients and inward investment successes.

In relation to innovation activity, we will aim to increase the Business Expenditure on Research and Development Compound Annual Growth Rate by 8% in Invest NI client companies with less than 250 employees and 5% in client companies with more than 249 employees.

These targets are more appropriate than job-related targets for locally-owned companies, as improvements in these measures are an indication of higher levels of business competitiveness; which in turn will lead to greater wealth creation and better employment opportunities.

The extent of Invest NI's engagement with locally-owned indigenous businesses is demonstrated by the fact that, during the past five years, £339 million of financial assistance was offered in support of development projects provided by locally-owned clients. This represents 53.5% of the total assistance offered by the agency during that period.

Tourism

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, to develop a marketing strategy to offer alternative key

visitor attractions in Belfast city centre, following the closure of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum.
(AQO 883/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Whilst recognising the importance of Belfast City Hall and the Ulster Museum to tourism in Belfast, I should remind the Member that marketing the city is the primary responsibility of Belfast City Council and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

However, officials from my Department and from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board recently met representatives from the Council and the Convention Bureau to discuss a range of issues including the closure of these attractions. The Council and the Convention Bureau have undertaken to encourage other attractions in Belfast to consider, for example, opening out of season, or extending their opening times, in order that visitors can still find plenty to do in the city while the City Hall and the Ulster Museum are closed for refurbishment. Added to the list of places to visit in Belfast are a number of new attractions which have opened this year, including Thompson Dock, Titanic Tours and the Nomadic.

While the City Hall is being refurbished the Waterfront Hall, Malone House and Belfast Castle will be available for functions ranging from small scale events to conferences. The grounds of the City Hall will also stay open for visitors and events, including the popular Christmas Continental Market and the Belfast Big Wheel.

With regard to the Ulster Museum, National Museums have put in place a significant outreach programme designed to continue engagement with existing audiences of the Museum, taking the artefacts to the people. This outreach programme includes numerous venues in the Belfast area. In addition, a full marketing and communication plan has been in operation since the Ulster Museum closed. This has included coverage on TV and radio and the distribution of over 160,000 events and exhibition booklets.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board also continues to support the Belfast Welcome Centre and the two information desks at the Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport. The Tourist Information staff at these locations are fully informed about alternative visitor attractions available and can recommend a choice of experiences to visitors.

Broadband for Businesses

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the current availability of broadband for businesses in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 826/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Broadband access with speeds of no less than 512 kilo bits per second have been available to all of Northern Ireland since December 2005. This includes every business in Northern Ireland and is delivered via telephone lines, wireless or satellite services. Over 99% of broadband services are delivered by telephone wires or cable TV systems. Less than 1% of broadband services are delivered by wireless systems including satellite. Customers can often choose from more than one provider.

Tourism

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to achieve his goals of increasing the number of tourists visiting Northern Ireland to 2.5 million; and increasing tourist revenue to £520 million per year by 2011.

(AQO 830/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Increasing the number of tourists to Northern Ireland is a key priority for my Department. The Draft Budget 2008 to 2011 provides increased indicative allocations for tourism which will be key to increasing the number of visitors to 2.5 million and the amount they spend to £520 million by 2011.

The indicative allocations for the next three years for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board are £44.6 million resource and £47.6 million capital. The indicative allocation for Tourism Ireland for the same period is £48.8 million.

Subject to the outcome of the Draft Budget, this funding will be used to enhance still further Northern Ireland's diverse tourism product. This will include investment in tourism infrastructure across Northern Ireland and working with key partners to bring the five tourism Signature Projects to a successful conclusion. This investment in tourism infrastructure will be underpinned by increased investment in Visitor Servicing, so ensuring that visitors are well looked after during their stay and thus encouraged to return.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland Ltd will also continue to market Northern Ireland energetically in the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and overseas.

Tourism

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what progress is being made in relation to Tourism Ireland's brand review.
(AQO 824/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Tourism Ireland is finalising a report on the review of

the island of Ireland tourism brand. Findings will be launched to the tourism industry on 29 November 2007. The findings will inform marketing activity in 2008 and the years to come.

United States of America/Northern Ireland Investment Conference

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on plans for the United States of America/Northern Ireland Investment Conference in 2008. (AQO 859/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department and Invest NI are actively planning for this conference.

On 15 and 16 October 2007, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I welcomed an inward mission of 17 US companies led by US Ambassadors Tuttle from London and Foley from Dublin. The visit provided an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of US investment to the development of the NI economy and to demonstrate that we are “open for business” in preparation for the investment conference to be held in Belfast next year. The feedback from all who participated in the visit was very positive and they were impressed with the Northern Ireland business messages and the solutions we can provide for international businesses.

Last week, following up the Ambassadors visit to Northern Ireland, I travelled to the East Coast of the United States. During this visit, I met with key business and political stakeholders, including Paula Dobriansky at the State Department. This allowed me to successfully raise the profile of the conference and to encourage senior business executives to participate. When the First Minister and deputy First Minister visit the United States early next month, they too will take the opportunity to reinforce this message.

In addition, the US Administration has plans to bring one further inward delegation to Northern Ireland, probably in February 2008. Arrangements are still to be finalised for this future visit.

The key objective of the conference will be to showcase a new Northern Ireland governed by a stable Devolved Administration that is pro-business and pro-active in meeting the needs of international business.

ENVIRONMENT

District Council Office Meetings

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of office meetings that have taken

place in (i) Fermanagh District Council area; (ii) Omagh District Council area; (iii) Magherafelt District Council area; (iv) Cookstown District Council area; (v) Newry and Mourne District Council area; (vi) Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council area; (vii) Banbridge District Council area; (viii) Down District Council area; (ix) Ards Borough Council area; and (x) Lisburn City Council area, since 1 September 2006.

(AQW 1407/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

The number of office meetings that have taken place with the various district councils since 1 September 2006 are shown in the attached table. While there is a wide variation in the number of meetings held per district council, the numbers do not reflect the differing workload pressures, the different types of application considered and the differences in the quality of the information submitted from one district/Division to another.

OFFICE MEETINGS HELD

| District Council | Number of meetings |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Fermanagh | 349 |
| Omagh | 411 |
| Magherafelt | 281 |
| Cookstown | 212 |
| Newry & Mourne | 58 |
| Dungannon & South Tyrone | 322 |
| Banbridge | 45 |
| Down | 5 |
| Ards | 6 |
| Lisburn | 25 |

Planning Applications

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of (i) outline; (ii) reserved matters; and (iii) full planning applications for single dwellings in the countryside, submitted after 16 March 2006, that have been approved. (AQW 1408/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of approved outline, reserved matters and full applications are shown in the table below.

NO OF APPROVALS FOR SINGLE RURAL DWELLINGS RECEIVED SINCE 17TH MARCH 2006 AND APPROVED UP TO 30TH SEPTEMBER 2007

| Outline | Reserved Matters | Full |
|---------|------------------|-------|
| 272 | 1,257 | 1,146 |

Road Construction at Strathern Manor, Newcastle

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment if she will provide an update on progress made by the Planning Service, in relation to investigations into the road constructed at Strathern Manor on the Tollymore Road, Newcastle on 1 October 2007. (AQW 1409/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Following a site inspection carried out by officers from the Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office enforcement team on 1 October 2007, it was concluded that the works were to lay an access between Strathearn Manor and lands to the south of No. 8 Tollymore Road, Newcastle. The works do not affect trees covered by a Tree Preservation Order.

The contractor on site provided a copy of a certificate issued by DRD Roads Service in respect of a temporary access 'for site investigation' purposes but an application for planning permission has not been received.

Further investigations were carried out including consultations with Roads Service culminating in warning letters being issued to the current developer and the original developer of the Strathearn Manor site as the last known owner of the land affected by the unauthorised works.

The letters require the removal of the material deposited and the restoration of the land by 7th December 2007.

PRIORITIES AND BUDGET 2007 - RESOURCE ALLOCATIONS

| Spending Proposal | Bid Order | Total Bids | | | Bids met from Resource Allocations | | | Variance between allocations and bids | | |
|---|-----------|------------|---------|---------|------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 |
| Road Safety Services- new initiatives/partnerships to reduce number of road casualties | 1 | 800 | 1,600 | 1,600 | 500 | 1,200 | 1,600 | -300 | -400 | 0 |
| Enhanced Road Transport Compliance (Driver & Vehicle Agency) to improve road safety | 1 | 780 | 1,395 | 1,670 | 780 | 1,395 | 1,670 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Enforcement and better Regulation for environmental protection | 2 | 870 | 1,255 | 1,980 | 770 | 1,255 | 1,980 | -100 | 0 | 0 |
| Implementation of reform within the Planning Service | 3 | 950 | 980 | 1,115 | 2,150 | 150 | 250 | 1,200 | -830 | -865 |
| Costs associated with the Programme Delivery Support Unit | 4 | 600 | 600 | 800 | 200 | 600 | 800 | -400 | 0 | 0 |
| Cost of Implementing RPA - Planning Service & Local Government- to address issues such as finance, estates, shared services | 5 | 4,450 | 5,500 | 8,150 | - | 800 | 5,000 | -4,450 | -4,700 | -3,150 |
| Emergency Planning for NI Civil Contingencies Programme - Grant to District Councils | 6 | 700 | 700 | 700 | - | 700 | 700 | -700 | 0 | 0 |

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if she will provide an update on her department's progress on amending Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside, since it assumed responsibility for this issue. (AQW 1430/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As indicated I intend to bring forward a new draft PPS 14 within 6 months. The first meeting of the Executive Subcommittee charged with reviewing PPS 14 was held on Monday 12 November 2007. This meeting was constructive and productive and we have made an excellent start to the review by considering a range of policy options.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1449/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The attached table details the Department's bids in relation to Budget 2007 as well as the additional funding allocated to the various bids.

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Costs to put in place a regime to deal with waste and contaminated land | 7 | 1,500 | 1,500 | 1,500 | - | 400 | 1,000 | -1,500 | -1,100 | -500 |
| Subtotal | | 10,650 | 13,530 | 17,515 | 4,400 | 6,500 | 13,000 | -6,250 | -7,030 | -4,515 |
| Marker bids | | | | | | | | | | |
| Waste Management (100% funded from central government) (1) | 8 | 33,3451 | 53,293 | 52,761 | - | - | - | -33,345 | -53,293 | -52,76 |
| Illegal dumping - for the removal and disposal of waste from the RoI (2) | 9 | 8,200 | 5,200 | 2,600 | - | - | - | -8,200 | -5,200 | -2,600 |
| Overall Total | | 52,195 | 72,023 | 72,876 | 4,400 | 6,500 | 13,000 | -47,795 | -65,523 | -59,876 |

Notes

(1) The waste management funding is now being addressed through the ISNI.

(2) These are estimated costs and are dependant upon whether or not the Department is liable for a third of the overall removal and disposal costs.

Planning Applications

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria used by her department when assessing requests from district councils for (i) site meetings; and (ii) office meetings, to discuss individual planning applications; and if she will confirm whether or not this criteria is applied uniformly across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1520/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The criteria used by my Department when assessing requests from district Councils for site meetings and office meetings to discuss individual planning applications are set out in guidance on the new procedures issued to Councils in November 2006. These are:

- I. Applications which clarify the interpretation of a newly published or previously untested planning policy or where there is a lack of specific policy;
- II. Applications which involve a departure from the Regional Development Strategy or a development plan or a draft development plan;
- III. Applications which have significant environmental impact, requiring the submission of an Environmental Impact Statement;
- IV. Applications which have generated strong local/ neighbourhood objections based on valid planning concerns; and
- V. Where the council considers that all material planning considerations have not been assessed or where the opinion has been made contrary to, or departs from, prevailing planning policy.

In these cases, the planning opinion presented to Council will have been based on a full and proper assessment of the proposal having regard to all relevant material considerations. When these new procedures were introduced, guidance was issued to Chief Executives of Councils and Divisional Planning Managers and a circular issued to Planning Service staff giving advice on their operation.

Meetings to discuss deferred applications will be office-based unless, exceptionally, and again where there are clear planning reasons, the meeting needs to take place at the location of the proposed development because the issues to be raised can only be properly considered there.

I would confirm that these criteria are being applied uniformly across Northern Ireland.

Apartment Planning Approval

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of apartments that have received planning approval in each of the last seven years. (AQW 1521/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I regret the current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20 – does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the information requested. To provide accurate figures for the years in question could only be done by manual search of all our existing files and this would not be available in the time and would incur disproportionate costs.

It may be helpful to note that the new electronic system - ePIC – which is due to be introduced during 2008 will be able to store and retrieve such data.

Draft Banbridge/Newry and Mourne Area Plan 2015

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a date for the commencement of the Public Inquiry into the Draft Banbridge/Newry and Mourne Area Plan 2015. (AQW 1586/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) which accompanied the Draft Banbridge/Newry & Mourne Area Plan has

been the subject of a judicial challenge. The challenge raised issues similar to those that were the subject of the rulings handed down by the High Court on 7 September and 13 November 2007 in respect of the Draft Northern and Magherafelt Area Plans. The Department, in consultation with our legal advisors, is currently considering the implications of this judgement.

However, in light of the ongoing judicial challenge to this draft Area Plan, it is not currently possible to indicate when Planning Service will be in a position to request the Planning Appeals Commission to hold an independent examination into the objections to the Draft Banbridge/Newry & Mourne Area Plan.

Planning Applications for Wind Turbines

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total number of planning applications for, or including, wind turbines that are currently in the system; and to detail the capacity for generating electricity of each of these turbines. (AQW 1598/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are 38 current planning applications for windfarms/turbines (to specifically provide energy for the National Grid) with the potential to produce a total of 1038.45MW. The majority of turbines proposed in windfarm applications are 2 to 3 MW in size.

PROPOSED WIND FARMS

| Application No. | Location | No. Turbines | Capacity |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| M/2003/0999 | Slieve Beagh | 12 | 30 MW |
| L/2004/0472/F | Tullinoid | 9 | 15.75 MW |
| A/2004/1130/F | Slieve Kirk | 25 | 75 MW |
| A/2004/1243/F | Curryfree | 8 | 13.2 MW (Max) |
| L/2004/2483/F | Old Barr, Derrygonnelly | 11 | 22 MW |
| J/2005/0104/F | Tievenameenta | 22 | 66 MW |
| J/2005/0211/F | Carrikatane, Tyrone/Londonderry | 15 | 45 MW |
| L/2005/0377/F | Belmore, Co. Fermanagh | 10 | 30 MW |
| K/2005/0387/F | Hunter's Hill, Co. Tyrone | 8 | 13.2 MW |
| J/2005/0213/F | Gortmonly, Co. Tyrone | 6 | 18 MW |
| A/2005/0223/F | Eglishe, Co. Londonderry | 9 | 27 MW |
| K/2005/0810/F | Screggagh, Co. Tyrone | 8 | 18.4 MW |

| Application No. | Location | No. Turbines | Capacity |
|------------------|---------------------------|--------------|------------------|
| U/2005/0281/F | Drumadarragh, Co. Antrim | 7 | 16.1 MW |
| K/2005/1786/F | Thornog | 4 | 9.2 MW |
| L/2005/3070/F | Ora More | 13 | 29.9 MW |
| K/2006/0074 | Crockdun | 9 | 27 MW |
| K/2006/0164/F | Altamooskin | 6 | 12 MW |
| K/2006/0242/F | Cregganconroe | 8 | 16 MW |
| U/2006/0054/F | Carn Hill | 11 | 22 MW |
| D/2006/0104/F | Long Mountain | 16 | 36.8 MW |
| K/2006/1089 | Gortfinbar | 8 | 24 MW |
| L/2006/1553/F | Extension to Tappaghan | 8 | 12MW |
| K/2006/1368/F | Pollnalaght | 14 | 42MW |
| L/2006/1197 | Gortgall, Boho | 8 | 18.4 MW |
| J/2006/0840/F | Altgolan, Castlederg | 13 | 39MW |
| J/2006/0883/F | Seegronan, Castlederg | 9 | 27MW |
| G/2006/0754/F | Elginny Hill, Broughshane | 22 | 44MW |
| M/2006/1802/F | Eshmore, Tyrone | 7 | 21MW |
| K/2006/1793/F | Inishative, Omagh | 8 | 24MW |
| T/2006/0832/F | Corby Knowe, Kells | 3 | 9MW |
| M/2006/1754/F | Slatbeg | 9 | 20.7MW |
| G/2006/0842/F | Rathsherry | 16 | 36.8MW |
| B/2006/0607/F | Glenconway | 13 | 30MW |
| K/2006/1934/F | Castlecraig | 25 | 75 MW |
| L/2006/2371/F | Ballyreagh, Tempo | 1 | 2.5MW |
| B/2007/0006/F | Altahullion Phase III | 15 | 34.5MW |
| D/2006/0599/F | Glenbuck II | 5 | 15MW |
| K/2007/0547/F | Clunahill | 7 | 21MW |
| Total: 38 | | 408 | 1038.45MW |

Planning Applications for Wind Turbines

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the average timescale for processing a planning application for a large scale (over 0.5mw) wind turbine; and the number of applications that have been (i) approved; and (ii) refused, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1603/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The average processing time for the determination of wind turbine

applications (for the National Grid) in the last 5 years has been 22 months. The length of time taken to determine planning applications is very much dependent on the quality of submissions. Poor quality submissions result in protracted processing times. The majority of windfarm planning applications require the submission of further environmental information that is lacking in the original submission. The time taken by an applicant to submit further environmental information can cause the processing time of an application to extend; in extreme examples, beyond two years. Of the 19 planning applications approved within the last 5 years, 17 required the submission of further information.

- (i) The number of applications approved in the last five years are detailed in the table below.

| Year | No. of windfarms approved |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2003 | 3 |
| 2004 | 1 |
| 2005 | 3 |
| 2006 | 4 |
| 2007 (at 14.11.2007) | 8 |
| Total approved in last 5 years | 19 |

- (ii) Two applications have been refused in the same period and one of these was allowed on appeal.

Closure of Planning Application

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the date on which Planning Service closed the file on planning application X/2006/0744/F, prior to the matter being brought to Ards Borough Council; (ii) whether or not the file was subsequently reopened, and, if so, the date on which this took effect; and (iii) what opportunities were provided for those opposed to the application to submit further information, following the initial closure of the file. (AQW 1607/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service did not close the file on planning application X/2006/0744/F prior to the matter being brought to Council. Planning Service is not in a position to refuse to accept information sent in the post by an agent acting on the instructions of an applicant. Planning Service is obliged to place the information on the file, in the interests of openness and transparency and to ensure that the file fully reflects the manner in which the application has been processed. The information submitted by the agent was placed on the file. The content of the submission was not considered. Planning Service gave an undertaking to the Member that the application would be presented to Council and that the late

submission of information would not halt that process. Planning Service have fulfilled that undertaking.

Following on from the response given above, since the file was not closed it was not necessary to reopen the file. The Council met and took a view to agree with the opinion presented by Planning Service. The Member will be aware that if Planning Service were to proceed to a decision without having taken account of all material considerations, there would remain the possibility that the legality of that decision could be challenged. For that reason, Planning Service has consulted with the Environmental Health Officer at Ards Borough Council with regard to the content of that late submission by the applicant. Planning Service awaits a response to the consultation.

If it is the view of the consultee that this information has the potential to contribute to the consideration of the application the consultation process will be reopened.

If the information submitted is considered to be a material consideration, those opposed to the application will be given every opportunity to view the information and to make their views known.

Waste to Energy Incinerator Plants

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to establish waste to energy incinerator plants in Northern Ireland; where these plants are likely to be located; and if she will give an assurance that public inquiries will be conducted in relation to such proposals. (AQW 1615/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Waste to Energy or Energy from Waste (EfW) plants form an integral part of the mix of technologies for waste management.

Waste disposal is a local government responsibility and ultimately the decision on the location of any such plants lies with the district councils and their respective Waste Management Groups.

It is not possible to determine the need for a public inquiry until Planning Service receives an application for an EfW facility. If the application is classed as major, under Article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, the Department may cause a public local inquiry to be held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) for the purposes of considering objections/representations to the proposal.

Ulster By-Products Factory, Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment if she will investigate concerns about odours emanating from the Ulster By-Products factory, outside Glenavy. (AQW 1617/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Ulster Farm By-Products operation has been regulated since November 2005 by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) through a permit issued under the Pollution Prevention and Control (NI) Regulations 2003.

My officials regularly inspect the operations at the site and investigate and respond to complaints from local residents. They also keep residents informed of work ongoing to further minimise the site's environmental impact, in particular odour.

Significant progress has been made in addressing the environmental impacts from this installation since 2005. Improvements have been instigated that have substantially reduced the visual and odour impacts from the operation.

In line with the permit requirements, further investigation of other sources of odour on site is being carried out with recommendations due in early 2008.

Whilst rendering plants are inherently odorous operations, EHS will continue to work to ensure that the plant is effectively regulated and the resulting impacts are minimised as far as possible.

Illegal Waste

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1306/08, to detail whether or not she has received the expected response from Dublin City Council, with a timetable for the repatriation of waste at the site specified.
(AQW 1665/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials received the response from Dublin City Council on 5 November 2007 and are currently preparing a reply to deal with a number of issues raised. It is therefore not possible at present to speculate on a timetable for repatriation of the waste.

Giant's Causeway

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the age of the Giant's Causeway.
(AQW 1693/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Geologists generally agree that the Giant's Causeway is some 60 million years old. As you will be aware, however, there are alternative views in relation to the age of the Giant's Causeway.

Planning Applications in Banbridge and Newry and Mourne

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications in (i)

Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) Newry and Mourne District Council area, that have been refused solely on the grounds of prematurity to the draft area plan.
(AQW 1729/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below provides a break down of the number of applications in the Banbridge District Council area and Newry and Mourne District Council area that have been refused solely on the grounds of prematurity to the draft area plan from 1 January 2000 until 30 September 2007.

NO OF PLANNING APPLICATIONS REFUSED ON THE GROUNDS OF PREMATURITY TO THE DRAFT AREA PLAN

| Banbridge District Council Area | Newry and Mourne District Council Area |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 170 | 321 |

Illegal Waste

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1665/08, to detail the issues raised by Dublin City Council in its response to her Department on 5 November 2007.
(AQW 1842/08)

The Minister of the Environment: For the two sites in question, Dublin City Council does not accept that the competent authorities of dispatch in the Republic of Ireland are fully responsible under the requirements of the relevant legislation to take back the waste nor does it accept that the evidence provided by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is strong enough to indicate that all the waste came from the Republic of Ireland.

EHS is currently preparing a response to these issues.

All-Ireland Waste Enforcement Network

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of meetings of the All-Ireland Waste Enforcement Network that have been held since 8 May 2007; and to outline whether or not any other meetings are due to take place in 2007.
(AQO 822/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is not aware of a network of that name. However, my officials were invited to join the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Environmental Enforcement Network and are represented on two working groups. These groups focus on Transfrontier Shipment of Wastes and Unauthorised Waste Activity. The first group has met twice this year, and has no further meetings planned in 2007. The latter group has not

met this year. Of course, North-South co-operation is not confined to these two groups.

Protection of the Irish Hare

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment if she will explain why the Game Preservation (Special Protection for Irish Hares) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 is in force for only five months. (AQO 845/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The period of temporary protection provided under the Special Protection Order runs until the 31st March 2008. From the 1st April until the 12th August each year a 'close season' operates for the hare and other game species. During this close season it is an offence to take, kill or trade in Irish hares. As such, there is no need for the SPO to duplicate the existing protection and the end of the period of temporary special protection is timed to coincide with the start of this close season.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the limits that apply to her department's release of information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. (AQO 809/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Every public authority to which the Act applies, including my Department, is bound by its provisions.

Section 1 of the Act provides a general right of access to information by the public and every public authority is obliged to provide information on receipt of a request for information.

Compliance with that obligation is subject to a number of essential conditions being met – for example, the request must be in writing (including email) and must be clear as to the information sought.

By virtue of section 12, it is possible to refuse to comply with a request for information if the cost involved in answering exceeds the "appropriate limit", currently £600, set by the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004.

Section 14 also removes the obligation to comply with a request for information if the request is vexatious. The Information Commissioner has detailed guidelines on when this provision may be relied on.

Most importantly, however, information may be refused if it falls within the terms of any of the exemptions set out in sections 21 to 44 of the Act. Some of the exemptions are "absolute" exemptions while majority may only be relied on if the balance of

the public interest weighs in favour of withholding the information concerned.

Any decision to refuse to comply with a request for information, whether wholly or partly, is subject to an appeal procedure also laid down in the Act. This includes an independent review by the Information Commissioner and, ultimately, the Information Tribunal.

Planning Process

Mr A McFarland asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to issue new guidelines for the transparent operation of the planning process, in relation to national heritage sites, national parks and environmentally sensitive sites. (AQO 811/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In relation to national heritage sites and environmentally sensitive sites, current planning policy is clearly set out in Planning Policy Statement 2 'Planning and Nature Conservation' and Planning Policy Statement 6 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage'. The designation of any site through the development plan process is the subject of detailed public consultation. In the determination of planning applications, Planning Service operates an open and fully transparent process through the publication of relevant policy, the advertising of planning applications in the local press, neighbour notification, maintaining a public register of application details and the operation of an open file policy where any individual may inspect a planning application file either during the processing of the application or when it has been decided. I therefore see no need to issue new guidelines in this respect.

In terms of the designation of National Parks there would be a requirement for new legislation which would entail detailed public consultation.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the extent of support in Northern Ireland for an independent environmental protection agency. (AQO 842/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Environmental Non Governmental Organisations support the concept of an environmental protection agency. However, built heritage interests are concerned by Review of Environmental Governance proposals that conservation and protection of our built heritage should be within the remit of such an agency. Ulster Farmers Union is concerned about the potential costs and possible additional bureaucracy and regulation of an agency.

European Union Directives on Waste

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of whether or not Northern Ireland is prepared to implement European Union Directives on waste, and associated targets, in full. (AQO 814/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am confident that Northern Ireland is prepared to implement European Union Directives on waste and their associated targets in line with our European Union obligations. EU Directive targets are generally set at Member State level. I am determined to ensure that Northern Ireland contributes fully to meeting those targets.

Waste Management

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to (a) encourage households to reduce plastic and other waste material; and (b) encourage retailers to reduce the amount of plastic packaging sold to the public in shops and supermarkets. (AQO 839/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The first strand of the NI Waste Management Strategy sets out a range of initiatives to be applied across all sectors with the aim of motivating behaviour change, that will contribute to waste reduction. Those initiatives include developing waste awareness campaigns, such as the “Wake up to Waste” campaign.

The Waste and Resources Action Programme, which is partly sponsored by my Department, is working closely with leading retailers across the UK who have signed up to the Courtauld Commitment to reduce the amount of packaging and food waste thrown away.

My Department is also proposing to increase the current recycling targets for certain types of packaging waste through revised producer responsibility regulations. The aim of these regulations is to encourage a reduction in packaging at the design stage.

Accident Black Spots

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with the Minister for Regional Development in identifying and dealing with accident black spots, where road configuration was a contributory factor in serious and fatal accidents. (AQO 815/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It is important to recognise that some 95% of road collisions are due to road users making errors of judgement or simply ignoring road traffic laws. Responsibility for dealing

with collision clusters where road configuration might have contributed to fatal and serious collisions is a matter for the Department for Regional Development. While I have not met with Minister Murphy to discuss this specific issue, the Member may be aware that during the summer I met with the DRD Minister and an Assistant Chief Constable from the Police Service of Northern Ireland to instigate a review of the Road Safety Strategy. This will include consideration of further measures that can be put in place to reduce road traffic casualties to complement those that we know are already working.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment if she will provide an update on progress in relation to implementing the Northern Ireland Assembly's resolution of 25 September 2007, on the introduction of an independent environmental protection agency. (AQO 864/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am carefully considering my approach to environmental governance. In so doing I am taking account of the recommendations made by the Review of Environmental Governance, of resource implications and wider policy considerations and of points which stakeholders have raised. I am also taking full account of the Assembly debate on September 25.

Capital Budget

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the sufficiency of her department's capital budget for the current year. (AQO 846/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The outcome of the October Monitoring Round has provided my department with a capital budget £13.6m which is sufficient to meet the capital requirement's for the current year.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the volume and percentage of work currently undertaken by her department, that would be removed if an independent environmental protection agency was established. (AQO 808/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Review of Environmental Governance proposed that the functions of the Environment and Heritage Service should be moved to an independent environmental protection agency. Environment and Heritage Service

expenditure for 2007-2008 is expected to be £54 m, which is 40% of the anticipated DOE total of £135m. It's capital investment this year will be £1.7m, 17% of the DOE total of £9.8m.

Eco-Tourism

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to identifying and promoting eco-tourism opportunities across Northern Ireland. (AQO 812/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have had no direct discussions with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to identifying and promoting eco-tourism opportunities across Northern Ireland.

My Department does however support a number of organisations who deliver eco-tourism projects such as the canoe trails in Lough Erne.

My Department has also contributed expertise and funded officers to guide the delivery of the Natural Resources Rural Tourism Initiative.

Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on progress on updating the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. (AQO 851/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A policy consultation document on proposals for updating and amending the Wildlife Order has been prepared and I will shortly be seeking the formal agreement of the Executive Committee to publish the document. Subject to the approval of the Executive Committee, I would anticipate the document will be published in January.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the longest period of time his department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1332/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The longest period of time the department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received

from a Member of Parliament is 13 working days; a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, 21 working days; a Councillor, 21 working days; and a member of the public, 43 working days.

Each of these correspondence necessitated lengthy research and analysis and/or third party agreement in order to address fully the questions asked. It is working practise in such cases for the department to issue an interim reply.

Ministerial Cars

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether or not instructions have been given to drivers of Ministerial cars to ensure that car engines are switched off when vehicles are not in use, to prevent pollution and unnecessary consumption of fuel resources. (AQW 1549/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: All Ministerial vehicles are driven by highly experienced staff who are well aware of the Executives commitment to reduce pollution and promote sustainability. The need to switch off engines whilst waiting for prolonged periods is covered in the handbook issued to drivers when they join the Central Transport Unit. No further specific instructions on the issue have been given to drivers.

Departmental Legal Advisers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the role of departmental legal advisers. (AQW 1853/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Departmental Solicitor's Office is a directorate within the Department of Finance and Personnel. The role of DSO is to support the NI Executive in its work by the provision of legal advice, services and representation.

Departmental Solicitors

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if departmental solicitors have ever been used to examine statements made by an MLA. (AQW 1854/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The member's question appears to arise from the same issue as questions which have been directed to the Minister for the Environment.

Clearly, in carrying out their duties as legal advisers to the Northern Ireland Departments, the Departmental Solicitor's Office must be able to consider any relevant statements of MLAs, whether made in the Assembly or elsewhere.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Dermatology Units

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what financial resources are available to each dermatology unit in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1454/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The total planned recurrent spend on dermatology services for 2007/2008 within each Trust is as follows

| Trust | | Hospital Service | 07/08 £000 |
|---------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Belfast | Mater | Dermatology | 33 |
| | Belfast City Hospital | Dermatology | 1,989 |
| | | Light Therapy treatment | 322 |
| | Royal | Dermatology | 1,398 |
| Western | Altnagelvin | Dermatology | 1,529 |
| Northern | Causeway | Dermatology | 771 |
| | United | Dermatology | 1,060 |
| Southern | Armagh & Dungannon | Dermatology | 61 |
| | Craigavon Area Hospital | Dermatology | 1,549 |
| | Down Lisburn | Dermatology | 241 |
| | Newry & Mourne | Dermatology | 377 |
| South Eastern | Down Lisburn | Dermatology | 241 |
| | Ulster | Dermatology | 1,262 |

Total 2007/08 Planned Recurrent Spend on Dermatology Services 10,592

Home Assessments

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people currently on waiting lists to have their homes assessed by an occupational therapist in each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1557/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people currently on waiting lists to have their homes assessed by an occupational therapist according to parliamentary constituency is not collected centrally. Information is, however, available on the number of people waiting for an Occupational Therapy Assessment in each Health and Social Care Trust, which is detailed in the Table below, according to specific time bands.

At 30th June 2007, 6,309 people were waiting for assessment by community occupational therapists. Of these, 29% had been waiting less than 1 month for assessment at 30th June 2007, 33% had waited between 1 and 3 months, 28% had waited between 3 and 6 months, and 11% had waited 6 months or more.

Information on assessments by occupational therapists is published quarterly in the publication 'Assessments by Community Occupational Therapists in Northern Ireland', and is available to view on the Departmental Internet site.

PERSONS WAITING FOR AN ASSESSMENT BY AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST AT 30 JUNE 2007, BY LENGTH OF TIME WAITING

| HSC Trust | Less than 1 months | | 1 to 3 months | | 3 to 6 months | | 6 months or more | | All persons waiting |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | |
| Belfast HSC Trust | 305 | 20% | 522 | 35% | 489 | 33% | 184 | 12% | 1,500 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 488 | 44% | 325 | 29% | 221 | 20% | 68 | 6% | 1,102 |
| South Eastern HSC Trust | 347 | 25% | 386 | 28% | 431 | 31% | 220 | 16% | 1,384 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 284 | 23% | 454 | 37% | 347 | 28% | 147 | 12% | 1,232 |
| Western HSC Trust | 379 | 35% | 370 | 34% | 253 | 23% | 89 | 8% | 1,091 |
| Northern Ireland | 1,803 | 29% | 2,057 | 33% | 1,741 | 28% | 708 | 11% | 6,309 |

Home Assessments

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for a home assessment by an occupational therapist in each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland in each of the past five years. (AQW 1558/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average waiting time for a home assessment by an occupational therapist is not collected according to parliamentary constituency. Information is, however, available on completed waiting times for commencement of assessments by community occupational therapists by the old Health and Social Services Trusts, according to specific time bands.

Figures are categorised according to priority and non-priority cases. The number of persons in each time band is shown in Table 1 (priority cases) & Table 2 (non-priority cases) overleaf, for the years ending 30th June, 2003 to 2007, where a year refers to the period 1st July to 30th June.

During year ending 30th June 2007, 54% of the 22,511 priority assessments commenced by occupational therapists started within 2 weeks of referral, 29% in 1 month or more, and 17% between 2 weeks and 1 month. During this period, 62% of the 17,940 non-priority assessments commenced by occupational therapists started within 3 months of referral, 25% in 6 months or more, and 13% between 3 and 6 months.

Parenting Strategy

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to gather comprehensive statistics and data in relation to fathers' and childrens' experiences of parental involvement. (AQW 1564/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At present the DHSSPS does not collect statistics or data in relation to fathers' and childrens' experiences of parental involvement and, given other competing pressures, has no plans to do so.

The Department is taking forward the development of a family and parenting strategy, *Families Matter*, which highlights the vital role parents have in securing the best outcomes for their children and aims to ensure parents are supported in achieving this. This policy has been informed by extensive stakeholder engagement with relevant statutory, voluntary and community partners and from key research evidence highlighting the value of parental involvement in securing the best outcomes for children.

The Department also encourages the promotion of fathers' role in actively participating in their children's lives through the provision of project funding to support Kickstart, a project that offers training, support and practical action to organisations seeking to engage with fathers in Northern Ireland.

Paediatric Occupational Therapy

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the current and future provision of paediatric occupational therapy at Oakwood special school, Belfast.

(AQW 1568/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are two paediatric Occupational Therapists at Oakwood Special School. However, the service is currently operating at a reduced level due to a member of staff working reduced hours. Normal service provision will resume with effect from December 2007. There are no plans to extend this service at the School.

Paediatric Occupational Therapy

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the general availability of paediatric occupational therapy across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1573/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Paediatric Occupational Therapy provision is available in schools and in a wide range of settings in the community for those children assessed as requiring occupational therapy. In addition, nine early intervention multidisciplinary teams, which include paediatric Occupational Therapists, have been established across Northern Ireland.

Paramedical Therapy Provision

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate which body is responsible for informing parents in relation to any changes in paramedical therapy provision delivered to children with special needs in a school setting.

(AQW 1574/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The responsibility for arranging therapy provision, when this forms part of special educational provision in a child's statement of special educational needs, falls to the Education and Library Boards under The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, but responsibility for providing the therapy rests with the DHSSPS through the Health and Social Services

Boards and Trusts, as the employer of the therapists. In this instance responsibility for advising parents of any changes in the statement, such as speech and language therapy provision on the basis of advice received from a Health and Social Care Trust, lies with the Education and Library Board. For those children who do not have a statement of special educational needs, but who are receiving therapy provision, it is the responsibility of the local Health and Social Care Trust to advise parents of any changes in that provision.

Rules for Care Assistants

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the impact of rules regarding care assistants accompanying older people, or those with disabilities, for shopping, that dictate they must only go to the nearest available shop. (AQW 1575/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has given no direction to the effect that care assistants accompanying older people or those with disabilities for shopping must go to the nearest shop, nor am I aware of any such rules within the health and social care sector. However, Health and Social Care Trusts have a duty to balance the needs and expectations of services users with the efficient use of the resources available, and in some instances this may mean that longer journeys are not the most cost-effective use of staff time.

Dementia

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria that are applied to ensure that patients experiencing mild forms of dementia are not placed in care homes for patients suffering from advanced stages of dementia or Alzheimer's Disease. (AQW 1590/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Everyone who has dementia and who may be in need of care home provision will have an individual, multi-disciplinary, assessment of their needs. This assessment is conducted by a range of professionals and involves the physical, mental and social functioning of the person who has dementia. It will also take account of their carers' and relatives' needs. The assessment will determine if the person with dementia needs to be placed in a care home, and if so, the type that is best suited to meet their individual needs.

The physical needs and associated risk management of the person with dementia will often dictate the type

of home best suited to their needs. This may mean that they will be best looked after in a home that supports people with varying degrees of dementia. Such mixed resident homes are expected to provide a safe and satisfactory care environment for all their residents.

Dementia

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria that are applied by the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust to ensure that patients suffering from dementia are placed in residential care within a reasonable travel distance for visits from family and friends. (AQW 1591/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Every person with dementia within the new Northern Health and Social Care Trust, which embraces the old Causeway Health and Social Services Trust, who is in need of care home provision, will have an individual, multi-disciplinary, assessment of their needs. This will be conducted by a range of professionals who will consider the service user's physical, mental and social functioning and will also take into account their carers' and relatives' needs. The assessment will determine if the person with dementia needs to be placed in a care home, and if so, the type that is best suited to meet their individual needs.

Service users and their carers will be offered a range of suitable care homes but these may be some distance from their family and friends, depending on the availability of the type of care required. While a reasonable travel distance is clearly very desirable and important to family and friends, the service users' physical needs and safety must be the main priorities when considering where they can best receive the care they need.

Residential Care

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of elderly people in the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust area who have been placed in residential care more than 20 miles from their homes. (AQW 1592/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of elderly patients placed in residential care more than 20 miles from their homes is not collected centrally.

Community Information Branch (CIB) within the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, contacted the Northern Health & Social Care Trust to request this information. In response, the

Northern HSC Trust stated that as of 14th November 2007, nine elderly clients (including those with dementia) had been placed in a residential Home (Statutory / Independent) more than 20 miles from their home, in the old Causeway Health & Social Services Trust area.

The Northern HSC Trust's policy for service users with dementia who require residential care is to place them as close as possible to their friends and families. Service users and their carers will be offered a range of suitable care homes. However, depending on the availability of the type of care required, these may be some distance from their family and friends. Availability of the appropriate type of care will therefore determine the travel distances for friend and families.

Management Roles

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of managers employed in the Down and Lisburn Trust and the Ulster Community and Hospital Trust, who were required to reapply for their posts when the two organisations merged. (AQW 1618/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Management roles within the new organisation are not the same jobs that existed in the previous structures. All management posts in the South Eastern Trust were filled by competition – to date 125 managers have been appointed.

Management Redundancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of managers who were made redundant when the Down and Lisburn Trust and the Ulster Community and Hospital Trust merged. (AQW 1619/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been no compulsory redundancies as a result of the merger of the two Trusts. However, 4 managers have volunteered for early retirement and 4 have volunteered for redundancy.

Cost of Management Redundancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the costs of all redundancy payments to managers, following the merger of the Down and Lisburn Trust and the Ulster Community and Hospital Trust. (AQW 1620/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the South Eastern Trust, the cost of the redundancy element of the Voluntary Early

Retirement and the Voluntary Redundancy scheme is £475,799 at 31 October 2007.

Management Redundancies

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of managers who (i) were made redundant; and (ii) received redundancy payments following the merger of the Down and Lisburn Trust and the Ulster Community and Hospital Trust, and who were subsequently employed at another level within the health service. (AQW 1621/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been no compulsory redundancies as a result of the merger of the two Trusts. However, 4 managers have volunteered for premature retirement and 4 have volunteered for redundancy; all of these have received their statutory redundancy entitlement. Management at the South Eastern Trust advise that they are not aware that any of these managers have been subsequently employed at another level within the health service.

Coeliac Disease

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 553/08, to detail what research has been carried out by, or on behalf of, his department, into the increase in the number of people suffering from coeliac disease. (AQW 1632/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department has not carried out nor commissioned any research into the increase in the number of people diagnosed with coeliac disease. However, the Department is aware of research undertaken elsewhere which indicates that there has been an apparent increase in the incidence of coeliac disease over the past 30 years. It is unclear from the reported evidence whether this is due to a real increase in the number of cases, enhanced awareness of disease or more reliable serological testing.

Residential Care

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to ensure that elderly people who need residential care are placed in homes in their own communities. (AQW 1641/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In determining whether an elderly person requires residential care, Trusts are required to carry out a comprehensive, holistic assessment of need. This assessment will include physical,

emotional, psychological and spiritual needs and in so doing will consider each client's relationship with and proximity to family, friends, carers and their communities. Following assessment of need, all clients are entitled to a choice of accommodation; wherever possible, Trusts should arrange for the service user to be placed in their preferred accommodation.

Draft Sports Strategy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the health benefits of the draft sports strategy; and if he will make a statement on the level of commitment of his department to ensuring its delivery.

(AQW 1643/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have recently received a copy of the draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation which sets the key strategic priorities for sport and physical recreation over the next ten years. It is at present under active consideration and a detailed response will be issued in due course.

In the interim, I am in principle, content to support the draft strategy.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost to his department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1647/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The right to request information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 came into effect on 1 January 2005. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in common with all NI Departments, does not record the cost of dealing with Freedom of Information requests.

Cost Benefit Analysis

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what cost benefit analysis his department has carried out to assess the savings to his department, as a result of public expenditure on sport and exercise. (AQW 1649/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not have direct responsibility for spending on sport and therefore has not routinely carried out cost benefit analysis on public expenditure on this area.

Some analysis has been done by my Department on the impact of physical inactivity. In 2003, the Department

updated a piece of work for the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. This estimated the savings that could arise from a reduction in the proportion of physically inactive adults in Northern Ireland from 20% to 15% to be:

- 358 lives could be saved each year;
- £6m of direct cost savings to the local Health Service each year; and
- 190,000 sick days avoided each year.

The Departments for Education and Culture, Arts and Leisure also play key roles in promoting physical activity through sport and exercise.

Smoking Ban

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on adherence to the smoking ban in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1672/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am pleased to say that strong public support for the introduction of smoke-free legislation on 30 April is reflected in the latest compliance figures available. During the 5 month period 30 April – 30 September 2007, over 26,000 premises were inspected by the enforcement authorities. The findings show 98% compliance with the “no-smoking” requirement and 95% compliance with the requirement to display appropriate signage.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of clostridium difficile that have been treated at Antrim Area Hospital in each month for the last year; and what new steps are being taken to prevent the spread of such infections. (AQW 1686/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cases of clostridium difficile reported at Antrim Area Hospital in the calendar year 2006 (the latest year available) is 106 and is broken down by month in the table below.

| Month and Year | No. of cases of C. Difficile Reported at Antrim Area Hospital |
|----------------|---|
| January 2006 | 8 |
| February 2006 | 8 |
| March 2006 | 9 |
| April 2006 | 8 |
| May 2006 | 6 |
| June 2006 | 6 |

| Month and Year | No. of cases of C. Difficile Reported at Antrim Area Hospital |
|----------------|---|
| July 2006 | 8 |
| August 2006 | 13 |
| September 2006 | 11 |
| October 2006 | 14 |
| November 2006 | 8 |
| December 2006 | 7 |
| Total | 106 |

Source: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre Northern Ireland (CDSC (NI)).

There are a number of steps being taken to prevent the spread of infections. These include:

1. Mandatory surveillance and annually published figures on this infection. The Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (CDSC) presently receives and collates data, which are regarded as key markers for the overall infection rates in hospitals.
2. In April this year the Department issued substantial guidance to the Health and Social Care family and this is available on the Department's website. This highlights issues in relation to infection caused by C-Diff. It reminds healthcare workers of specific issues in relation to this infection, including the mandatory surveillance programme, policies and procedures and investigating outbreaks of *Clostridium Difficile*.
3. A million leaflets and posters were distributed to all Northern Ireland's hospital wards and units in September 2007, specifically designed to advise patients, visitors and staff on how infections can be controlled and indeed prevented. These regional leaflets encourage everyone to use hand sanitisers and how best to wash your hands (and when hands should be washed as opposed to cleansed).
4. Various other steps have been taken to prevent the spread of such infections. These include the *Changing the Culture* strategy that was launched in 2006, with an *Action Plan Implementation Group*, to deliver the strategy and share good practice; the introduction of an *Infection Control Manual* by Southern Trust, which was sent to all Trusts on CD ROM; a target which proposes a 20% reduction in *Clostridium difficile* by end March '09; commissioned 2nd audit of environmental cleanliness standards; issued standards and guidance on numbers of isolation rooms; and issued guidance on the use of antibiotics.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will give an estimate of the costs incurred to date in relation to establishing (i) local commissioning groups; (ii) the five new health trusts; and (iii) other health structures proposed in the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 1687/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Each of the seven Local Commissioning Group costs in the region of £100k per annum, largely in respect of attendance allowance and expenses. However, this is being funded from the budget previously used for the 15 Health and Social Care Groups which were stood down in September 2006.

Approximately £3.2m has been spent to date on the establishment of the five new health trusts. This includes the revenue costs of operating the new organisations in shadow form from August 2006 to 31 March 2007 and costs associated with the provision of temporary headquarters.

The only other structure where some establishment costs have been incurred is the proposed Health and Social Care Authority. Seven of the ten Directors designate remain on the payroll of their original employer - either DHSSPS or a Health and Social Services Board - and have not been replaced so that the overall management cost has not been increased.

The Chief Executive designate and two other Directors designate are working on behalf of the Department with specific responsibilities in the areas of commissioning, performance and financial management. Their combined annual salary is around £360k.

With regard to the establishment of the new structures, some £542k was incurred in 2006/07 for advertising, recruitment, training and other support for staff.

The Department has made provision within its accounts for identifiable expenditure needed to underpin the establishment of new HPSS structures arising from the Review of Public Administration. The anticipated expenditure amounts to £68.6m and relates primarily to the early retirement/redundancy costs of a range of HPSS management and administrative support staff arising from the changes to HPSS organisations, but also includes some administrative costs surrounding the change implementation process.

Estimated efficiency savings from this restructuring will be £53m per annum.

Local Commissioning Groups

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will provide a

breakdown of the total costs to date, resulting from payments to members of local commissioning groups.
(AQW 1688/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total payments made to the members of local commissioning groups from 1 April 2007 to 31 October 2007 are shown in the table below.

| LCG | Total |
|------------|----------|
| Southern | £29,714 |
| North West | £39,025 |
| West | £44,757 |
| North East | £39,484 |
| Inner East | £45,936 |
| Belfast | £43,502 |
| East | £42,762 |
| | £285,180 |

The total covers the remuneration, locum cover and travel expenses incurred by members.

Some LCGs have vacant posts.

Medical Secretaries

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 584/08, to detail the reasons why comparisons with band outcomes in other parts of the NHS are unhelpful, given that job descriptions for medical secretaries in Northern Ireland are the same as those for medical secretaries in the rest of the United Kingdom.
(AQW 1696/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: While there may be some similarities in jobs across the NHS it is not possible to categorically say that similar titled roles do exactly the same job. For that reason when matching jobs to Agenda for Change pay bands each of the four countries undertook separate exercises. The Agenda for Change matching process for medical secretaries in Northern Ireland is not yet complete but I have instructed health and social care employers to have all staff on Agenda for Change rates of pay by the end of March 2008.

Agenda for Change

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he will take to speed up the processing of arrears that are due to employees, under the Agenda for Change, in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area.
(AQW 1699/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have already instructed all Health and Social Care employers that all Agenda for Change staff should be placed on the new rates of pay by the end of March 2008. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust is currently working towards the completion of this process within this timeframe.

An assessment of the payments made to individual staff members must be carried out over a three year period from October 2004 to accurately establish if any arrears of pay are due. I understand that the Northern Trust are currently reviewing proposals to increase payroll staff in order to cope with this additional workload.

Haemo-Chromatosis

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the number of people in Northern Ireland who have been diagnosed with haemo-chromatosis.
(AQW 1703/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who have been diagnosed with haemo-chromatosis in Northern Ireland is not currently available. However, information is available on the number of people with a diagnosis of haemo-chromatosis who have been admitted to hospital.

The total number of admissions to hospital with a primary diagnosis of haemo-chromatosis for 2005/06 is 1,292. It is estimated that this equates to 274 individuals based on the patients' casenotes.

It is not possible to report on how many of these admissions are new diagnoses, or how many people have been diagnosed, but are not being treated in an inpatient setting. Discharges from hospital and Deaths in hospital 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.

Diabetes

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his department's expenditure on diabetes, broken down by (i) Health and Social Services Board area; and (ii) each parliamentary constituency, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 1724/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Total expenditure on treating diabetes in a hospital inpatient or daycase setting in Northern Ireland was as follows:

TABLE 1: BY YEAR AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA

| Board Area | Expenditure (£m) 2005/06 | Expenditure (£m) 2004/05 | Expenditure (£m) 2003/04 | Expenditure (£m) 2002/03 | Expenditure (£m) 2001/02 |
|--------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Eastern | 19.9 | 16.3 | 14.8 | 12.7 | 10.7 |
| Northern | 11.9 | 11.2 | 9.0 | 7.8 | 6.9 |
| Southern | 5.9 | 5.6 | 5.3 | 4.5 | 4.2 |
| Western | 5.7 | 5.4 | 4.4 | 3.9 | 3.1 |
| Unassigned* | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 |
| Total | 43.7 | 38.7 | 33.7 | 29.0 | 25.0 |

* Hospital Inpatient System could not identify the area due to insufficient information

Source: Trust Annual Costing Returns and Hospital Inpatient System

TABLE 2: BY YEAR AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

| Parliamentary constituency | Expenditure (£m) 2005/06 | Expenditure (£m) 2004/05 | Expenditure (£m) 2003/04 | Expenditure (£m) 2002/03 | Expenditure (£m) 2001/02 |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Belfast East | 3.2 | 2.5 | 2.3 | 1.8 | 1.7 |
| Belfast North | 2.6 | 2.0 | 2.2 | 1.7 | 1.6 |
| Belfast South | 2.2 | 2.0 | 1.7 | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| Belfast West | 2.8 | 2.1 | 2.2 | 2.0 | 1.6 |
| East Antrim | 2.6 | 2.3 | 2.0 | 1.9 | 1.5 |
| East Londonderry | 2.1 | 2.2 | 1.4 | 1.2 | 0.9 |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 1.7 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 1.2 | 0.9 |
| Foyle | 2.2 | 2.0 | 1.7 | 1.4 | 1.2 |
| Lagan Valley | 2.9 | 2.5 | 2.2 | 1.9 | 1.6 |
| Mid Ulster | 2.1 | 1.8 | 1.7 | 1.6 | 1.5 |
| Newry and Armagh | 1.6 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 1.1 |
| North Antrim | 3.0 | 3.0 | 2.1 | 1.7 | 1.5 |
| North Down | 2.5 | 2.1 | 1.8 | 1.5 | 1.3 |
| South Antrim | 2.5 | 2.3 | 2.0 | 1.7 | 1.8 |
| South Down | 2.0 | 2.1 | 1.6 | 1.6 | 1.4 |
| Strangford | 3.1 | 2.6 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 1.3 |
| Upper Bann | 2.3 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 1.8 | 1.6 |
| West Tyrone | 2.0 | 1.7 | 1.3 | 1.2 | 1.0 |
| Unassigned* | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 |
| Total | 43.7 | 38.7 | 33.7 | 29.0 | 25.0 |

* Hospital Inpatient System could not identify the area due to insufficient information

Source: Trust Annual Costing Returns and Hospital Inpatient System

The above does not include the costs of treatment for diabetes in primary, community, personal social service or outpatient settings, which is not available.

Diabetes

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people suffering from diabetes, broken down by (i) Health and Social Services Board area; and (ii) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1728/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested. 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. Whilst this cannot be provided for the area in which the patient resides, it is possible to break it down by the area on which the GP practice is located. The figures, as at 14th February 2007, are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

TABLE 1: DIABETES CASES BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD OF GP PRACTICE

| | Number of patient on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over) |
|--------------|---|
| Eastern | 23,307 |
| Northern | 13,719 |
| Southern | 10,478 |
| Western | 9,420 |
| Total | 56,924 |

TABLE 2: DIABETES CASES BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY OF GP PRACTICE

| | Number of patient on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over) |
|----------------------------|---|
| Belfast East | 3,488 |
| Belfast North | 5,034 |
| Belfast South | 2,801 |
| Belfast West | 2,611 |
| East Antrim | 2,456 |
| East Londonderry | 2,864 |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 3,504 |
| Foyle | 3,254 |
| Lagan Valley | 3,106 |
| Mid Ulster | 2,188 |
| Newry and Armagh | 3,291 |
| North Down | 3,700 |
| South Antrim | 2,898 |
| South Down | 3,160 |

| | Number of patient on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over) |
|--------------|---|
| Strangford | 3,133 |
| Upper Bann | 3,758 |
| West Tyrone | 3,020 |
| Total | 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 62,280. The study also estimated that the expected number of the population aged 20 years and over with Type 1 diabetes, was 4,776. This study also provides diabetes prevalence estimates by Board and Local Government District of patient residence.

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.

Diabetes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with diabetes in each Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 1764/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested. 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. Whilst this cannot be provided for the area in which the patient resides, it is possible to break it down by the area in which the GP practice is located. The figures, as at 14th February 2007 are shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: DIABETES CASES BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD OF GP PRACTICE

| | Number of patients on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over) |
|----------|--|
| Eastern | 23,307 |
| Northern | 13,719 |
| Southern | 10,478 |

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Western | 9,420 |
| Total | 56,924 |

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS).

Diabetes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people with diabetes that have received retinal screening in 2005; 2006; and 2007, in each Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 1766/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested. However, under the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract, the number of GP-registered patients aged 17 and over with diabetes mellitus that have a record of retinal screening in the previous 15 months is recorded. Whilst this cannot be provided for the area in which the patient resides, it is possible to break it down by the area in which the GP practice is located. The figures, as at 31st March, are presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: DIABETES SCREENING BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA

| | Number of patients on the QOF Diabetes Register who have a record of receiving retinal screening (aged 17 and over) | | |
|----------|---|--------|--------|
| | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
| Eastern | 16,508 | 18,469 | 20,582 |
| Northern | 10,446 | 11,044 | 11,833 |
| Southern | 7,459 | 7,919 | 8,662 |
| Western | 6,530 | 7,847 | 8,121 |
| Total | 40,943 | 45,279 | 49,198 |

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS).

Home Start Initiative

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what steps he intends to take to ensure the future of the Home Start initiative beyond March 2008. (AQW 1771/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety supports four locally-based Home Start schemes through the Children's Fund component of the Children and Young People's Funding Package, and will continue to do so until March 2008, when the current round of funding is set to end.

Some funding has been identified in the draft Budget to continue the important work of the Children's Fund. I cannot therefore guarantee that all existing projects will be supported in the future, or to the level that they have been in the past. It will not be possible to make firm decisions about individual projects until consultation on the draft Budget has been completed, and it has been finalised.

I know how important it is that existing projects are given early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

The Department also provides funding to Home Start's regional office to assist with its central running costs. This funding is currently in the first year of a three year cycle.

General Practice Surgeries

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who need to be registered with a General Practitioner for the surgery to be viable.

(AQW 1900/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In determining the need for the provision of primary medical services by a general practitioner within a specific area, the size of the registered patient list for a GP practice is only one of the factors taken into consideration by the relevant Health and Social Services Board, and there is no established threshold below which a GP practice would be considered unviable.

Health and Social Services Boards also consider factors such as the availability of suitable premises within an area, demographics (including physical accessibility of services and population variation), the views of the local community, financial viability, and the range of services, including specialist services, offered.

General Practice Surgeries

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients registered across General Practice surgeries within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board.

(AQW 1901/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of patients registered across General Practice surgeries within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board at October 2007 was 719,764.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water and Crystal Alliance

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the cost to the taxpayer of; and (ii) the future committed costs arising from, the contract between Northern Ireland Water and Crystal Alliance. (AQW 1336/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the overall value of the contract with Xansa (Crystal Alliance) is £92.4 million. The cost of the contract to date has been £21 million. Prior to 1 April 2007 these costs were met by the taxpayer and non-domestic charges and since then by the taxpayer through subsidy and non-domestic charges.

The future committed cost up to the expiry date of the contract on 31 March 2013, based on the overall value of the contract, is £71.4 million. If charges were to be fully introduced then costs would in future be met by customers rather than the taxpayer. Contract activities relating to domestic billing and collection and domestic billing contact handling have been suspended as a result of the deferral of domestic water and sewerage charges and contract costs are currently being reviewed.

Illegally Erected Monuments

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 862/08, to detail the location of each of the 34 illegally erected monuments relating to the Troubles. (AQW 1403/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, I should explain that further to my reply to the Member's question AQW 862/08, on closer analysis of the data issued in relation to illegally erected monuments, only 31 of the previously stated 34 related directly to the Troubles. The remaining three monuments, which are not linked to traffic accident fatalities, appear to have been erected to mark deaths due to other causes.

In relation to AQW 1403/08, the table below details the locations of the 31 monuments that relate to the troubles.

With regard to AQW 1404/08, I am advised that in general my Department's Roads Service does not carry out a formal assessment of these sites, however, all roads are regularly inspected for hazards as part of its routine maintenance procedures.

Location of Illegally Erected Monuments

Junction at Moss Road, Stoneyford Road, Ballypitmave Road, Steedstown Road, Y Bridge Road, Stoneyford

Roundabout at Upper Dunmurry Lane at the junction with Stewartstown Road, Colin Road, Pantridge Road, Belfast

Malachy Conlon Park, Cullaville

Dorans Hill at Raymond Kelly Park, Newry

Derrybeg Estate, Newry

Derrybeg at junction of Camlough Road, Newry

Tievecrom Road, Forkhill, Newry

Tullynavall Road, Cullyhanna

Donaldson's Road at Ballyfannahan Road, Cullyhanna

Kelly's Road, Killeen

Edenappa Road, Jonesborough

Annaghgad Road, Cullaville

Newry Road, Camlough

Kilmorey Street Flood defence wall, Newry

Buttercrane Quay Newry

Barley Lane, Newry

Ford's Cross, Silverbridge

Newry Bypass, Newry

Skerriff Road, Cullyhanna

Near frontier, Cashel Road, Enniskillen

Clonliff Road, Enniskillen

Near frontier Drumnasreane Road, Enniskillen

Eshnadarragh Road, Rosslea

Opposite Holiday Centre, Garrison

Swanlinbar Road, Enniskillen

Eshnadarragh Altawalk Cross

Drumnakilly Road, Omagh

Water Wall Footpath, Mourne Bridge, Strabane

Annagher Road, Coalisland

Drum Road, Near to Teebane Road, Cookstown

Corrick Road, Dungiven

Illegally Erected Monuments

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 862/08, to detail whether or not each of the illegally erected monuments related to the Troubles has been assessed in relation to danger to road users. (AQW 1404/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, I should explain that further to my reply to the Member's question AQW 862/08, on closer analysis of the data issued in relation to illegally erected monuments, only 31 of the previously stated 34 related directly to the Troubles. The remaining three monuments, which are not linked to traffic accident fatalities, appear to have been erected to mark deaths due to other causes.

In relation to AQW 1403/08, the table below details the locations of the 31 monuments that relate to the troubles.

With regard to AQW 1404/08, I am advised that in general my Department's Roads Service does not carry out a formal assessment of these sites, however, all roads are regularly inspected for hazards as part of its routine maintenance procedures.

| Location of Illegally Erected Monuments |
|---|
| Junction at Moss Road, Stoneyford Road, Ballypitmave Road, Steedstown Road, Y Bridge Road, Stoneyford |
| Roundabout at Upper Dunmurry Lane at the junction with Stewartstown Road, Colin Road, Pantridge Road, Belfast |
| Malachy Conlon Park, Cullaville |
| Dorans Hill at Raymond Kelly Park, Newry |
| Derrybeg Estate, Newry |
| Derrybeg at junction of Camlough Road, Newry |
| Tievecrom Road, Forkhill, Newry |
| Tullynavall Road, Cullyhanna |
| Donaldson's Road at Ballyfannahan Road, Cullyhanna |
| Kelly's Road, Killeen |
| Edenappa Road, Jonesborough |
| Annaghgad Road, Cullaville |
| Newry Road, Camlough |
| Kilmorey Street Flood defence wall, Newry |
| Buttercrane Quay Newry |
| Barley Lane, Newry |
| Ford's Cross, Silverbridge |
| Newry Bypass, Newry |
| Skerriff Road, Cullyhanna |
| Near frontier, Cashel Road, Enniskillen |
| Clonliff Road, Enniskillen |
| Near frontier Drumnasreane Road, Enniskillen |
| Eshnadarragh Road, Rosslea |
| Opposite Holiday Centre, Garrison |
| Swanlinbar Road, Enniskillen |

| Location of Illegally Erected Monuments |
|--|
| Eshnadarragh Altawalk Cross |
| Drumnakilly Road, Omagh |
| Water Wall Footpath, Mourne Bridge, Strabane |
| Annagher Road, Coalisland |
| Drum Road, Near to Teebane Road, Cookstown |
| Corrick Road, Dungiven |

Traffic-Related Dangers

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of whether or not his officials have accepted the views of local residents, local politicians and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in relation to addressing the traffic-related dangers at the southern end of the Old Warrenpoint Road, at its junction with the Newry/Warrenpoint dual carriageway. (AQW 1410/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Road safety continues to be one of the top priorities for my Department's Roads Service. Roads Service, along with other agencies such as the Police and DoE's Road Safety Branch, is fully committed to doing all it can to reduce the number of people killed or injured on our roads.

I should explain that Roads Service receives information from the PSNI on all collisions in which someone has been injured. The locations of all these collisions are monitored and any location with a history of four or more collisions in a three year period (known as a "collision cluster"), is investigated to determine if an appropriate engineering measure could be introduced to mitigate against further collisions at the site.

I can advise that Roads Service has re-examined the junction of the Old Warrenpoint Road and the Newry/Warrenpoint dual carriageway, in conjunction with the PSNI, and it is their mutual opinion that safety at this junction would be best served by closing the central median gap to all traffic turning movements. I am aware, however, that this is something which may not be supported by local politicians and residents. Nonetheless, I am sure you will appreciate that banning right turning movements out of the Old Warrenpoint Road would be extremely difficult to enforce without the full physical closure of the central median.

I understand that a meeting between Roads Service and representatives from Newry and Mourne Council to further discuss road safety issues at this junction was held on 15 November, and that Roads Service agreed to re-assess the situation. I have asked the

Divisional Roads Manager in Roads Service's Southern Division to write to you to inform you of the results of this exercise.

Parking Tickets in Ballymoney

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Ballymoney, in (i) the last 12 months; (ii) 2005; and (iii) 2006. (AQW 1413/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. Since then, to the end of October 2007, a total of 2137 Penalty Charge Notices were issued in Ballymoney, 5967 in Ballymena, and 276 in Ballycastle.

I do not have parking enforcement figures prior to October 2006 as this function was then undertaken by the police.

Parking Tickets in Ballymena

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Ballymena, in (i) the last 12 months; (ii) 2005; and (iii) 2006. (AQW 1414/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. Since then, to the end of October 2007, a total of 2137 Penalty Charge Notices were issued in Ballymoney, 5967 in Ballymena, and 276 in Ballycastle.

I do not have parking enforcement figures prior to October 2006 as this function was then undertaken by the police.

Parking Tickets in Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Ballycastle, in (i) the last 12 months; (ii) 2005; and (iii) 2006. (AQW 1415/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. Since then, to the end of October 2007, a total of 2137 Penalty Charge Notices were issued in Ballymoney, 5967 in Ballymena, and 276 in Ballycastle.

I do not have parking enforcement figures prior to October 2006 as this function was then undertaken by the police.

A26 Frosses Road

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the date on which the remedial action on the A26 Frosses Road will begin. (AQW 1421/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that the commencement date for construction of the proposed dualling of the A26 Frosses Road from Glarryford Crossroads to its junction with the A44 Drones Road will be dependant on the timely and successful completion of the statutory procedures, detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding at that time. As such, it is not possible, at present, to provide a start date, however, it is likely to be within the latter half of the present Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (RSTN TP 2015) period.

Traffic Congestion

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce measures to alleviate traffic congestion in the centre of Keady; and to give a timescale within which such plans will be implemented. (AQW 1434/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: While the traffic through the town of Keady would not be particularly heavy, congestion can occur, at peak times, because parking or inappropriate parking on the narrow streets can impede the free flow of traffic.

My Department's Roads Service is currently progressing waiting restriction Orders for Kinelowen Street and Bridge Street in an effort to improve traffic progression. Objections to these proposals are currently being considered and, if resolved, it is anticipated that these restrictions will be implemented during early 2008.

There are also plans to review the current deployment of Traffic Attendants, with a view to increasing the level of presence at peak times, to enforce parking restrictions, thereby reducing the negative impact that inappropriate parking behaviour has on traffic movement and accessibility.

I am also pleased to confirm that officials within my Department are involved with the local regeneration committee to identify if other measures could be introduced to improve traffic flow in the town.

Pedestrian Crossing: Whiteabbey

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to conduct a survey to ascertain the feasibility of installing a pedestrian crossing on the A2 Shore Road, adjacent to the junction with Abbeyville Street and opposite St James' church in Whiteabbey. (AQW 1439/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that as it has been several years since a survey was carried out at this location on the A2 Shore Road, an updated survey will be conducted in the New Year. If following an analysis of the survey results, the location meets the criteria for the provision of a pedestrian crossing, it will be included in a list with other potential schemes, to be considered for prioritisation and possible inclusion in a future works programme. I have asked the Eastern Divisional Roads Manager to notify you of the outcome of the survey once it has been completed.

Parking Regulation Enforcement

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of parking regulation enforcement in each of the last three years. (AQW 1463/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. I do not have parking enforcement details prior to this date as this function was then undertaken by the police.

In relation to AQW 1463/08, the total payment to National Car Parks Services Ltd. for enforcement of on-street restrictions and management of off-street car-parks for the five months of operation in the 2006/07 financial year was £2.54 million.

With regards to AQW 1464/08, Roads Service has advised that 163,500 Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) were issued from 13 November 2006 to 10 November 2007. During the first two weeks of operation, Warning Notices were issued.

In relation to AQW 1465/08, Roads Service has advised that, from 13 November 2006 to 10 November 2007, 19,444 PCNs have been challenged, of which 10,734 have been successful. In addition the independent Traffic Penalty Tribunal received 92 formal appeals of which 17 have been successful.

Finally, with regards to AQW 1466/08, I am advised that the costs associated with processing appeals against PCNs are not held separately. I can advise, however, that during the five months of operation in the 2006/07 financial year, the total in-house cost to

Roads Service for processing all PCNs including administrative work, work associated with challenges, representations, appeals, payments, and debt collection, was £0.8 million.

Parking Regulation Enforcement

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking enforcement tickets that have been issued in each of the last three years. (AQW 1464/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. I do not have parking enforcement details prior to this date as this function was then undertaken by the police.

In relation to AQW 1463/08, the total payment to National Car Parks Services Ltd. for enforcement of on-street restrictions and management of off-street car-parks for the five months of operation in the 2006/07 financial year was £2.54 million.

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Parking Regulation Enforcement

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of (i) appeals lodged against parking enforcement tickets; and (ii) these appeals that were successful, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1465/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting

restrictions on 30 October 2006. I do not have parking enforcement details prior to this date as this function was then undertaken by the police.

In relation to AQW 1463/08, the total payment to National Car Parks Services Ltd. for enforcement of on-street restrictions and management of off-street car-parks for the five months of operation in the 2006/07 financial year was £2.54 million.

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Parking Regulation Enforcement

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of the appeals process against parking enforcement tickets, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1466/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions on 30 October 2006. I do not have parking enforcement details prior to this date as this function was then undertaken by the police.

In relation to AQW 1463/08, the total payment to National Car Parks Services Ltd. for enforcement of on-street restrictions and management of off-street car-parks for the five months of operation in the 2006/07 financial year was £2.54 million.

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Air Quality and Carbon Emissions

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether or not he has made any assessment of the likely effects on air quality and carbon emissions, arising from changes to the M1/Westlink/M2 corridor. (AQW 1482/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Air quality assessments were conducted as part of the Environmental Statements for both the M1/Westlink and the M2 Improvement Schemes in accordance with the relevant guidance.

The M1/Westlink Scheme Environmental Statement concluded that construction of the proposed scheme would result in a slight deterioration in local air quality levels but an improvement in regional air quality. At the Public Inquiry held in November/December 2000, an independent inspector concluded that the change in air quality would be of little significance.

With regard to the M2 Improvement scheme, the Environmental Statement concluded that there would be no significant effect on either local or regional air quality as a result of the creation of a third lane on a section of the M2.

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the longest period of time his department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1486/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The table below sets out the longest periods of time taken by my Department to provide a full response to letters from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, received during the period 8

May to 31 October 2007. All responses were signed by me or my Private Secretary.

| | Longest period of time, in working days, from date letter received until date full response issued |
|---|--|
| Member of Parliament | 71 |
| Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly | 70 |
| Councillor | 23 |
| Member of the Public | 75 |

Colinglen Road, Dunmurry

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he will give to improving the Colinglen Road in Dunmurry, including the provision of (i) a 30 mph speed limit; (ii) street lighting; (iii) footpaths; and (iv) resurfacing, in light of several fatalities at this location in recent years.

(AQW 1495/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised as follows:

(i) 30 mph Speed Limit

The Colinglen Road is currently subject to a 30 mph speed limit from near the works entrance at Colinglen Concrete to the Mullaghglass Road and this section of road has street lighting in place. The Mullaghglass Road has lengths of both 30 and 40 mph speed limits and both it and Colinglen Road are provided with 30 and 40 mph speed limit signs as appropriate.

Speed limits are introduced against criteria relating to the density of development along a road. The part of Colinglen Road, linking from Colinglen Concrete to the 30 mph speed limit at Glen Road, Belfast, does not meet the relevant criteria and there are no proposals to introduce a 30 mph speed limit on this stretch of road.

(ii) Street Lighting

Roads Service receives more requests for street lighting than available resources can sustain and so criteria have been developed to assess each request to ensure that resources are directed to the most deserving locations. In rural areas, these criteria relate to the density of houses along the road. The currently unlit portion of Colinglen Road is rural in nature and does not exhibit the required density of development and, therefore, there are no plans to provide additional lighting.

(iii) Footpaths

A route improvement study has been carried out by Roads Service on the A501, including that portion known as Colinglen Road. This study identified a number of potential schemes to improve road safety including footway provision, as well as localised road widening and improved visibility at junctions.

As a result, enhanced signing and high friction surfacing at the 'hairpin bend' at Glen Bridge and the provision of right turning pockets at the Colinglen Road/ Glenside Road junction have been completed. In addition, a number of road drainage improvements have been implemented and over 100m of safety fence was installed on the Colinglen Road, opposite the Farmer's Inn, during May 2007. An additional 270m of safety fence is programmed for replacement for early 2008, subject to agreement with local landowners.

Due to the scale and cost of large and small scale improvement works considered in the route improvement study, and the relatively low volumes of vehicles on the Colinglen Road, none of the identified options ranked highly on a prioritised list of Minor Works schemes and were not, therefore, progressed.

(iv) Resurfacing

Roads Service has no proposals, at present, to resurface or surface dress the Colinglen Road.

Waste Water

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to improve the treatment of waste water at locations in Northern Ireland that have been termed 'sewerage hotspots'; and to detail when this work will be completed. (AQW 1524/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that work continues on a programme of capital works, based on environmental prioritisation, to improve the treatment of wastewater and to upgrade the sewerage network in the 57 'hotspot' locations originally identified by the Environment & Heritage Service.

Northern Ireland Water has completed work in relation to 28 of these locations and anticipates that the remaining work on the programme will be progressed through to completion in June 2011.

A20 Road from Kircubbin to Portaferry

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the present condition of the A20 main road from Kircubbin to

Portaferry; and to give a timescale within which this road will be upgraded, in particular the Ardkeen section.
(AQW 1543/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The present condition of the section of the A20 road between Kircubbin and Portaferry varies from a good standard, where resurfacing has been carried out in recent years, to a lesser standard, particularly in the area of the hamlet of Ardkeen.

The Ardkeen section of the road has been earmarked for the installation of new drainage and for resurfacing, and my Department's Roads Service will undertake this work following the completion of substantial works by Northern Ireland Water.

While Roads Service intends to implement this scheme as soon as practically possible, this will depend on adequate finance being available and other competing priorities and so I am unable to give a definitive timescale for commencement of the work.

In addition, sightline improvement schemes are planned at two locations along the A20 Kircubbin to Portaferry section of road:

- (i) Rowreagh Road/Gransha Road (commencement of construction work is anticipated for early in the 2008/09 financial year);
- (ii) Rowreagh Road/Rubane Road (programmed for the 2008/09 financial year).

Construction work will, of course, be subject to the successful acquisition of any lands that may be required and the availability of the necessary finance.

Installation of Temporary Traffic Management Cones

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the method currently used to place and retrieve traffic cones on roads and motorways in Northern Ireland, in relation to whether or not this method conforms to health and safety requirements.
(AQW 1544/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 1544/08, my Department's Roads Service advises that, on motorways and dual carriageways with hard shoulders, the Department requires that the installation / retrieval of temporary traffic management cones is carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Traffic Signs Manual (Chapter 8). Under Chapter 8 the organisation responsible is required to prepare and implement a Method Statement and a Risk Assessment for each individual site.

Roads Service's requirements in relation to all other roads are specified in the Code of Practice for Safety at Street Works and Road Works.

Both of these documents have legal status here under Article 31 of the Road Traffic Regulations Order and I am satisfied that the methods used to place and retrieve cones conform to Health and Safety requirements.

With regard to AQW 1546/08, I am advised that the specific methods employed by Roads Service mostly consist of manually installing / retrieving cones from / to stock stacked on the back of lorries. These lorries being protected by Impact Protection Vehicles.

Installation of Temporary Traffic Management Cones

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the method or system used by the Roads Service to place and retrieve traffic cones on roads and motorways in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1546/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 1544/08, my Department's Roads Service advises that, on motorways and dual carriageways with hard shoulders, the Department requires that the installation / retrieval of temporary traffic management cones is carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Traffic Signs Manual (Chapter 8). Under Chapter 8 the organisation responsible is required to prepare and implement a Method Statement and a Risk Assessment for each individual site.

Roads Service's requirements in relation to all other roads are specified in the Code of Practice for Safety at Street Works and Road Works.

Both of these documents have legal status here under Article 31 of the Road Traffic Regulations Order and I am satisfied that the methods used to place and retrieve cones conform to Health and Safety requirements.

With regard to AQW 1546/08, I am advised that the specific methods employed by Roads Service mostly consist of manually installing / retrieving cones from / to stock stacked on the back of lorries. These lorries being protected by Impact Protection Vehicles.

Road Improvement Work

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to comment on the priority afforded to road improvement works at High Street, Portaferry;

and to indicate a timeframe when road improvement work will commence. (AQW 1550/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am informed that my Department's Roads Service have previously assessed the condition of High Street, Portaferry and included it on their programme of improvement works. Due to the nature of the street the work will involve the complete reconstruction of the footways and carriageway between Anne Street and Meeting House Street. As such, the cost of such works would be considerable and current funding is not available to progress the scheme.

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide you with a timeframe for commencement of the scheme but I can assure you that it is high on the list of priorities for Roads Service and will be implemented when appropriate funding becomes available taking into consideration other competing schemes at that time.

Managerial Posts

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of (i) women; and (ii) men, who hold senior managerial posts in each division within his department. (AQW 1559/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Within the Department for Regional Development, the numbers of women and men who currently occupy Senior Civil Service posts in each Agency and Division are as follows:

| Business Area | Number of women | Number of men |
|--|-----------------|---------------|
| Permanent Secretary | 0 | 1* |
| (senior post not allocated to a specific Division) | | |
| Deputy Secretary | 1 | 0 |
| (senior post not allocated to a specific Division) | | |
| Roads Service | 0 | 6^ |
| Regional Planning & Transportation Division | 0 | 1 |
| Ports and Public Transport Division | 0 | 1 |
| Public Transport Performance Division | 0 | 1 |
| Water Policy Division | 0 | 1* |
| Water Shareholder Unit | 0 | 1 |
| Personnel Division | 1 | 0 |
| Finance Division | 0 | 1* |
| Total | 2 | 13 |

* Officer currently on temporary promotion

^ Includes 3 officers currently on temporary promotion

Parking Tickets

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Ballycastle since Roads Service assumed responsibility for parking enforcement, broken down by month. (AQW 1569/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department assumed responsibility for the enforcement of on-street parking and waiting restrictions at the end of October 2006. In the period to the end of October 2007, the total number of Penalty Charge Notices issued in Ballycastle is 276, broken down as follows:

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| November 2006 | 13 |
| December 2006 | 14 |
| January 2007 | 16 |
| February 2007 | 3 |
| March 2007 | 7 |
| April 2007 | 12 |
| May 2007 | 29 |
| June 2007 | 13 |
| July 2007 | 32 |
| August 2007 | 114 |
| September 2007 | 4 |
| October 2007 | 19 |

Railway Repairs

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the timetable for the proposed funding of repairs to sections of railway line between Ballymena and Coleraine that cause train slow-downs for the purposes of safety. (AQW 1570/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A Letter of Offer amounting to £12 million for expenditure towards the Ballymena to Coleraine Track Life Extension Works programme was issued to Translink in October 2007. The works programme has been broken down into three phases as outlined below.

1. Phase 1, which has already been completed, involved the rectification of 1,700 wet beds.
2. Phase 2, which is due to be completed by August 2008, will involve the rectification of the remaining 4,300 wet beds on the line.
3. The third and final phase of the project is programmed to start in August 2008 with completion due by July 2010. This will involve extensive excavation works at a number of

locations within a five mile stretch of track north of Ballymoney Station. New ballast will be laid to support the track and new drainage will be provided. All track between Broughdone and Coleraine will be converted to continuously welded rail.

This programme of works has been planned so that the least possible disruption will be caused to rail services and will be conducted with relevant safety requirements. Bus substitution services will be put in place for up to 16 weeks to cater for rail passengers during the course of the work.

Social Housing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the sale of land owned by his department, adjacent to 41 Movilla Street, Newtownards, can proceed, to allow this social housing project to meet planning requirements. (AQW 1587/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that a portion of land adjacent to No 41 Movilla Street, has been adopted by it and is currently used as an informal off-street parking area.

While it is understood that a planning application has been made, to re-develop the land in question, no formal request has been received by Roads Service to ascertain whether the land in question is surplus to requirements.

Disabled Parking Enforcement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the Road Service's policy in relation to disabled parking enforcement outside core hour provision; and to detail the prescribed sanctions for such offences. (AQW 1609/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that core enforcement hours are generally between 8am and 6pm, from Monday to Saturday. The exact timings do, however, depend on the parking restrictions in individual towns and cities.

Outside these times, Roads Service does not normally deploy routine patrols, as the impact of illegal parking is not as severe as during the day and the cost of enforcement would outweigh the benefits.

However, if Roads Service is made aware of illegal parking problems occurring outside these times, including the misuse of accessibility bays reserved for Blue Badge holders, mobile patrols can be deployed to deal with individual situations.

The penalty for such a contravention is a £60 Penalty Charge Notice.

Motorway Slip Roads

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to provide slip roads from Dunmurry on to the M1. (AQW 1616/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that the provision of additional slip roads onto the M1 at Blacks Road, is included in both the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan and the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (2015).

This proposal is one of a number of schemes listed in the "Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015" consultation document, published in September 2006. The draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland published for consultation, in October 2007, sets the funding priorities for the period 2008-2018. When the Strategy is finalised, it will determine the relative priority and timing of all planned Major Works, including the Blacks Road slips scheme.

I would add that the provision of this road scheme will be subject to the successful completion of the statutory procedures, detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding at that time.

Hillhead Road, Newry

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress he has made in relation to the Hillhead Road, Newry; and what plans he has to meet local residents and public representatives to update them on this progress. (AQW 1718/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member will recall my site meeting with him and local residents in July last. Since then my Department's Roads Service has been actively progressing options for the solution to the ongoing road closure at Hillhead Road, Newry.

Engineering consultants have been engaged by Roads Service to consider the available options which range from permanent closure of the road as a through route, to realignment of the road on a line outside of the unstable area associated with the rock slippage at Dromalane Quarry. An initial review of the options prepared by the consultants has been completed and a report on the outcome of the assessment process, along with cost estimates is awaited.

Roads Service has also met with the owners of the Dromalane Quarry site, Moyard Properties Ltd, who have advised that they are looking at a solution that

would ease the angle of the quarry face. This proposal will necessitate the acquisition of land from landowners on the western side of the quarry and the realignment of the Hillhead Road. I understand that the Quarry owners have already made contact with the landowners involved.

Roads Service officials have requested a further meeting with Moyard Properties Ltd to ascertain the progress on their solution and it is expected that this will be held within the next few weeks.

Following consideration of the report by the engineering consultants engaged by Roads Service, and depending on the outcome of the meeting with Moyard Properties Ltd, it is my intention to meet again with the local residents and public representatives. In due course my office will contact those concerned to put the appropriate arrangements in place.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will explain the reasons why he is unable to detail the consultancy costs incurred by non-departmental public bodies connected to his department. (AQW 1745/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department could not detail the consultancy costs incurred by Non Departmental Public Bodies as it was not responsible for any Non Departmental Public Bodies during the year in question.

Maintenance of Drains

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what additional resources have been allocated to drains' maintenance in flooding hotspots. (AQW 1754/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 1754/08, my Department's Roads Service has confirmed that no additional resources have been allocated to the maintenance of drainage systems in flooding hotspots.

In response to AQW 1756/08, my Department's Roads Service has advised that all drains considered to be located in flooding hotspots, and which are the responsibility of Roads Service, have been inspected this Autumn.

Maintenance of Drains

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether or not all drains located in flooding hotspots have been inspected this autumn. (AQW 1756/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 1754/08, my Department's Roads Service has confirmed that no additional resources have been allocated to the maintenance of drainage systems in flooding hotspots.

In response to AQW 1756/08, my Department's Roads Service has advised that all drains considered to be located in flooding hotspots, and which are the responsibility of Roads Service, have been inspected this Autumn.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his answer to AQW 1340/08, to give a detailed breakdown of the expenditure incurred by Northern Ireland Water, in fees and all other costs, in respect of the consultancy firms listed. (AQW 1811/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the fees and other costs attributed to the consultancy firms listed in AQW 1340/08 since 1 April 2007 are as follows:

| | |
|--|---------|
| Adjust Procurement Solutions Ltd | 26,287 |
| AJ McCann Consultants Ltd | 4,044 |
| Alvarez & Marsal Europe Limited | 10,934 |
| BDO Stoy Hayward | 24,875 |
| Being Communication Limited | 50,000 |
| Bespoke Performance Management Limited | 24,071 |
| Bhb Fire and Specialist Training Consultants | 255 |
| Black & Veatch Ltd | 105,706 |
| BSG Civil Engineering Limited | 280,823 |
| BTW Shiells | 8,500 |
| Building Design Partnership Limited | 99,663 |
| Capita | 356,548 |
| Chandlerkbs | 19,299 |
| Construction Consultancy Services | 325,343 |
| Construction Supervisory Services Limited | 49,902 |
| Consult Nb1 Limited | 4,300 |
| Contractauditline | 1,397 |
| Contracting Out LLP | 101,992 |
| Deloitte | 35,000 |
| DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary UK LLP | 16,841 |
| Doran Consultant | 310,602 |
| DP Contracting Ltd | 9,360 |
| Dundas & Wilson CS LLP | 291,016 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| EC Harris & Partners | 36,403 |
| ENTEC | 11,223 |
| Ernst & Young LLP | 79,838 |
| Ewan Group Plc | 83,440 |
| Faber Maunsell Ltd | 198,293 |
| Fujitsu Services Ltd | 5,538 |
| Glover Site Investigation | 2,444 |
| Halcrow Management Sciences Limited | 334,546 |
| Hyder Consulting Limited | 163,917 |
| Independent Occupational Health Limited | 18,497 |
| Interim Management Assignments (NI) Ltd | 96,308 |
| Intra Consulting | 9,300 |
| IT Project Recovery Limited | 67,965 |
| Jacobs UK Ltd | 370,222 |
| John Fawell | 122 |
| John Graham (Dromore) Ltd | 36,091 |
| John W Smith | 12,759 |
| Kirkwood Management Consultants Ltd | 53,163 |
| KPMG | 1,200 |
| McAdam Design | 1,427,598 |
| McAuley & Browne | 17,000 |
| Mercer Human Resource Consulting | 53,622 |
| MMC Associates | 6,150 |
| Mott MacDonald Group | 753,032 |
| Mouchel Parkman Services Limited | 146,903 |
| Mulholland & Doherty | 714,531 |
| MWH UK Ltd | 254,420 |
| Neueda | 28,553 |
| Nicholas O Dwyer & Partners | 156,618 |
| Nick Owen Associates Ltd | 1,922 |
| Ntuition Ltd | 5,856 |
| Ollave Ltd | 12,600 |
| Peter J Graham Consultancy Ltd Total | 17,363 |
| Pipeline Simulation Ltd Total | 480 |
| Practical Planning Limited | 121,108 |
| R Robinson and Sons | 240,528 |
| Rps Kirk McClure & Morton (Rps Kmm) | 1,085,061 |
| Sacker & Partners | 25,695 |
| Scott Wilson | 251,585 |
| Service & System Solutions (Sx3) Ltd | 6,000 |

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Strategic Planning | 8,000 |
| The Event-Ful Consultancy Ltd | 300 |
| The Helm Corporation Ltd | 440,644 |
| Waterpeople Limited | 9,000 |
| WDR & RT Taggart | 174,229 |
| Weber Shandwick | 38,700 |
| White Young Green | 379,475 |
| Williams Ind Services Ltd | 32,944 |
| WJ McDowell & Partners | 169,995 |
| WRC Plc | 16,521 |
| WS Atkins Consultants Ltd | 1,547,446 |
| Yorkshire Water | 162 |
| Total | 11,892,068 |

These costs are exclusive of VAT.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Pensions Bill

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development to report on the progress of the Pensions Bill, including the changes to the basic state pension being introduced in GB from 2010, in relation to the reduction in the number of qualifying years to 30. (AQW 1469/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Pensions Bill, which corresponds to the Pensions Act 2007, was introduced in the Assembly on 12 November 2007.

The Bill proposes a number of changes to simplify the State Pension and improve its coverage and generosity, particularly for women and carers. One of its key features is the replacement of the existing contribution conditions for basic State Pension with a single contribution condition. The new condition provides that, for those reaching State Pension age from 6 April 2010, the number of qualifying years required to qualify for a full basic state pension will be 30 for both men and women.

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the longest period of time her department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007. (AQW 1487/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The longest period of time my Department has taken to provide a full reply to a letter received from an MP, MLA and Councillor, from date of receipt to date of reply issue, is 47 working days; and to a member of the public is 43 working days.

My department endeavours to respond to all correspondence within timescales set out in Cabinet Office Guidelines. Where it is impossible to provide a full and accurate response within these timescales, every effort is made to ensure recipients are kept fully informed as to the reason for, and likely scale of, the delay.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties that have been allocated in Killyleagh, in each of the past three years.

(AQW 1498/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties allocated in Killyleagh, in each of the past three years at September in each year is as follows:

| | |
|----------------|----|
| September 2007 | 15 |
| September 2006 | 14 |
| September 2005 | 12 |

Housing Executive Waiting List

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list, who have identified Killyleagh as one of their areas of choice.

(AQW 1499/08)

The Minister for Social Development: 106 applicants have indicated Killyleagh as a 1st or 2nd preference area for housing. 55 of these have more than 30 points and are therefore considered to be in housing stress.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Moneyreagh area.

(AQW 1500/08)

The Minister for Social Development: At 31st March 2007 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive owned 49 properties in the Moneyreagh area, 133

former NIHE dwellings having been sold to sitting tenants.

Public Housing Units

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of units of public housing that will be provided in (i) Ballymoney Borough Council area; (ii) Ballymena Borough Council area; and (iii) Moyle District Council area, in the next two years.

(AQW 1505/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The current Social Housing Development Programme makes provision for 14 units in the Ballymoney Borough Council area, 67 units in the Ballymena Borough Council area and 30 units in the Moyle District Council area over the next two years.

Vacant Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of vacant residential properties in (i) Ballymoney Borough Council area; (ii) Ballymena Borough District Council area; and (iii) Moyle District Council area; and to outline what steps she will take to ensure this information is available at electoral ward level.

(AQW 1506/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not hold the information requested across all tenures at electoral ward level. The information is held by District Council areas as indicated in the table below.

| September 2006 | Ballymoney Borough | Ballymena Borough | Moyle District |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Private Sector Empty Dwellings* | 400 | 878 | 431 |
| NIHE Voids | 7 | 125 | 11 |
| NIHE Voids pending sale/demolition | 1 | 67 | 0 |
| Housing Association Voids ** | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Totals | 411 | 1072 | 443 |

* Private Sector figures provided by Rates Collection Agency.

** The Housing Association voids information shows the position at November 2007

Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she will explain the reasons why

Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit appeals are no longer being heard in Newtownards; and if she will confirm that this decision was taken due to financial issues. (AQW 1515/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit appeals are being heard in Belfast for a trial period of 3 months from November 2007 to January 2008. The decision was made because statistics show that customers called to the Newtownards Tribunal venue have to wait on average two weeks longer for their appeals to be heard than those called to Cleaver House, Belfast.

There are procedures in place for anyone not able to attend Cleaver House, to request an 'out of centre' hearing i.e. a hearing at a suitable venue closer to their home or a hearing in their home. Customers can also elect to have their appeal decided on the basis of the papers alone, i.e. in their absence, or can be represented at a hearing in their absence.

Appeal Tribunals will re-commence in Newtownards with effect from February 2008, pending an evaluation of the impact of the trial arrangements. This will include seeking the views of customers concerned.

Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the impact of the decision to stop holding Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit appeals in Newtownards, in light of the fact that appellants must now travel to Belfast in order to have their appeal heard. (AQW 1516/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The impact of the administrative decision to schedule hearings in Belfast as opposed to Newtownards, for a three month period from November 2007 to January 2008, cannot be quantified until an evaluation has taken place at the end of the trial. The evaluation will include a review of statistical information and customer views.

Appeal hearings will recommence in Newtownards from February 2008 pending the outcome of the evaluation.

There are procedures in place for anyone not able to attend Cleaver House, Belfast to request an 'out of centre' hearing i.e. a hearing at a suitable venue closer to their home or a hearing in their home. Customers can also elect to have their appeal decided on the basis of the papers alone, i.e. in their absence, or can be represented at a hearing in their absence.

Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Incapacity Benefit appeals that were held in Newtownards in (i) 2004; (ii) 2005; (iii) 2006; and (iv) 2007. (AQW 1517/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of Incapacity Benefit appeals which have been held in Ards Small Business Centre, Newtownards during the years 2004 to date are set out in the table below.

| Year | No. of appeals |
|------|----------------|
| 2004 | 83 |
| 2005 | 119 |
| 2006 | 142 |
| 2007 | 57 to date |

Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the location of appeal centres for Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit that have been closed or relocated. (AQW 1519/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department's Appeals Service rents accommodation in various centres across Northern Ireland for the purposes of holding appeal hearings. The venue for appeal hearings in Downpatrick was relocated from Downpatrick Resource Centre to Down Business Centre in 2005. Appeal Hearings for customers from Bangor and Newtownards have been relocated from Ards Business Centre, Newtownards to Cleaver House, Belfast for a trial period of three months from November 2007 to January 2008, after which an evaluation of the service will be undertaken. Pending this evaluation, the Ards Small Business Centre arrangements will be reinstated.

Social Housing Units

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of social housing units that have single glazed windows; and to give a timescale within which double glazing will be installed in these properties. (AQW 1530/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The 2006 House Condition Survey estimates that approximately 26,240 Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties and 2,440 Housing Association properties have single glazing.

There is no specific programme of improvement of window glazing in social dwellings. Policy is to replace windows only at the end of their useful life. One of the criteria against which dwellings are being inspected for the Decent Homes Standard is that all homes should provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. The need for window replacement will be considered as part of this process. If considered necessary and practicable, replacement works will be planned in conjunction with other works and improvements scheduled for the dwellings. Double glazing is not however a requirement to achieve thermal comfort.

Women's Centres Partnership

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment on whether or not the interim evaluation of the women's centres partnership, commissioned by her Department and carried out by the Department of Finance and Personnel, addresses the gaps in funding for the women's sector as a whole.

(AQW 1540/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Women's Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP) was set up following a recommendation of the cross departmental 'Review of Women's Organisations Delivering Support and Services to Disadvantaged Communities' (September 2005).

My Department commissioned an interim evaluation of WCRP. The evaluation was completed in August 2007 by the Delivery and Innovation Division of the Department of Finance and Personnel. The report concluded that WCRP has made significant progress against objectives agreed with my Department. My Department will commission a full evaluation of WCRP towards the end of the current Contract for Funding, March 2009.

WCRP's role is to provide direct support to the 14 women's centres that deliver frontline services to disadvantaged communities, not to address the gaps in funding for the women's sector as a whole.

Neighbourhood Action Plans

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development if she will explain the reasons why (i) her department has informed community organisations in West Belfast that they are not entitled to funding unless the services provided, and the groups providing such services, have been identified within draft Neighbourhood Action Plans; and (ii) these Neighbourhood Action Plans have been reclassified as Agendas for Change, without any guarantee of future funding.

(AQW 1541/08)

The Minister for Social Development: (i) DSD has not advised community organisations in West Belfast that they are not entitled to funding unless the services, and the service providers, have been identified in Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans. The Department provides funding for community activity through a number of programmes, including Neighbourhood Renewal. Community-based organisations have however been advised that Neighbourhood Renewal funding will be used to support services and activities where these clearly address local priorities and needs as identified in Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans, developed and agreed by individual Neighbourhood Partnerships. This does not entitle a group to funding or remove the possibility of a group receiving funding.

(ii) Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans, developed by Neighbourhood Partnerships to identify and prioritise local needs have not been reclassified as Agendas for Change. These plans 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 what is sometimes referred to as an "agenda for action" in each neighbourhood. Neighbourhood Renewal funding is not guaranteed for any service or group, all funding decisions depend on the extent to which services are identified as necessary to meet locally prioritised needs.

Disability Living Allowance Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Disability Living Allowance appeals that were held in Newtownards in (i) 2004; (ii) 2005; (iii) 2006; and (iv) 2007.

(AQW 1545/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of Disability Living Allowance appeals which have been held in Ards Small Business Centre, Newtownards during the years 2004 to date are set out in the table below.

| Year | No. of appeals |
|------|----------------|
| 2004 | 258 |
| 2005 | 295 |
| 2006 | 331 |
| 2007 | 160 to date |

Pension Credit

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of applications for Pension Credit that are currently being processed; (ii) the number of these applications that have taken longer than 12 clearance days to be processed; and (iii) the specific causes for the delay in cases where processing has taken longer than 12 clearance days.

(AQW 1552/08)

The Minister for Social Development:

- (i) Pension Credit applications cannot be processed until all supporting evidence has been received. At 31 October 2007 Pension Service had 335 applications with all supporting evidence and a further 1299 awaiting information from customers.
- (ii) It is not possible to provide information on individual cases which are over 12 days, as the

clearance time for processing Pension Credit new claims is measured as an Actual Average Clearance time from the point at which claimants have supplied all necessary supporting evidence.

- (iii) The main reason for delay in processing Pension Credit applications is because the customer has not provided all supporting evidence to meet the legislative requirement.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses built by each NI Housing Executive district office area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1562/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the new build starts in each Northern Ireland Housing Executive district office area in each of the last five years.

| NIHE District | 2002/03 Units | 2003/04 Units | 2004/05 Units | 2005/06 Units | 2006/07 Units |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Antrim | 2 | 16 | 14 | 35 | 41 |
| Armagh | 0 | 19 | 23 | 0 | 11 |
| Ballycastle | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Ballymena | 20 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 0 |
| Ballymoney | 2 | 32 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| Banbridge | 1 | 0 | 0 | 38 | 0 |
| Belfast East | 57 | 99 | 60 | 158 | 83 |
| Belfast North | 209 | 300 | 196 | 312 | 121 |
| Belfast South | 42 | 78 | 45 | 144 | 88 |
| Belfast Shankill | 38 | 15 | 86 | 68 | 15 |
| Belfast West | 101 | 192 | 335 | 321 | 101 |
| Bangor | 27 | 76 | 29 | 9 | 99 |
| Carrickfergus | 30 | 56 | 19 | 26 | 5 |
| Castlereagh | 0 | 4 | 14 | 39 | 82 |
| Derry (Collon Terrace) | 30 | 61 | 43 | 50 | 146 |
| (Derry) Waterloo Place | 15 | 6 | 104 | 10 | 0 |
| (Derry) Waterside | 4 | 15 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Coleraine | 45 | 60 | 0 | 40 | 3 |
| Cookstown | 0 | 6 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| Downpatrick | 7 | 39 | 30 | 22 | 13 |
| Dungannon | 0 | 7 | 10 | 0 | 22 |
| Enniskillen | 59 | 53 | 37 | 4 | 42 |
| Larne | 0 | 1 | 14 | 0 | 0 |

| NIHE District | 2002/03 Units | 2003/04 Units | 2004/05 Units | 2005/06 Units | 2006/07 Units |
|-----------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Limavady | 7 | 21 | 1 | 6 | 0 |
| Lisburn Antrim Street | 22 | 43 | 56 | 93 | 46 |
| Lisburn Diary Farm | 91 | 210 | 76 | 39 | 50 |
| Lurgan & Brownlow | 0 | 27 | 20 | 0 | 4 |
| Magherafelt | 6 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Newtownabbey 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Newtownabbey 2 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 27 | 0 |
| Newry | 33 | 19 | 52 | 27 | 34 |
| Newtownards | 4 | 10 | 5 | 28 | 17 |
| Omagh | 22 | 32 | 7 | 7 | 0 |
| Portadown | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Strabane | 8 | 27 | 19 | 0 | 9 |
| Totals | 900 | 1,526 | 1,317 | 1,519 | 1,032 |

Homelessness

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of funding that has been provided by her Department to tackle homelessness in each of the last two financial years. (AQW 1563/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Expenditure on the Social Housing Development Programme in 2005/06 and 2006/07 amounted to £122.7m and £131.7m respectively. Outside of the development Programme the amount of funding provided through my Department to tackle homelessness in each of the last two years was as follows:

| | 2005/2006 | 2006/2007 |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Temporary accommodation provision* | £8.75m | £8.6m |
| Funding for voluntary bodies** | £1.67m | £2.03m |
| Supporting People programme*** | £18.8m | £19.6m |

* Expenditure on temporary accommodation provision (including housing benefit provision). This does not include those homeless applicants who self referred to voluntary sector accommodation.

** Funding to a range of voluntary bodies for special projects to tackle and prevent homelessness, demonstrating the Housing Executive's continued commitment.

*** The Supporting People programme (totalling £56m in 2006/07), provided funding across a range of floating support services and supported accommodation schemes. The proportion of the Supporting People budget outlined in the table includes services to the homeless, victims of domestic violence and vulnerable young people affected by homelessness.

Pension Credit

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of pension credit applications that are currently outstanding. (AQW 1566/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Pension Credit applications cannot be processed until all supporting evidence has been received. At 31 October 2007 Pension Service had 335 applications with all supporting evidence and a further 1299 awaiting information from customers.

Bookmaker's Licencing

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development if she will review the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, in light of recent comments by the Lord Chief Justice for Northern Ireland, in relation to the transfer of a bookmaker's licence to new premises and to the need for new legislation. (AQW 1588/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The issue of a change in the law to allow the transfer of a bookmaking office licence from one premises to another has been noted for detailed consideration. Given that any changes would need to be considered in relation to the licensing of gambling more widely, and involve changes to primary legislation, this would be best undertaken when an opportunity arises for a wider review of gambling law.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of women recovering from breast cancer who have been refused Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 1594/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold the information requested, as any data held refers to awards of benefit only and not to cases that have been disallowed.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her Department's expenditure on official hospitality in each of the last five years. (AQW 1630/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department's expenditure on official hospitality in each of the last five years is detailed below.

| 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| £20,392.36 | £19,513.85 | £27,978.66 | £27,255.31 | £27,883.93 |

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people per 1000 of working age, who are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, broken down by (i) local government ward area; and (ii) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1634/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My department does not hold all the information requested, however I have placed in the Library tables giving information on the number of people per 1000 of working age, who are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, broken down by Ward area, Parliamentary Constituency, and Local Government District. Also included is the number of Disability Living Allowance recipients expressed as a percentage of Parliamentary Constituency and Local Government District population, however we do not have the population figures available at Ward level.

The figures given reflect the number of claims where an amount of Disability living Allowance is in payment at the date of extract.

Renewing Communities Programme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the names of groups and amounts of funding that have been made available under the Renewing Communities programme. (AQW 1653/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Renewing Communities Action Plan, launched in April 2006, identified over 60 actions spread across 8 individual Departments. The total value of the proposed actions, which included a number of major mainstream and baseline funded programmes, was in excess of £200m. Additional funding, however, of £28.6m was secured to support a number of innovative pilot projects spread over the two years from April 2006 to March 2008.

Details of all indicative allocations made from this additional funding on a Departmental basis have been placed in the Library. The details on allocation of funding and monitoring of expenditure for specific actions are held by each lead Department and their delivery agencies. Furthermore a list of groups supported under Renewing Communities Actions for which DSD is the lead Department has also been placed in the Library.

Bereavement Allowance

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of people in receipt of Bereavement Allowance; and (ii) the amount of money paid out in Bereavement Allowance, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1656/08)

The Minister for Social Development:

- (i) My Department is unable to provide the specific information requested on the number of recipients of Bereavement Allowance. The relevant data currently provided on this area combines the numbers of the recipients for Bereavement Allowance together with the recipients of other widows and bereavement related benefits e.g Widowed Parents Allowance etc, therefore the requested information is not separately available.
- (ii) Expenditure on Bereavement Allowance is as follows:

| Financial Year | Expenditure |
|----------------|-------------|
| 2004/2005 | £12.7m |
| 2005/2006 | £11.5m |
| 2006/2007 | £10.9m |

Regeneration Programmes

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her Department's current role in funding regeneration programmes in cities, towns and villages; and whether or not this has changed in recent times. (AQW 1657/08)

The Minister for Social Development:

My Department's role is to improve the physical, social and economic well-being of cities and towns across Northern Ireland by maximising investment potential and attracting more people back to work, shop and socialise in them. The Department undertakes this work in settlements with a population of more than four and a half thousand residents using a mix of public and private sector investment and contributions from the European Union's Structural funds and the International Fund for Ireland.

Responsibility for funding regeneration programmes in villages rests with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The key change in recent years has been the move by my Department to a more strategic approach to regeneration, identifying and tailoring solutions as opposed to the previous "react and repair" nature of our work.

This is underpinned by the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy and the recently launched good practice guide, "Vital & Viable", which sets out my Department's suggested approach to the regeneration of city and town centres using an overarching framework.

Regeneration Programmes

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has for the regeneration of (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballycastle; and (iii) Moyle.
(AQW 1669/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In Ballymoney, my Department will complete the 'Experience Ballymoney' project funded under the Town Centre Promotions and Marketing Programme; take forward a small number of projects under the Urban Development Grant pilot scheme and work up plans for an environmental improvement scheme on the Main Street and Castlecroft in conjunction with our colleagues in DRD Roads Service.

In Ballycastle, the Department has provided support for the appointment of a Project Officer to produce and implement a regeneration strategy for Ballycastle. It is expected that the strategy will be completed by the end of March 2008. Any future DSD activity in Ballycastle will depend on the contents of the regeneration strategy.

As Ballycastle is the only part of Moyle District which is designated as an urban settlement, my Department has no plans for regeneration activity in any part of the district outside Ballycastle.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of cancer patients who have undergone surgery or been treated with chemotherapy/radiotherapy, and who have been refused Disability Living Allowance.
(AQW 1730/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold the information requested as any data held refers only to awards of benefit and not to cases that have been disallowed. Where benefit has been awarded the data held relates to the main disabling condition that gives rise to the current award of benefit and not to the treatment undertaken.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost to her Department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 1738/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development – in common with all NI Departments – does not normally calculate or record information on the cost of individual FOI requests. In short, this information is not held.

The NICS position corresponds to that of the Whitehall Departments.

Warm Homes Scheme

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people living in North Belfast who will benefit from the Warm Homes Scheme this year.
(AQW 1824/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since April 2007 in North Belfast, BT14 and BT15 postal code areas, there have been 52 heating installations and 111 house insulations completed. There are 40 more heating installations and 29 house insulations in progress in the area. There are a further 66 heating installations which have been surveyed and most of these will be completed before the end of March 2008. Therefore by the end of the year there should be a total of 158 heating installations completed in North Belfast homes.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 30 November 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Equality Provision

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 192/08, what steps it will take to establish how other regions of the European Union have assessed (i) the need for; (ii) the wording of; (iii) the scope of; and (iv) the exceptions to, any harassment clause included in equality proposals stemming from EU directives.

(AQW 612/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way which both complies with the requirements of the directives but also addresses the specific needs of the member state. Given therefore that implementation of directives is a matter for the member state, how other member states comply with directives, whilst of interest, is not directly pertinent. We do not therefore normally contact other member states.

Policy consideration on the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law includes consideration of the degree of flexibility available to the member state and the devolved. In doing so, we are also required to meet our statutory equality obligations and comply with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Given that equality is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of this Administration to consider how the requirements of equality directives impact on Northern Ireland and to bring forward legislation specific to Northern Ireland to implement those directives.

However, European law does demand that directives are implemented within a specified timeframe. The provisions of the Directive must be adequately transposed

into domestic law. If this does not happen, the member state will be deemed to have failed to implement and would be liable to infraction proceedings which could result in daily fines; and the Government could also be vulnerable to individual legal challenge. Therefore, it may be the case in the transposition of certain directives into domestic law there is a limited discretion in relation to certain provisions.

Equality Provision

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 192/08, what steps it will take to examine how other regions of the European Union have protected freedom of speech, in relation to equality proposals stemming from EU directives.

(AQW 613/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way which both complies with the requirements of the directives but also addresses the specific needs of the member state. Given therefore that implementation of directives is a matter for the member state, how other member states comply with directives, whilst of interest, is not directly pertinent. We do not therefore normally contact other member states.

Policy consideration on the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law includes consideration of the degree of flexibility available to the member state and the devolved Administration. In doing so, we are also required to meet our statutory equality obligations and comply with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Given that equality is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of this Administration to consider how the requirements of equality directives impact on Northern Ireland and to bring forward legislation specific to Northern Ireland to implement those directives.

However, European law does demand that directives are implemented within a specified timeframe. The provisions of the Directive must be adequately transposed into domestic law. If this does not happen, the member state will be deemed to have failed to implement and would be liable to infraction proceedings which could result in daily fines; and the Government could also be vulnerable to individual legal challenge. Therefore, it may be the case in the transposition of certain directives into domestic law there is a limited discretion in relation to certain provisions.

Equality Provision

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 192/08, to detail the method used to assess (i) the need for; (ii) the wording of; (iii) the scope of; and (iv) exceptions to, any harassment clause included in equality proposals. (AQW 614/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way which both complies with the requirements of the directives but also addresses the specific needs of the member state. Given therefore that implementation of directives is a matter for the member state, how other member states comply with directives, whilst of interest, is not directly pertinent. We do not therefore normally contact other member states.

Policy consideration on the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law includes consideration of the degree of flexibility available to the member state and the devolved Administration. In doing so, we are also required to meet our statutory equality obligations and comply with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Given that equality is a devolved matter, it is the responsibility of this Administration to consider how the requirements of equality directives impact on Northern Ireland and to bring forward legislation specific to Northern Ireland to implement those directives.

However, European law does demand that directives are implemented within a specified timeframe. The provisions of the directive must be adequately transposed into domestic law. If this does not happen the member state will be deemed to have failed to implement and would be liable to infraction proceedings which could result in daily fines; and the Government could also be vulnerable to individual legal challenge. Therefore, it may be the case in the transposition of certain directives into domestic law there is a limited discretion in relation to certain provisions.

Equality Provision

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 192/08, what steps it will take to guarantee the right of freedom of speech when considering equality proposals. (AQW 615/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way which both complies with the

requirements of the directives but also addresses the specific needs of the member state. Given therefore that implementation of directives is a matter for the member state, how other member states comply with directives, whilst of interest, is not directly pertinent. We do not therefore normally contact other member states.

Policy consideration on the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law includes consideration of the degree of flexibility available to the member state and the devolved Administration. In doing so, we are also required to meet our statutory equality obligations and comply with the Human Rights Act 1998.

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Equality Provision

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 192/08, what priority it will give to ensuring that all equality legislation and initiatives recognise the distinctiveness of Northern Ireland's society. (AQW 616/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Each member state has its own obligation under EU law to implement European directives and to determine how best to do so in a way which both complies with the requirements of the directives but also addresses the specific needs of the member state. Given therefore that implementation of directives is a matter for the member state, how other member states comply with directives, whilst of interest, is not directly pertinent. We do not therefore normally contact other member states.

Policy consideration on the appropriate transposition of EU directives into domestic law includes consideration of the degree of flexibility available to the member state and the devolved Administration. In doing so, we are also required to meet our statutory equality obligations and comply with the Human Rights Act 1998.

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However, European law does demand that directives are implemented within a specified timeframe. The provisions of the directive must be adequately transposed into domestic law. If this does not happen the member state will be deemed to have failed to implement and would be liable to infraction proceedings which could result in daily fines; and the Government could also be vulnerable to individual legal challenge. Therefore, it may be the case in the transposition of certain directives into domestic law there is a limited discretion in relation to certain provisions.

EU Directives on Equality

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 137/08, to detail the means through which consultation documents issued by the Department contribute to the implementation of EU directives on equality. (AQW 810/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Although EU directives lay down specific requirements which must be reflected in domestic law, there may still be options for how these are to be implemented. The main purpose of public consultation is to give interested parties an opportunity to express an opinion on the options and proposals for implementation. An analysis of the responses to the consultation can then be taken into account when policy decisions are taken.

The consultation documents also serve to inform those affected about the requirements of EU directives, so that they are better prepared for any changes in their rights and obligations.

However, European law does demand that directives are implemented within a specified timeframe. The provisions of the directive must be adequately transposed into domestic law. If this does not happen the member state will be deemed to have failed to implement and would be liable to infraction proceedings which could result in daily fines. Therefore it can be the case that there is a limited discretion on particular provisions.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the Deloitte Touche report, 'The Cost of Division – A Shared Future Strategy' is being taken into account within its approach to the current Northern Ireland Comprehensive Spending Review. (AQW 820/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The research report was conducted and finalised during direct rule. We have made clear that it does not form an agreed basis for future policy development, as such it is not a material consideration, in our approach to the Comprehensive Spending Review (Priorities and Budget 2007). However, an assessment of the equality, good relations, poverty/social inclusion, and sustainable development impacts of all financial proposals has been undertaken as part of the spending review. OFMDFM are committed to breaking down all barriers and working towards a shared and better future for all.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1447/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Draft Budget 2007, as announced by the Minister of Finance on 25 October 2007, allocated an additional £6.8 million (2008/09)/£13.5 million (2009/10)/£18.4 million (2010/11) to OFMDFM.

The table below details the bids that were submitted in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review (Budget 07) by officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and Ministers' decisions regarding the allocation of the additional funding made available in the Draft Budget to these spending priorities.

The additional funding allocations proposed in the Draft Budget 07 represents an average growth of 5.9% in spending power for OFMDFM over the three-year budget period.

COMPARISON OF ORIGINAL OFMDFM BUDGET BIDS (JUNE 07) WITH DRAFT BUDGET ALLOCATIONS (OCTOBER 07)

| Area of Spend | 2008/09 | | 2009/10 | | 2010/11 | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| | Original Bid £m | Allocation £m | Original Bid £m | Allocation £m | Original Bid £m | Allocation £m |
| Sustainable Development | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.3 |
| International Relations | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 0.5 |
| Victims and survivors | 9.7 | 1.6 | 9.7 | 5.0 | 9.7 | 7.1 |
| Older People | 2.0 | 0.0 | 2.0 | 0.8 | 2.0 | 1.8 |

| Area of Spend | 2008/09 | | 2009/10 | | 2010/11 | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| | Original Bid £m | Allocation £m | Original Bid £m | Allocation £m | Original Bid £m | Allocation £m |
| Children and Young People | 1.0 | 0.0 | 1.0 | 0.7 | 1.0 | 1.6 |
| Anti-poverty & Good Relations | 4.0 | 1.1 | 4.0 | 3.1 | 5.0 | 3.6 |
| Equality | 0.5 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.1 | 0.3 | 0.3 |
| Restoration (incl NSMC) | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 3.3 | 2.5 |
| PAC/WAC | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.3 | 0.6 | 0.3 | 0.7 |
| Strategic Futures | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 |
| Total | 20.3 | 6.8 | 20.4 | 13.5 | 22.0 | 18.4 |

Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the percentage increase in its proposed departmental budget since the last period of devolution; (ii) those areas in which the proposed draft budget will receive increases above inflationary increases, between the 2001/02 budget and the 2008/09 budget; and (iii) the percentage increase in each of these areas. (AQW 1457/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

- (i) Since the last period of devolution the budget of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has increased by £54.3m (£48.7m in 2007-08 real prices). The Department has assumed responsibility for a number of functions since 2001-02 such as the:
- regeneration of Reinvestment & Reform sites - £14.9m budget in 2008-09;
 - Strategic Investment Board (SIB) - £9m budget in 2008-09;
 - Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission (PACWAC) - £2.4m budget in 2008-09; and
 - North Belfast Community Action Unit and the redevelopment of the Crumlin Road Gaol - £6.7m budget in 2008-09.

An additional £6.6m has also been allocated to Victims and Survivors in 2008-09.

These areas alone account for £39.6m of the £48.7m budget increase since 2001-02.

In the last financial year of the previous period of devolution (2001-02) the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister had an annual

budget allocation of £32.0 million (£37.6m in 2007-08 real prices). The proposed budget allocation for 2008-09 will be £86.3m. This represents a real increase since 2001-02 of £48.7m (129%).

The Treasury published GDP inflator has been used to inflate 2001-02 figures to 2007-08 prices to enable a like for like comparison of budget allocations.

- (ii) The Draft Budget 07 proposes an additional allocation to OFMDFM of £6.8 million in 2008/09, £13.5 million in 2009/10, and £18.4 million in 2010/11. The table below details those areas within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that have received increases above inflationary increases between the 2001/02 budget and the 2008/09 budget and the percentage increase in each of these areas.
- (iii) Areas of Expenditure within OFMDFM receiving increases above inflation between 2001/02 Budget and 2008/09 Budget

| | 2001-02 Budget | 2001-02 NPV | 2008-09 | Change NPV terms | % Change NPV terms |
|---|-------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | £'000 | % |
| Equality | 17,473 | 20,539 | 34,503 | 13,964 | 68 |
| Strategy & Regeneration | 1,535 | 1,804 | 26,727 | 24,923 | 1,381 |
| Resources, Rpa & International Relations | 4,166 | 4,897 | 9,532 | 4,635 | 95 |
| Support For The Executive | 6,051 | 7,112 | 8,051 | 939 | 13 |
| Transferred Functions / non cash budgets / in year pressures / EU funding | 2,807 | 3,300 | 7,484 | 4,184 | 127 |
| Total Budget Allocations | 32,032 | 37,652 | 86,297 | 48,645 | 129 |
| | <i>Note 1</i> | <i>Note 2</i> | <i>Note 3</i> | | |

Note 1: Source Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2001-02 and OFMDFM internal allocation sheets

Note 2: Inflated using the GDP deflator of 1.175453 to reflect 2007-08 prices

Note 3: Source OFMDFM Committee Paper on Budget Allocations: Comparison of Draft Budget Allocations with previous 2 years

Maze/Long Kesh Site

Ms J McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will confirm that there are two major projects proposed for the Maze/Long Kesh site, the multi sports stadium and the International Centre for Conflict Transformation. (AQW 1722/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The multi-party consultation panel recommended unanimously that the development of the site should be based upon a multi-sport stadium and an International Centre for Conflict Transformation based on the listed prison buildings and scheduled World War II aircraft hangars together with supporting transport infrastructure. Proposals for the regeneration of the former prison and army base are currently being considered by us on that basis.

Community Relations Council

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will make a statement on the budget allocated to the Community Relations Council. (AQO 982/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Community Relations Unit (CRU) of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister provides funding to the Community Relations Council (CRC) on the basis of three-year agreements which are reviewed annually during the agreement period. The grant in aid from CRU this year (2007/08) amounts to £3.289 million.

This grant does not include fees earned by CRC as the implementing body for both European Union Peace II Programmes and Victims Core Funding and Development Grant Scheme.

Eradicating Poverty

Mr McKay asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will identify the funds within the draft Budget 2008-2011 that will be directed towards the objective of eradicating poverty. (AQO 997/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Tackling poverty will require co-ordinated actions across a range of departmental programmes including employment, education, health and social development. It is expected therefore that Departments will, in line with previous practice, continue to skew efforts and resources towards those in greatest objective need.

This will ensure that tackling poverty will be prioritised and mainstreamed within the departmental public expenditure planning process.

European Union Economic Taskforce

Mr McLaughlin asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the progress of the European Union Economic Taskforce. (AQO 966/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: President Barroso has presented us with a unique opportunity as this is the first time there has been a specific taskforce for a single region in the EU. We want to make the most of the European Union and facilitate the development of a sustainable and mutually productive long-term relationship. In particular, it helps us achieve the Executive's aim of a vibrant, competitive economy for the good of all our people.

We have made good progress to date. Our 2007-13 Rural Development, Fisheries and Competitiveness and Employment Programmes are all now agreed with the Commission. Several Ministers have visited Brussels to continue the process of building relationships. We organised a successful EU 'Open Days' event in Brussels on PEACE funding with over 140 participants from different regions.

We will be stepping up our engagement with the Barroso Taskforce over the coming weeks and months. Our objective is to optimise the opportunities and support being offered to us. The Commission is preparing a report on our participation in the available EU initiatives most relevant to our needs and we expect it to be ready by the end of January. The Commission are keen to hear our ideas to help develop their thinking. The Taskforce will, at our invitation, be coming to Northern Ireland on 11 December. This visit and the information collected during it will influence the forthcoming report. The Commission's report must not only detail opportunities, but map out how the Taskforce will assist us over the long-term.

Although this is a European Commission Taskforce, our Departments have nominated counterparts for each Commission member. To help further structure our engagement and to demonstrate our commitment, Junior Ministers Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly chaired a meeting of departmental lead officials on Tuesday 13 November and followed this up by leading a delegation of senior officials from across Departments to Brussels last week. They completed a series of some 30 meetings over a two-day period including 2 key meetings between the Junior Ministers and Catherine Day (European Commission Secretary General) and Dirk Ahner (Director General of Regional Policy.)

These meetings were very focused and productive. Having completed the necessary stocktaking, the process is focusing in on the most effective assistance which can be provided from the taskforce in the short term and beyond.

Junior Ministers also discussed arrangements for us to visit Brussels in early January to meet President Barroso, Danuta Hübner and other Commissioners.

Child Protection Issues

Ms J McCann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent debates in the Assembly, to detail whether or not it intends to place child protection issues on the agendas of the next plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council. (AQO 943/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Child protection is a crucial matter for the Executive, and collaboration and co-operation across the Administration and with other jurisdictions is essential.

Following the recent debate on sex offenders in the House, we have advised the Secretariats of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council of the Assembly's wish for meetings of NSMC and BIC to consider this issue.

While the issue of child protection is not within the existing work programmes for either BIC or NSMC, we would wish to raise the matter at the next NSMC Plenary and BIC Summit meetings, subject to agreement from the other participating Administrations.

Equality

Mr McCartney asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will identify the funds within the draft Budget 2008-2011 that will be directed towards the objective of making a more equal society. (AQO 998/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Promoting fairness, inclusion and equality, including gender equality, are themes that are included in our priorities in the draft Programme for Government. Equality considerations are, and will continue to be, mainstreamed into the planning, resourcing and delivery of all programmes with the aim of making people's lives better. This is in line with our statutory duty. Equality considerations will also be applied at a strategic level to the PfG, the budget and ISNI.

Public Service Agreements for the period 2008 to 2011 have been included specifically to tackle poverty and reduce inequality and disadvantage.

OFMDFM Equality Directorate will have available to it £26.9m to deliver equality policy, legislation and sponsorship of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission has a wide remit to monitor and promote equality across both the public and private sector.

Funding for OFMDFM Equality Directorate will be used, amongst other things, towards achieving specific targets on gender equality.

Economic Policy Unit

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the measures it has put in place to assess the customer responsiveness of its Economic Policy Unit. (AQO 938/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Economic Policy Unit (EPU) consults and works closely with key stakeholders in taking forward its responsibilities across a diverse range of areas. The Unit is responsible for a number of discrete areas, involving customers both within and outside OFMDFM.

Its Policy Innovation Unit provides a facility for customer feedback through the 'Policy link' website and Policy link bulletins. In addition, the Unit organises seminars for the purpose of discussing and disseminating good practice and to obtain feedback from policy practitioners. Audits of policymaking capacity and customer surveys have also been undertaken.

Over the past year, as part of its work on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy, the Sustainable Development Unit has worked closely with the stakeholder group and has carried out work to determine how best that engagement might be taken forward in future.

Finally, in relation to the Programme for Government process which is currently underway, EPU will undertake a full evaluation of how the Unit worked with Ministers and engaged key stakeholders in the development of the Programme for Government for the period 2008 to 2011.

Draft Programme for Government

Mr A Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to ensure full community consultation on the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 964/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Recognising the close relations between the Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget, the Executive is undertaking a joint consultation exercise on those documents and all have been published on the same website for easy reference.

We are determined that this will be a genuine consultation process that engages as many people as possible and that influences our final decisions. To ensure an

open and transparent process in this regard, a number of public consultation events have been organised.

In addition to these events, meetings will be held with the Equality Commission and the Equality Coalition, representing key stakeholders within each of the nine section 75 groups. OFMDFM and DFP officials will also participate in a series of public events organised by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

Gender Equality

Mr P Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will identify funds in the draft Budget 2008-2011 that will be directly targeted towards achieving gender equality. (AQO 996/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Promoting fairness, inclusion and equality, including gender equality, are themes that are included in our priorities in the draft Programme for Government. Equality considerations are, and will continue to be, mainstreamed into the planning, resourcing and delivery of all programmes with the aim of making people's lives better. This is in line with our statutory duty. Equality considerations will also be applied at a strategic level to the PfG, the budget and ISNI.

Public Service Agreements for the period 2008 to 2011 have been included specifically to tackle poverty and reduce inequality and disadvantage.

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Funding for OFMDFM Equality Directorate will be used, amongst other things, towards achieving specific targets on gender equality.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether or not it intends to include measures to address regional disparities, as a sub-pillar of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2. (AQO 961/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Promoting regional balance is one key element in the cross-cutting strategic objectives that were set at the outset of developing the Investment Strategy over the last year. As such, it is currently reflected across the Strategy, rather than concentrated in an individual sub-pillar.

As you are aware, the Investment Strategy is currently out for public consultation and we await the completion of this process.

With infrastructure investment of over £18bn envisaged over the period 2008-2018, of which £5.6bn will be over the next three years, the Investment Strategy will seek to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. Our investment will be in infrastructure to accelerate economic growth and improve competitiveness; to promote equality of opportunity; to promote regional balance in future development; to tackle social disadvantage and to protect and enhance our environment.

Good examples of major projects that will help to promote regional balance include increasing broadband take-up rates outside Belfast, developing tourism in both rural and urban areas and proposed new and upgraded roads that will improve access for all, but particularly for communities in the North West. Investment in healthcare, with a developing network of health and care centres across the region, and new hospital facilities in the South West are other examples. Schools, too, will receive a boost, benefiting communities across the region.

Freedom of Information Act 2000

Mr Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the contact it has had with the United Kingdom Government, in light of the recent decision not to curtail the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000; and what views it has previously expressed to the United Kingdom Government in relation to this issue. (AQO 977/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We have had no specific contact with the United Kingdom government following the announcement on 25 October 2007 that there would be no changes to the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004. OFMDFM officials continue to liaise regularly with officials from the Ministry of Justice, the lead Whitehall Department on Freedom of Information, on related policy matters.

New Ethnic Minority Communities

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will provide a definition for 'New Ethnic Minority Communities', as referred to in the draft Programme for Government 2008-2011. (AQO 963/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 sets out

the objective (under PSA 7, objective 2) to “Take forward co-ordinated strategic action to promote social inclusion for New Minority Ethnic Communities”. In this the Executive signals their proposal to address the significant challenges raised by the arrival in recent years of substantial numbers of migrants from, in particular, the eight countries that acceded to the European Union in May 2004. This will complement the work already being undertaken on racial equality and good relations mentioned in objective 5 under the same PSA.

An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking in relation to the findings of the report ‘An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland’.

(AQO 924/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The report was copied to ministerial colleagues in advance of the Budget 2007 exercise to inform their decisions. We also strongly made the case for significant funding for children’s services in pre-budget discussions and are very pleased that an allocation of £26 million has been made to DE, DHSSPS and DCAL to facilitate the continuation of projects previously funded by the Children and Young People’s Funding Package in addition to a range of mainstream programmes.

The report will also be an important consideration in informing the development of action plans to deliver on the 10-year strategy for children and young people and we are currently taking forward plans to establish a ministerial subcommittee on Children. The Committee will co-ordinate existing and developing policies and budgets relevant to children and young people and ensure that they remain high on Ministers’ agendas.

It must also be remembered that funding for many other services, not specifically set aside for children and young people, can help to improve their lives and achieve the outcomes of the strategy – for example funding for health services.

A Shared Future

Mr McGlone asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail whether or not it endorses the policy document ‘A Shared Future’.

(AQO 908/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Assembly had a very good debate on A Shared

Future on 4 June. We agreed that we would review progress so far on the implementation of the policy and bring forward proposals for the Executive consistent with the ministerial 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.

We intend to bring the proposals for discussion to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Assembly in the next few months.

Single Equality Bill

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will make a statement on a Single Equality Bill, in relation to the draft Programme for Government.

(AQO 960/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Since 8 May we have been examining current equality legislation, identifying, in particular, inconsistencies and considering where and to what extent the existing laws should and could be amended, harmonised or extended. This is a complex task involving a consideration of around 30 years of anti-discrimination legislation. Any proposals for legislative change will be a matter for consultation with the relevant departmental Committees and will be brought before the Assembly in due course.

Departmental Efficiency

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to reduce costs and to improve the efficiency of the Department.

(AQO 939/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We intend to deliver £11.1 million of efficiency savings in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister across the three years of Budget 07, 2008/09 to 2010/11. £9.1 million of these savings relates to resource expenditure efficiencies and £2 million to administrative efficiencies.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Tree Coverage

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail whether or not North Down

will receive an increase in tree coverage, as stated in the draft Budget; and the locations in which trees will be planted within the constituency. (AQW 1622/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): My Department's Forest Service will continue to encourage an increase in tree cover primarily through the Woodland Grant Scheme which is funded under the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. The Scheme is available to landowners throughout the North, including those in North Down and provides an additional supplement of £1,000 per hectare to landowners wishing to create new wood close to urban areas and who provide public access for informal recreation.

New woodland creation will enhance and conserve the rural environment and new planting supported by the Woodland Grant Scheme will only take place on suitable sites and will have regard for the environmental value of the site in terms of existing habitats, landscape value, archaeological and historic features. To assist landowners to find forestry solutions consistent with sustainable land management, the Forest Service will publish indicative maps showing where new woodland is to be encouraged.

Tree Coverage

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the types of trees that will be planted to increase tree coverage across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1645/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The expansion of tree cover across Northern Ireland will be achieved primarily through encouraging farmers and private land owners to establish new woodland by support made available under the Rural Development Programme through the mechanism of the Forest Service's Woodland Grant Scheme.

My Department will encourage a wide range of types of forest. It will favour those that complement other objectives of government policy by improving the environment, by promoting rural development, and those which support renewable energy policy.

The woodlands created will consist of conventional conifer and broadleaf species, and will include creation of new native woodland made up of tree species which are locally native. Support will also be available for short rotation coppice willow for an energy end use. The tree species used must also be suited to the site and fulfil the objectives of the owner.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost to her department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1737/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has been responding to requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 since the Act came into operation on 1 January 2005.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in common with all other NI Departments, does not calculate or record information on the cost of individual requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and does not hold the information you have sought. This position corresponds to that of the Whitehall Departments.

Office of the Northern Ireland Executive

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what contact she has had with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels over the past month. (AQW 1751/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I personally used the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) for a debriefing session after meeting with Commissioner Borg as part of the UK delegation.

In addition, my Department has a permanent representative posted in ONIEB to assist the Department's contribution to EU policy development and implementation on agri-food, veterinary, fisheries and rural development issues. During the period referred to the following contacts were made:

- Arrangements for the Ministerial visit to Brussels for the UK delegation meeting with Fisheries Commissioner Borg on 16 October.
- Liaison with the Commission with regard to the NI Nitrates derogation application. (Approved at the Nitrates Committee meeting on 15 October)
- Information regarding the forthcoming CAP Healthcheck and developments with regard to the forthcoming TACs and Quotas regulation and December Fisheries Council.
- Correspondence and information with regard to a state aid application for the Salmon Hardship Fund.
- Information with regard to planning for and the proceedings of the Special Committee for Agriculture on the 5, 12 and 19 November, the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 22 and 23 October and 26 and 27 November. This included issues of cross compliance and the position on Herculex maize.

- Information regarding developments in Standing Committee for food chain and Animal Health on 6 November relating to Foot and Mouth, Avian Influenza and Bluetongue disease.
- Arrangements and information regarding the Commission meeting on 14 November regarding LFA redesignation.
- Arrangements for meetings for DARD official with UKREP, DG AGRI and DG Environment covering state aids, agriculture promotion, GM Feed, redmeat taskforce report, milk quotas and the nitrates directive and derogation.
- Communication on Commission adoption of scheme for private aids to storage for pigmeat

Agri-Food Industry

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of people employed in the agri-food industry in each of the last five years. (AQW 1820/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following numbers of people (also expressed in full-time equivalents) were engaged in farming during the years 2002 – 2006.

TABLE 1. FARM EMPLOYMENT

| Total Agricultural Labour Force | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Number of persons | 54,273 | 54,486 | 53,332 | 51,073 | 49,952 |
| Full time equivalents | 31,925 | 31,641 | 30,595 | 30,002 | 29,622 |

Source: Statistical Review of NI Agriculture

The employment in the food and drinks processing and input supply sectors (expressed in full time equivalents) during the years 2001 – 2005 was as follows.

TABLE 2. FOOD PROCESSING AND OTHER ANCILLARY EMPLOYMENT

| | full-time equivalents | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------------------|
| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 ¹ |
| Processing Sector | 18,774 | 18,733 | 18,693 | 18,391 | 18,565 |
| Supply Sector | 4,400 | 4,390 | 4,150 | 4,060 | 4,040 |
| Total ancillary employment | 23,174 | 23,123 | 22,843 | 22,451 | 22,605 |

Source: Statistical Review of NI Agriculture

¹ Provisional figures

For a further breakdown of the above totals see the DARD publication 'Statistical Review of NI Agriculture' online at the following link:

http://www.dardni.gov.uk/statistical_review_of_ni_agriculture_2006.pdf

Brazilian Beef

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the recent report by the European Union Food and Veterinary Office, what consideration will she give to banning the importation of Brazilian beef. (AQW 1924/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not have the statutory authority to ban imports of Brazilian beef.

The EU Commission determines which animals and animal products can be imported into the EU from countries such as Brazil and requires that these decisions are applied uniformly throughout the EU. As part of the EU, we cannot unilaterally prohibit imports of Brazilian beef that comply with current EU import controls.

The EU will take decisive action where the exporting country poses an increased risk to the animal health status of the EU. Indeed, following the outbreak of FMD in three regions of Brazil in 2005, the Commission took the decision to ban imports from these regions. This ban is still in place. The EU also requires meat from the FMD-free regions of Brazil to be de-boned and matured, a process which destroys any FMD virus should it be present in the beef for any reason.

A Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) Mission to Brazil in March 2007 indicated that there were certain practical difficulties in the general implementation of the system of animal identification and the control of animal movements. This has prompted a further FVO Mission this month to examine the controls surrounding red meat. The Brazilian authorities have been advised that if they do not address the remaining deficiencies by the end of 2007, the EU will reconsider authorising imports of beef.

I will continue to work closely with Ministers in Britain and the South to ensure that the EU Commission applies pressure on the Brazilian government to address the FVO concerns that have been raised. In this context I have already written to Lord Rooker expressing my concern about imports of Brazilian beef and to encourage consideration of the recent report of the March 2007 FVO mission to Brazil by the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFAH).

We must await the outcome of the follow-up FVO mission to Brazil to consider what response is appropriate. I wish to see early publication of the follow-up report.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish-Language Broadcasting Fund

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has in relation to the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund; and to confirm whether or not he will consult with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, before taking a final position on this matter. (AQW 1755/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): £12 million was made available to the Irish Language Broadcast Fund over a four-year period commencing in 2005. This funding is due to end in March 2009 and I was unable to secure further funding in the draft Budget agreed by the Executive.

In light of this I am considering what options are available to me to promote Irish language broadcasting within the wider promotion of the Irish language my anticipated budget and will bring forward any proposals to this House and the CAL Committee in due course.

Draft Budget 2008-2011

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will make a statement on funding of the arts within the draft Budget 2008-2011. (AQO 993/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The draft budget 2008-2011 sets out indicative allocations for arts and creativity funding for the three years covered by the Comprehensive Spending Review. The allocations include an increase of £6.75m over the 2007/08 baseline for arts and creativity revenue funding over the three years of the CSR period.

This comprises an uplift of £1m in year 1, an uplift of £1.5m in year 2 and an uplift of £4.25m in year 3. The significant increase in year 3 will enable the Department to make good progress in closing the per capita funding gap with the other UK regions and the Republic of Ireland.

The draft Budget also sets out the Department's capital allocations in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. The allocation for arts and cultural infrastructure from 2008/09 to 2010/11 is £32.5m which is a significant sum.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, further to the recent visit to Stormont by Lord Coe, to indicate whether or not Northern Ireland will

host any events in the 2012 Olympic Games, and to provide details of these events. (AQW 1799/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As set out in London 2012's Candidate File, if Northern Ireland builds its planned national stadium, this venue will be considered as a location for rounds of the Olympic football competition. The torch relay and other events as part of the Cultural Olympiad are planned to take place in Northern Ireland.

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail when in 1991 the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum became aware that Ian Patrick Magill had been arrested and charged with taking indecent photographs of young girls, and what action was taken by the board of the Museum between then and the date of his conviction. (AQW 1921/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer these two questions together. Mr Magill's first court appearance in connection with the charge of taking indecent photographs and the distribution of an indecent video was on 7 August 1991. As far as can be ascertained from the records this is the first time the Museum had any knowledge of the alleged offence. Legal advice was sought and provided to the Board. Legal advice was that no action be taken until the outcome of the case was known.

The date of Mr Magill's conviction relating to the above offences was 23 October 1991. The Board then sought legal advice in respect of Mr Magill's continuing employment with the Museum. The legal advice, including that of Counsel, informed the Board that there were insufficient grounds to dismiss Mr Magill at that time.

The Chairman of the Board and the Director of the Museum met with Mr Magill and issued him with a warning that he would be dismissed if there was any repetition of similar conduct. Mr Magill was also forbidden from using any image capturing device on museum premises.

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what action was taken by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum after Ian Patrick Magill's conviction in 1991 for taking indecent photographs of young girls and what was the date of that conviction. (AQW 1922/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer these two questions together. Mr Magill's first court appearance in connection with the charge of

taking indecent photographs and the distribution of an indecent video was on 7 August 1991. As far as can be ascertained from the records this is the first time the Museum had any knowledge of the alleged offence. Legal advice was sought and provided to the Board. Legal advice was that no action be taken until the outcome of the case was known.

The date of Mr Magill's conviction relating to the above offences was 23 October 1991. The Board then sought legal advice in respect of Mr Magill's continuing employment with the Museum. The legal advice, including that of Counsel, informed the Board that there were insufficient grounds to dismiss Mr Magill at that time.

The Chairman of the Board and the Director of the Museum met with Mr Magill and issued him with a warning that he would be dismissed if there was any repetition of similar conduct. Mr Magill was also forbidden from using any image capturing device on museum premises.

EDUCATION

Gaelscoil Enrolment Numbers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to provide the exact enrolment figures of primary years 1, 2 and 3 at (i) Gaelscoil Na Daroige in Derry/Londonderry; (ii) Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach in Crumlin; and (iii) Gaelscoil Éanna in Glengormley. (AQW 1220/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Information provided by the schools listed, in relation to the 2007/08 school year, is as follows.

| School Name | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Gaelscoil Éanna | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| Gaelscoil Na Daroige | 10 | 6 | 9 |
| Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach | 12 | 1 | 4 |

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the longest period of time her department has taken to provide a full response to a letter received from (i) a Member of Parliament; (ii) a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly; (iii) a Councillor; and (iv) a member of the public, since March 2007.

(AQW 1330/08)

The Minister of Education: The longest numbers of working days taken to respond to letters are as follows:

| | | |
|-------|----------------------|----------|
| (i) | MP | 89 days* |
| (ii) | MLA | 89 days* |
| (iii) | Councillor | 89 days* |
| (iv) | member of the public | 62 days |

* This relates to correspondence from an MP who is also an MLA and a Councillor.

Integrated Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to review the viability criteria for integrated schools, in particular to take into account those children with 'other' identities or who are the product of mixed relationships, in relation to minority grouping for individual integrated schools.

(AQW 1338/08)

The Minister of Education: The viability criteria for all schools, together with a range of other factors, are being considered in the development of a Sustainable Schools policy.

Children and Young People's Package

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail, broken down by constituency, the expenditure previously committed by her department under the Children and Young People's package. (AQW 1424/08)

The Minister of Education: Money allocated to the Children and Young People's Funding Package was not intended to be distributed on a constituency basis and therefore cannot be detailed as such. Two broad complementary approaches to targeting of resources were agreed:

- area-based, drawing on Neighborhood renewal areas, but recognizing that there are disadvantaged areas beyond these, including the needs of deprived rural areas; and
- client-based as is necessary for some elements of the package such as looked-after children and child protection issues, children with special needs and disabilities, some services, and for some allocations to schools which will reflect the proportions of pupils entitled to Free School Meals.

When introduced in March 2006, the Children and Young People's Funding Package committed more than £61 million over a two year period, £28.4 million in 2006-07 and £33.3 million in 2007-08.

Children and Young People's Package

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail, broken down by constituency, the projects under the

Children and Young People's package that will (i) continue to receive funding under the draft Budget proposals for 2008/09, and the amount of funding that each will receive; (ii) not continue to receive funding beyond 2008/09; and (iii) not receive funding beyond this financial year. (AQW 1425/08)

The Minister of Education: I am currently considering the implications for Education budgets of the draft Budget proposals for Education. Final decisions on the budgets for services, including Education, will not be taken until after the public consultation period, which ends on 4 January.

Legal Expenditure

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Education to detail the expenditure of (i) her department; and (ii) each Education and Library Board, on legal advice and legal services due to legal action taken against them, in 2006/07. (AQW 1431/08)

The Minister of Education: The information requested has been provided by each Education and Library Board and the Department of Education and is set out in the table below.

2006-07 EXPENDITURE ON LEGAL ADVICE AND LEGAL SERVICES:

| BELB | NEELB | SEELB | SELB | WELB | Department of Education | Total |
|------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| £56,935.56 | 50,274.80 | £93,446.00 | £64,787.77 | £48,226.80 | £24,514.50 | £338,185.43 |

The information provided relates to defence costs. Payments to plaintiffs/applicants' solicitors, in respect of their legal costs, have not been included.

Figures reported are net of VAT.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to report on what degree of funding has been allocated against them in the draft Budget 2008/11. (AQW 1448/08)

The Minister of Education: The list below sets out the bids in relation to current expenditure submitted by my department to the Department of Finance and Personnel as part of the Budget 2007 process. The additional funding proposed for Education in the Draft Budget was:

| | £m | | |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 |
| Current Expenditure | 143.8 | 292.3 | 421.0 |

I am currently considering the detailed implications for Education services of these proposed allocations.

Capital investment requirements were considered as part of the process of formulating the Draft Investment Strategy. The proposed allocations for Education amount to:

| | £m | | |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 |
| Capital Investment | 213.6 | 252.3 | 200.1 |

It is intended that this will enable already announced major projects to be taken forward at over 100 schools during the period.

BUDGET 2007 – DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION BIDS SET AGAINST PRIORITIES

| Title | 2008/09 £000s | | 2009/10 £000s | | 2010/11 £000s | |
|---|------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|
| | Res | Admin | Res | Admin | Res | Admin |
| Sustaining Existing Services | | | | | | |
| Children and Young People Funding Package - Restoration of Existing Provision | 23,174 | | 23,800 | | 24,443 | |
| Departmental Administration - Review of Public Administration/Reforms | | 2,078 | | 2,531 | | 2,640 |
| Education Administration Reform | 3,000 | | 38,400 | | 13,405 | |
| Education Services: Maintenance of Expenditure Levels (Mel) (Excl Schools' Aggregated School Budgets) | 23,956 | | 47,436 | | 72,222 | |
| EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation In The North of Ireland and The Border Region of Ireland - Measure 2.2 Developing Children and Young People | 512 | | 0 | | 0 | |
| Healthy Schools | 250 | | 3,250 | | 3,750 | |
| Integrated Development Fund (Including Renewing Communities) - Continuation of Existing Provision | 5,299 | | 5,442 | | 5,589 | |
| Improving The Professional Development of Teachers | 5,000 | | 7,200 | | 7,200 | |
| Maintenance of Schools Estate | 7,419 | | 10,534 | | 16,000 | |
| Pre-Employment Checks of Teaching/Non-Teaching Staff | 942 | | 1,161 | | 1,161 | |
| Preparation for The Introduction of New Arrangements for The Transfer of Pupils From Primary To Post-Primary Education | 1,000 | | 500 | | 500 | |
| School Transport - Safety | 4,580 | | 4,640 | | 4,695 | |
| School Budgets - Guaranteed Per Pupil Uplift | 114,660 | | 192,327 | | 262,251 | |
| Strengthening Governance | 750 | | 1,750 | | 3,000 | |
| Sustainable Living Schools | 3,750 | | 5,250 | | 6,500 | |
| Supporting The Economy | | | | | | |
| Curriculum, Assessment & ICT | 25,567 | | 23,725 | | 22,952 | |
| Early Years - Begin With Quality | 27,070 | | 27,810 | | 28,570 | |
| Employability, Careers and Business Education | 6,000 | | 6,500 | | 7,000 | |
| Enhance Science Technology Engineering & Mathematics (Stem) Education & Increase Supply of Stem Skills | 3,629 | | 6,124 | | 6,124 | |
| Entitlement Framework Support | 17,667 | 500 | 21,464 | 510 | 21,239 | 520 |
| School Improvement Fund Including Measures To Promote Literacy and Numeracy | 12,950 | 500 | 13,600 | 510 | 14,000 | 520 |
| Extension of Specialist Schools Programme | 3,273 | | 4,976 | | 6,792 | |
| Implementation of A Languages Strategy for The North of Ireland | 9,130 | | 9,222 | | 9,419 | |
| PPP and Infrastructure Procurement | 8,000 | | 25,555 | | 39,960 | |
| Support for Foundation Stage Statutory Curriculum | 20,200 | | 17,200 | | 17,200 | |
| Equality and Inclusion | | | | | | |
| Children Affected By Educational Disadvantage | 3,897 | | 4,214 | | 4,223 | |
| Connecting Schools To Their Communities | 30,784 | | 32,290 | | 33,935 | |
| High Quality Youth Service | 7,334 | | 9,164 | | 13,494 | |
| Irish-Medium Education | 3,270 | | 2,305 | | 2,325 | |
| Special Educational Needs (Sen) and Inclusion - Early Years/Early Intervention Package | 15,697 | | 16,835 | | 14,782 | |
| Sen and Inclusion - Development of School Based Integrated Capacity Building | 7,320 | 500 | 12,241 | 510 | 14,126 | 520 |
| SEN and Inclusion - Enhanced Support | 1,297 | | 1,469 | | 1,503 | |
| Totals | 397,377 | 3,578 | 576,384 | 4,061 | 678,360 | 4,200 |

Transfer Test

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail, in relation to the transfer test, the cost of (i) invigilation; (ii) her departmental staff involved in operating the test; (iii) Education and Library Board staff involved in operating the test; and (iv) issuing the results to schools and parents. (AQW 1533/08)

The Minister of Education:

2006/07 – SCHOOL YEAR

| School Year | 2006/07 |
|--|-----------------|
| Cost of Invigilation: | £ 84,814 |
| Cost of Departmental Staff | £ nil |
| Cost of Education and Library Board Staff | £ not available |
| Cost of issuing results to schools and parents | £ not available |

The Department has overall responsibility for the transfer procedure policy but no staff are involved in operating the test.

The Education and Library Boards do not record separately costs in respect of Board Staff involved in the operation of the transfer tests or the cost of issuing results to schools and parents.

School Travel Plan

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to introduce a legal requirement for schools to have a School Travel plan as required to be in place in England by 2010. (AQW 1548/08)

The Minister of Education: I understand the development of School Travel Plans is not a legal requirement in England. I have no plans at present to introduce a legal requirement for schools here to have a School Travel plan.

A number of schools are involved in Safer Routes to Schools, and a joint initiative between the Departments of Regional Development and Education. The initiative aims to encourage young people to walk, cycle, and use public transport in their journeys to and from school.

Education Other Than at School Service

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of cases involving staff of the Southern Education and Library Board's Education Other Than At School Service that have been lodged with the office of the Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal since September 2003. (AQW 1582/08)

The Minister of Education: There were 5 cases involving staff of the Southern Education & Library Board lodged with the Office of the Industrial Tribunal since September 2003 by 4 employees within the Education Other Than at School Service. No cases were lodged with the Fair Employment Tribunal.

Education Other Than at School Service Staff Time

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money spent in staff time by the Southern Education and Library Board in the settlement of disputes between teachers from the Education Other Than At School Service and the Board since September 2003. (AQW 1583/08)

The Minister of Education: This information is not held.

Education Other Than at School Service Legal Fees

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money that has been spent by the Southern Education and Library Board on legal fees in settlement of disputes between teachers from the Education Other Than At School Service and the Board since September 2003. (AQW 1584/08)

The Minister of Education: The amount of legal fees spent by the Southern Education & Library Board in settlement of disputes between teachers from Education Other Than at School Service and the Board since September 2003 was £9,752.50.

Teachers' Grievance Procedure

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not the established Teachers' Grievance Procedure in accordance with Teachers' Agreed Terms and Conditions of Employment has been available to teachers employed in the Education Other Than At School Service of the Southern Education and Library Board since September 2003. (AQW 1585/08)

The Minister of Education: There are separate procedures for dealing with grievance matters for employees directly employed by the Education and Library Board and those employees directly under the control of Boards of Governors.

The procedure for schools requires grievances and conduct issues to be managed by the School Principal and Board of Governors and therefore is inappropriate to non-schools environments. The procedures for staff

employed in Education and Library Board Headquarters and other non-school settings allows for such issues to be managed in a similar way but through the appropriate line management structure.

Post-Primary School Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of secondary school teachers who have a criminal record for serious offences, resulting in their imprisonment or the imposition of a suspended sentence, in (i) the controlled sector; (ii) the voluntary maintained sector; (iii) the integrated sector; and (iv) the Irish-medium sector. (AQW 1661/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not employ teachers and therefore would not hold this information. The Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools who employ teachers have advised that they have a record of 5 post primary school teachers who have a record which has resulted in their imprisonment or a suspended sentence.

Primary School Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of primary school teachers who have a criminal record for serious offences, resulting in their imprisonment or the imposition of a suspended sentence, in (i) the controlled sector; (ii) the voluntary maintained sector; (iii) the integrated sector; and (iv) the Irish-medium sector. (AQW 1662/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not employ teachers and therefore would not hold this information. The Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools who employ teachers have advised that they have a record of 1 primary school teacher who has a record which has resulted in their imprisonment or a suspended sentence.

Teachers Convicted of Criminal Offences

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's policy on the employment of teachers who have been convicted of criminal offences. (AQW 1663/08)

The Minister of Education: Under the Teachers' (Eligibility) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997, the Department may prohibit or restrict the employment or further employment of a person eligible to teach on the grounds of misconduct whether or not evidenced by the conviction of a criminal offence.

The decision on whether to employ a person rests with the employer in the light of full consideration of all the information available. However, employment in an educational setting may not be offered under any circumstances to any person listed on the DHSSPS or DE Lists as unsuitable to work with children or who has a disqualification order from the courts. Nor may a person on List 99 be offered employment as a teacher.

Creationism

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 633/08, to detail whether or not the occurrence of polystrate fossils spanning more than one layer of strata, and the implications of this on Darwinian evolutionary thought, is considered by (i) her department; and (ii) the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, as presenting (a) evidence-based; or (b) belief-based data to school children in science classes. (AQW 1670/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer you back to my response to your previous Questions (AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08), published in the Official Record on 23 November 2007, where I clearly set out the position.

My focus is not on joining debates that continue within the science and religious communities on such matters but on supporting the education of all our young people across all areas of the curriculum.

Creationism

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 633/08, to detail whether or not outlining the methods of Ernst Haeckel in support of the evolutionary assertion that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' is regarded by (i) her department; and (ii) the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment as presenting (a) evidence-based; or (b) belief-based data to pupils in science classes. (AQW 1671/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer you back to my response to your previous Questions (AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08), published in the Official Record on 23 November 2007, where I clearly set out the position.

My focus is not on joining debates that continue within the science and religious communities on such matters but on supporting the education of all our young people across all areas of the curriculum.

Internet Monitoring

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what action is being taken to protect children within the education sector in Northern Ireland from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet. (AQW 1676/08)

The Minister of Education: Schools access the Internet through their connection to the Classroom 2000 (C2k) network which is rigorously filtered and fully monitored, with the list of allowed and disallowed websites updated several times daily.

Schools must also have in place policies on the safe and effective use of the Internet. My Department works closely with key agencies involved in child protection to identify the most effective and appropriate sources of guidance on the issues that schools should consider when drawing up and updating their acceptable use policies. That guidance is available on the DE website and is regularly updated. Additionally, a circular was issued to all schools in June 2007 to make them aware of this and training has been provided through Education and Library Boards on Internet safety. The approach taken by schools to keeping pupils safe online is monitored by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Post-Primary Education in Glenavy/Crumlin

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education if she will carry out a review of the provision of post-primary education in the Glenavy/Crumlin area, in view of the fact that the majority of children living in this area attend schools in Belfast. (AQW 1702/08)

The Minister of Education: Responsibility for initiating a review of post-primary provision would normally rest with the appropriate education authority in the first instance. As children already have places in existing schools any such review should also take account of the potential implications for those schools.

Draft Sport Strategy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the educational benefits of the draft sport strategy; and to make a statement outlining what priority she will give this matter, in order to ensure its delivery. (AQW 1712/08)

The Minister of Education: I welcome the draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation and the fact that it includes targets which will require action from my Department. I have asked my officials to consider all related targets so that we can provide a compre-

hensive and positive response to the DCAL consultation on the draft Strategy.

I do want to stress my belief that, if we can get young people engaged in physical activity, linked to other areas of the curriculum and build their enjoyment and confidence this can impact positively on all aspects of their lives. Sport and physical activity can also improve a young person's concentration and motivation to learn, and therefore help to raise their performance in school.

That rationale was behind my Curriculum Sports Programme, launched on 12 November, which will see GAA and IFA coaches working in primary schools to help children improve their physical literacy and develop a love for sport.

Educational Psychologists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of initial assessments of new cases that have been undertaken by educational psychologists in the last 12 months, broken down by each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1714/08)

The Minister of Education: The number of initial assessments of new cases of children with special educational needs undertaken by educational psychologists, broken down by Education and Library Board, is as follows;

| | |
|---------------|------|
| Belfast | 695 |
| North Eastern | 983 |
| South Eastern | 773 |
| Southern | 1151 |
| Western | 1179 |

These figures are for the period 1 October 2006 to 30 September 2007, which is the last 12 months for which figures are available. They do not include pupils seen by an educational psychologist as part of transfer/enrolment procedures or for support for examination arrangements.

Building New Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the contracts in relation to building new schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area in (i) 2003; (ii) 2004; (iii) 2005; (iv) 2006; and (v) 2007; and the companies to which these contracts have been awarded. (AQW 1717/08)

The Minister of Education: The information requested is detailed in the following table.

| School | Project | Tender Approval Date | Contractor |
|--|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Loanends P.S. Crumlin | New school | June 2003 | O'Neill & Brady Ltd |
| Millquarter P.S. Toomebridge | New school | May 2003 | JFM Construction Ltd |
| Hillcroft Special School, Newtownabbey | New school | February 2004 | Felix O'Hare & Co |
| Roddensvale Special School, Larne | New school | February 2004 | McCombe Bros' (Antrim) Ltd |
| Sperrin Integrated College, Magherafelt | New school | September 2004 | FB McKee Ltd |
| Creggan P.S. Randalstown | New school | February 2005 | JPM Contracts |
| Leaney P.S. Ballymoney | New school | March 2005 | O'Hare & McGovern |
| Camphill P.S. Ballymena | New school | June 2005 | O'Neill & Brady Ltd |
| Mossley P.S. Newtownabbey | New school | July 2005 | O'Hare & McGovern |
| St Colmcille's P.S. & St Brigid's P.S. Ballymena | Two new schools | July 2006 | Heron Bros' |
| Fourtowns P.S. Ahoghill | New school | September 2006 | McCombe Bros' (Antrim) Ltd |
| Carnalridge P.S. Portrush | New school | December 2006 | Martin & Hamilton Ltd |
| Moorfields P.S. Ballymena | New school | April 2007 | FB McKee Ltd |

Catering Contracts

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the catering contracts awarded in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area in (i) 2003; (ii) 2004; (iii) 2005; (iv) 2006; and (v) 2007; and the companies to which these contracts have been awarded. (AQW 1719/08)

The Minister of Education: The North-Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that in 2003 to 2007 the catering contracts awarded by it and the companies involved were as follows:

| Contract | Supplier | Year Awarded |
|--|---|--------------|
| Catering Hygiene System and Cleaning Materials for School Meals Kitchens | Galgorm Hygiene; T McLaughlin; Stephens Catering Equipment; David R Swann. | 2003 |

| Contract | Supplier | Year Awarded |
|--|--|--------------|
| Catering Hygiene System and Cleaning Materials for School Meals Kitchens | Arco Industrial Supply; Blue Cross; Galgorm Hygiene; Hygiene Plus Group; Stephens Catering Equipment; T McLaughlin. | 2005 |
| Catering Equipment School Meals (Small) | A J Stuart & Co; Caterfreeze Products; Cater-Quip Ltd; Chefs & Cooks Supplies; Frazerton Ltd; Galgorm Hygiene; Hygiene Plus Group; McNeill Hotelware; P Nugent & Sons; School & Office Supplies; T McLaughlin. | 2004 |
| Catering Equipment School Meals (Small) | A J Stuart & Co; Caterfreeze Products; Cater-Quip Ltd; David R Swann; Eurolec Inst Ltd; Galgorm Hygiene; (Bunzel) McLaughlin; McNeill Hotelware; P Nugent & Sons; School & Office Supplies; Spa Business Services. | 2007 |
| Supply and Delivery of Confectionery and Potato Crisps | Courtney & Nelson; Tayto (NI) Ltd; O'Reillys. | 2003 |
| Supply and Delivery of Confectionery and Potato Crisps | Courtney & Nelson; Global Snacks; Tayto (NI) Ltd. | 2004 |
| Supply and Delivery of Confectionery and Potato Crisps | Courtney & Nelson; Global Snacks; Tayto (NI) Ltd; O'Reillys. | 2006 |
| Supply & Delivery of Confectionery and Potato Crisps | Courtney & Nelson; Tayto (NI) Ltd; O'Reillys. | 2007 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fish | Keenan Seafood Ltd; Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2003 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fish | Keenan Seafood Ltd; Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2004 |

| Contract | Supplier | Year Awarded |
|--|---|--------------|
| Supply and Delivery of Fish | Byrne Fish; Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2005 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fish | Byrne Fish; Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2006 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fish | Byrne Fish; Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2007 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fresh Yoghurt | Holmes Catering Services. | 2003 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fresh Yoghurt | Holmes Catering Services. | 2004 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fresh Yoghurt | Henderson Foodservice; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2005 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fresh Yoghurt | Henderson Foodservice; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2006 |
| Supply and Delivery of Fresh Yoghurt | Henderson Foodservice; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2007 |
| Supply and Delivery of Ice-Cream | Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2003 |
| Supply and Delivery of Ice-Cream | Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2004 |
| Supply and Delivery of Ice-Cream | Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2005 |
| Supply and Delivery of Ice-Cream | Lynas Frozen Foods. | 2006 |
| Supply and Delivery of In-Cup Drinks and Dispensing Facility | NI-Vend Vending Services. | 2003 |
| Supply and Delivery of In-Cup Drinks and Dispensing Facility | NI-Vend Vending Services. | 2004 |
| Supply and Delivery of In-Cup Drinks and Dispensing Facility | NI-Vend Vending Services. | 2006 |
| Supply and Delivery of In-Cup Drinks and Dispensing Facility | NI-Vend Vending Services. | 2007 |
| Supply and Delivery of Pasteurised Milk | Dale Farm Ltd; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2003 |
| Supply and Delivery of Pasteurised Milk | Dale Farm Ltd; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2004 |
| Supply and Delivery of Pasteurised Milk | Dale Farm Ltd; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2005 |
| Supply and Delivery of Pasteurised Milk | Dale Farm Ltd; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2006 |
| Supply and Delivery of Pasteurised Milk | Dale Farm Ltd; Ballyrashane Co-op Ltd. | 2007 |
| Supply and Delivery of Potatoes, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables | Arnotts (Fruit) Ltd; Moneymore Potatoes. | 2003 |

| Contract | Supplier | Year Awarded |
|---|--|--------------|
| Supply and Delivery of Potatoes, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables | Arnotts (Fruit) Ltd; Moneymore Potatoes. | 2004 |
| Supply and Delivery of Potatoes, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables | Arnotts (Fruit) Ltd; Moneymore Potatoes. | 2006 |
| Supply and Delivery of Potatoes, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables | Arnotts (Fruit) Ltd; Moneymore Potatoes. | 2007 |
| Supply of Soft Drinks | Coca Cola Bottlers; Courtney and Nelson; Holmes Catering Services; O'Kane Food Service; Rocwell Natural Mineral Water; Savoury Foods. | 2003 |
| Supply of Soft Drinks | Capitol Foods Ltd; Coca Cola Bottlers; Courtney and Nelson; Holmes Catering Services; Lynas Frozen Foods; O'Kane Food Service; Rocwell Natural Mineral Water; The Classic Mineral Water Co. | 2004 |
| Supply of Soft Drinks | Coca Cola Bottlers; The Classic Mineral Water Co; Henderson Foodservice; Rocwell Natural Mineral Water; Capitol Foods Ltd; Courtney and Nelson; O'Kane Food Service. | 2007 |
| Floor Maintenance System for School Meals Kitchens | Polysorb. | 2004 |

School Amalgamation

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which the review of the amalgamation of St Joseph's Primary School, Ahoghill and St Patrick's Primary School, Aughercloney, will be completed. (AQW 1732/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is in contact with CCMS on the position of this amalgamation and wishes to clarify the position as soon as possible in the next few weeks in the interests of the schools and parents.

Nendrum College, Comber

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm that the opening of the Public Private Partnership/Private Finance Initiative Nendrum College in Comber, scheduled for January, has now been delayed until the end of February 2008.

(AQW 1734/08)

The Minister of Education: The completion target date for Nendrum College is the end of February 2008, which is the date specified in the contract signed in September 2006. The date has not changed.

Nendrum College, Comber

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of whether or not the delay in the opening of the new build Public Private Partnership /Private Finance Initiative Nendrum College, Comber has had, or will have, any impact on the education of, or coursework produced by, the pupils currently attending the school.

(AQW 1735/08)

The Minister of Education: The completion target date for Nendrum College is the end of February 2008, which is the date specified in the contract signed in September 2006. The date has not changed.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost to her department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1740/08)

The Minister of Education: The right to request information under the FOI Act 2000 came into effect on 1 January 2005 and since then the Department of Education has processed 430 requests for information under the legislation. However, in common with all Departments in the North, the Department of Education does not calculate or record information on the cost of individual FOI requests but has built in compliance with the requirements of the Act into its normal business activities.

The information requested is not therefore held by the Department and this position corresponds to that of all NICS Departments and Whitehall Departments.

Science Curriculum

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 633/08, to detail whether or not recent discoveries that the majority of what was once regarded as 'junk' or 'vestigial' DNA,

which is now known to undergo transcription and to have a function, is considered to be presenting (i) evidence-based; or (ii) belief-based data to pupils in science classes.

(AQW 1744/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer you back to my response to your previous Questions (AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08), published in the Official Record on 23 November 2007, where I clearly set out the position.

My focus is not on joining debates that continue within the science and religious communities on such matters but on supporting the education of all our young people across all areas of the curriculum.

Bullying

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to address bullying in schools in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1750/08)

The Minister of Education: Bullying, in whatever form and for whatever reason, has no place in schools. The Department has taken pro-active steps to tackle bullying through development and publication of guidance. Furthermore, the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003, which came into operation on 1 April 2003, places a duty on all grant-aided schools to have an anti-bullying policy which includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The effectiveness of these measures is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections of pastoral care arrangements.

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.

In 2005, the Department, in partnership with voluntary organisations, including Save the Children, established an Anti-bullying Forum (NIABF) to enable a collaborative and coordinated approach to tackling bullying in schools. The Forum enables members to share models of best practice, disseminate information, to develop and coordinate joint initiatives and to ensure that schools and organisations working with children and young people are able to develop appropriate strategies to prevent and deal with bullying behaviours. The Forum has also established formal links with similar bodies in the South, England, Wales and Scotland.

From early 2006, the Department has been funding a regional coordinator post attached to the NIABF. The coordinator is involved delivering the 3-year Anti-

Bullying Strategy which includes the development, implementation and promotion of models of good practice, developing parental partnerships, website development and an annual anti-bullying week. Anti-Bullying Week 2007 (19-23 November) aims to challenge racist, sectarian and cyber bullying behaviour in schools. Activities include a children's art work project to create an anti-bullying mural in Belfast city centre; the dissemination of anti-bullying resource packs for schools; a poster competition for children and young people (with winning designs displayed on buses for a fortnight) and the production of three advice leaflets for parents and carers around the issue of cyber bullying, and bullying due to race, faith and culture. Copies are available on the Department's website www.deni.gov.uk.

In June 2007, the Department published a research report on "The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland". The findings show little change in the level of bullying behaviour reported by pupils compared to an earlier study completed in 2002. Following this report, the Department will be carrying out a survey of schools' anti-bullying policies early in 2008, drawing on the expertise and experience of the NIABF and NICCY. The results will be published in due course and used to inform future action.

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.

Reading Recovery Funding

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on funding for 'reading recovery' over the budgetary period 2008-11. (AQW 1752/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is in the process of finalising a review of the literacy and numeracy strategy. When completed the strategy will set how we propose to support approaches such as Reading Recovery and the teaching of reading through

DESTINATION OF YEAR 12 SCHOOL LEAVERS⁽¹⁾ 2000/01 TO 2005/06

| | 2000/01 | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Institution of Further Education | 5,206 | 5,211 | N/A | 4,919 | 5,063 | 5,158 |
| Employment ⁽²⁾ | 1,997 | 1,925 | N/A | 1,697 | 1,307 | 1,416 |
| Training | 5,072 | 4,630 | N/A | 4,370 | 4,073 | 4,094 |
| Unemployment | 726 | 803 | N/A | 670 | 738 | 489 |
| Unknown | 187 | 191 | N/A | 336 | 320 | 306 |
| Total Year 12 Leavers | 13,188 | 12,760 | N/A | 11,992 | 11,501 | 11,463 |

1. The data excludes special and independent schools. 2. Employment refers to full and part time employment.

phonics. It is intended that this review and proposals for the way forward will issue for consultation before the end of the year. Until the outcome of this review is determined and the Department's budget for the period 2008-11 is finalised I am unable to make any decision about the longer term funding for the Reading Recovery programme.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder Units

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education if she will confirm that the Autistic Spectrum Disorder units, awarded to the Western Education and Library Board area, and awaiting ratification from her department since February 2007, will be treated as a priority. (AQW 1753/08)

The Minister of Education: Development Proposals to establish Key Stage 1 Autistic Spectrum Disorder classes in Holy Trinity Primary School, Enniskillen and St Brigid's Primary School, Carnhill were published by the Western Education and Library Board in May 2007 and there followed by a period of consultation until July. The Department has been assessing the issues relevant to these proposals and I expect decisions should be made shortly.

The Western Education and Library Board has also published last month Development Proposals to establish Autistic Spectrum Disorder classes at Londonderry Model and Omagh County Primary Schools. Following completion of the statutory two-month consultation period, the proposals will be assessed as quickly as possible.

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school leavers at the age of 16 that are currently economically inactive and are no longer involved in education. (AQW 1767/08)

The Minister of Education: There were 489 pupils leaving school in year 12 at the end of the 2005/06 academic year who are economically inactive and are no longer in education. The table below gives a more detailed breakdown.

Transfer System

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what research she has conducted in relation to determining the most appropriate age for children to transfer from primary schools to post-primary schools.
(AQW 1768/08)

The Minister of Education: This issue has been the subject of research over a number of years, not only in the course of producing the Burns and Costello reports, but also in work carried out by Queen's University, Belfast, about the Dickson Plan and more recently work commissioned by the Southern Education and Library Board focussing on controlled schools within the Dickson Plan area.

Transfer Test

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children in Northern Ireland who (i) sat the transfer test; and (ii) opted out of taking the transfer test, in this academic year and for the last three years.
(AQW 1773/08)

The Minister of Education:

| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|-----------------------|
| Pupils eligible to sit the Transfer test | 23,572 | 23,208 | 22,698 | 23,689 |
| Pupils entered for the Transfer test | 15,373 | 15,255 | 14,944 | 15,693 ⁽¹⁾ |
| Pupils opting out of the Transfer test | 8,199 | 7,953 | 7,754 | 7,996 |

Source: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

1. Figure relates to those sitting Paper 1 only.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education to outline the appointment process for teachers in Irish-medium schools.
(AQW 1822/08)

The Minister of Education: Boards of Governors, as the employers of teachers in the Irish Medium sector, are responsible for the appointment of all teaching staff in the majority of Irish Medium schools. Posts are advertised, normally in Irish, in accordance with legal requirements and schools follow best practice established in other sectors. All applicants who are qualified to teach, and who meet the criteria for the post, are interviewed by a panel of the governors. The applicant who best fits the needs of the school is selected and this choice is ratified by the Board of Governors. A record of the process is retained on file by the school as is required by law.

One Irish medium school falls under the management of CCMS and one under the management of the BELB, each of which operates a common appointment procedure for all schools.

In all appointments, appropriate employment checks in respect of qualifications, eligibility, GTC registration and criminal background are carried out by the IME school/employing authority.

Review of Irish-Medium Education

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to give a timeframe within which the Review of Irish-Medium Education provision for Northern Ireland will be complete.
(AQW 1835/08)

The Minister of Education: The completed report is due with me early in the New Year.

Classroom Assistants

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken during the on-going industrial action by classroom assistants to ensure that the children attending special schools, and who access paramedical therapy in the schools, continue to do so on a regular basis.
(AQW 1843/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and Library Boards have advised Health and Social Care Trusts that contingency arrangements have been put in place in the event of further industrial action in the classroom assistants' dispute. Special schools and special units/classes attached to mainstream schools should mainly be operational.

Health and Social Care Trusts will continue to provide support in schools for children with health needs regardless of the industrial action taken by classroom assistants. This will continue as long as the schools are open.

The Health and Social Care Trusts have put contingency arrangements in place in the event that schools are not available. Allied health professional staff who normally provide services in schools will be re-deployed to provide their services, either in extra sessions in local clinics and health centres or in domiciliary visits to their clients. Where a personal service is delivered directly to an individual child, this will still be offered in the child's home.

Primary and Preparatory School

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education to provide a detailed breakdown for each primary and preparatory school of (i) the number and percentage of

P7 pupils to sit the Transfer Test, and (ii) the percentage of pupils attending the school who are in receipt of free school meals, for the academic year 2007/2008.
(AQW 1845/08)

The Minister of Education: No detailed data regarding the current Transfer Test are available until the process has been completed and the results issued to the Education and Library Boards. Currently we can only provide data on the total pupils entered for Paper 1 for the 2007/08 academic year, but not broken down by individual school.

Free school meal entitlement data for each primary and preparatory school for the 2007/2008 academic year are also unavailable. These data are currently being collected and will be subject to a validation process that will involve the Education and Library Boards. These data should be available in December 2007.

Consultancy Expenditure

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to (i) detail her department's expenditure on consultancy; (ii) list the names of the companies involved; and (iii) provide a breakdown of this expenditure for the last year.
(AQW 1851/08)

The Minister of Education: The department spent £905,600.57 on external consultants in the 2006-07 financial year, the tables below provide details of the companies used and a breakdown of the expenditure.

CONSULTANCY FIRMS

| | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| BDO | John Beatty | KPMG |
| PA Consulting | Arthur Rainey | Fujitsu |
| Capita Resourcing | Helm Corporation | Addleshaw Goddard |
| Mentoring Connections | Echelon | EC Harris |
| Commercial Graphics | Bearing Point | McClure Watters |
| Leslie Stannage Design | Sand Resourcing | Arthur Cox |
| Webber Shandwick | Jackie Simpson | Clerkins |
| Key Consulting | Bain Review Team | Patricia McCusker |
| PWC | Alan McVeigh | Transport Research Institute |
| EMQC | Queen's University | |
| Billy Burnison | University of Ulster | |
| Sheila McCall | Educational Research Centre | |

DEPARTMENT: EDUCATION

| Category | Amount |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. policy appraisal and review | £274,522.65 |
| 2. strategic management | £404,479.08 |

| Category | Amount |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| 3. organisational development | £84,335.00 |
| 4. performance management | £12,250.00 |
| 5. accountancy | £2,146.00 |
| 6. audit | £28,206.35 |
| 7. economic appraisal | £15,623.41 |
| 8. internal audit | £0 |
| 9. feasibility study | £0 |
| 10. quality accreditation | £42,446.37 |
| 11. investment appraisal | £0 |
| 12. corporate governance | £20,190.36 |
| 13. projects | £7,271.35 |
| 14. surveys | £9,800.00 |
| 15. marketing | £4,330.00 |
| 16. market research | £0 |
| Other | £0 |
| Total | £905,600.57 |

Educational Psychologists

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education, further to her answer to AQW 1314/08, to detail the reasons for the difference in waiting times for assessment by educational psychologists in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, compared to other boards.
(AQW 1860/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) that the reason for the difference in waiting times for assessment by educational psychologists in that Board compared to other boards is the model of service delivery which the SEELB adopts.

Within the Educational Psychology Services of Education and Library Boards (ELBs) there are two models of service delivery.

- Four Boards operate a time-allocation system
- SEELB operates a waiting list-based system

Time-allocation is a model whereby, on the basis of an agreed formula, psychologists' time is allocated to schools and schools have a clear statement of how much of a psychologist's time they can expect to have available to them in the course of a school year. Schools are then responsible for determining the work which they ask the psychologist to undertake during these visits.

A “waiting list” model is often referred to as an open referral system since schools are free to refer as many pupils as they consider necessary although there will be agreed criteria established as to when it is appropriate to refer a pupil. SEELB has adapted the model to include a consultation with schools before a referral is made to ensure that all reasonable steps have been taken by the school to deal with the pupil’s difficulties. Once a referral is accepted the pupil’s name is added to a waiting list for assessment. Cases are generally seen in the order in which they are referred.

SEELB is currently negotiating with schools to preserve the best aspects of its present system and, at the same time, adopt aspects of the time-allocation model.

Transfer System Costs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment of the approximate costs resulting from the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education at age 14, rather than at age 11.

(AQW 1864/08)

The Minister of Education: I will be bringing forward proposals for future post-primary transfer arrangements as soon as possible and these will include consideration of issues such as cost. 14 is already a key decision point in the educational development of young people. Building on this can improve the way our system responds to the needs of all young people. This should be factored into our agenda for structural reform - already well-established due to the need for school sustainability, curriculum reform and ongoing demographic change.

Withdrawing a Child From School

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the regulations governing a parent removing a child from a school register and applying to have them (i) educated elsewhere; and (ii) home educated.

(AQW 1898/08)

The Minister of Education: The Registration and Attendance of Pupils Regulations SRO 1974 No. 78 require a parent to notify the principal of his or her intention to withdraw a child from school. The principal then has to provide the parent with a prescribed certificate of attendance on a Form S.A.1. In a case where the child is to be educated at another school, the parent is required to give the Form to the principal of the school to which the child is to be admitted. In a case where a parent chooses to home educate their child, the parent is required to satisfy the

relevant Education and Library Board that the child is receiving efficient full-time education suitable to his or her age, ability and aptitude and must continue to satisfy the Board of this at least once a year.

Educational Provision

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how she proposes to tailor educational provision to the individual needs of the pupil; and (ii) how she intends to provide the necessary services without some form of selection. (AQW 1902/08)

The Minister of Education: The Revised Curriculum and the Entitlement Framework provide each school with the opportunity to tailor its curricular offer to meet the needs and aspirations of young people. There is now greater choice and flexibility for young people to pursue a range of pathways that will lead to progression to Further Education, Higher Education, training or employment. This approach is clearly predicated on the principle of matching education provision to the individual needs of individual young people rather than matching children to institutions as is currently the case.

This new educational environment will enable young people to experience three years of general post-primary education, followed by post-14 provision which reflects their needs, interests and aspirations and based on objective careers education, information, advice and guidance. It will also enable them to develop skills and obtain qualifications which will support the economic growth of the North.

Transfer System

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, given the indication of her intention to move towards 14 as a more appropriate age for transfer between the primary and secondary education, whether or not she intends to abolish streaming and setting for pupils in years eight, nine and ten. (AQW 1903/08)

The Minister of Education: What I have indicated is that the period between age 11 and 14 is one when young people’s preferences for an academic and/or professional and technical education and career pathway are shaped. 14 is thus a key decision point in a young person’s education. The place of streaming and setting in matching provision to young people’s educational needs and aspirations will be considered carefully as part of the development of the detail of proposals for post-primary transfer arrangements.

Conlig Primary School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to provide a timeframe for her decision on the integrated status proposal by Conlig Primary School.
(AQW 1955/08)

The Minister of Education: On 23 October 2007, the South Eastern Education and Library Board published development Proposal No. 198, proposing the acquisition of controlled integrated status for Conlig Primary School, with effect from 1 September 2008, or as soon as possible thereafter. The publication initiated a statutory two-month period during which comments or objections may be offered to the Department. The statutory consultation period ends on 27 December 2007 and I will make a decision as quickly as possible thereafter.

Provision of School Places

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education, in light of plans to allocate school places in Northern Ireland to children from the Republic of Ireland, what steps she will take to ensure that there is adequate provision of places for children residing in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1974/08)

The Minister of Education: Under Article 16(4) of the Education (NI) Order 1997 and Article 32(4) of the Education (NI) Order 1998 schools and pre-schools shall provide in their admissions criteria for all children resident in the North to be selected for admission before any children not so resident. These Articles may be in breach of EU legislation. It is my intention to review the legislation with a view to changing it. Such changes will, of course, take account of the need to ensure there is adequate provision of places for children in the North.

Transfer System

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to the design of selection tests, based not on the pass/fail concept, but on recognition of different aptitudes such as academic aptitude and technical aptitude, at the ages of 11 and 14.
(AQW 1976/08)

The Minister of Education: I have noted the views of those who favour some form of testing as a replacement to the Transfer Test, and have taken advice on proposals where they have been developed. I remain of the view that testing of any description is not the best way to inform key decisions about a young person's future educational and career pathway. I would prefer that such decisions be informed by three

years of post-primary education, teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance, resulting in the matching of children to suitable provision.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education, in relation to days on which classroom assistants are taking strike action, to detail whether or not (i) Riverside Special School in Antrim is open; and (ii) the full range of educational services are available.
(AQW 1982/08)

The Minister of Education: I am informed by the Chief Executive Officer of the North Eastern Education and Library Board that during the recent strike action Riverside Special School, Antrim has been open in accordance with the agreed five Board procedure allowing parents the option of accompanying their child to school. As such the Board considers Riverside, like all schools in its area, to be open to pupils. As regards the actual uptake of this arrangement and the facilities used, details are as follows:

Thursday 15 November 2007

3 children were accompanied to school for therapy;

Friday 16 November 2007

No children attended school;

Monday 19 November 2007

No children attended school;

Tuesday 20 November 2007

3 children attended school for occupational therapy and speech and language therapy and 2 went horse riding.

On the above days no child made use of the educational facilities in Riverside Special School in Antrim.

St Aloysius High School, Cushendall

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of pupils currently on the roll of St Aloysius High School in Cushendall; and (ii) the school's intake in 2007.
(AQW 2028/08)

The Minister of Education: There are 67 children enrolled at St Aloysius High School in 2007/08. Of these, one is in Year 8.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which she will make a statement to the Assembly on the latest meeting of the

Education Sector of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQW 2058/08)

The Minister of Education: I intend to make a statement to the Assembly in relation to the North / South Ministerial Council meeting, in Education Sector format, held in Dublin on 14 November 2007 on Tuesday 11 December 2007.

Answers to Assembly Questions

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which a Member can expect to receive an answer following the submission of a question to her department for priority written answer. (AQW 2095/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education endeavours to answer all priority written questions within the timescales set by individual members.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Skillsmart Retail Sector Skills Council Report

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how his department is responding to the Skillsmart Retail Sector Skills Council Report, in view of its confirmation that career opportunities are currently available within this sector. (AQW 1658/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Labour Market Information research conducted as part of stages 1-3 of Skillsmart Retail's Sector Skills Agreement has identified that 8% of retailers in Northern Ireland currently have at least one staff vacancy. The Department works closely with Sector Skills Councils as they develop their Sector Skills Agreements.

The Department's Public Employment Service (PES) provides a service to employers to assist them to fill vacancies. Vacancies may be publicised on the PES web-site 'Jobcentreonline' which is widely used and through this web-site, vacancies are publicised throughout Europe. The Employment Service will work with employers in all sectors to provide additional assistance where the employer commits to considering Employment Service clients for vacancies.

Finance and Economics Graduates

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he will take to encourage university graduates in finance and economics to seek a career within Northern Ireland. (AQW 1664/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Under the Bridge to Employment Programme, my Department works with local businesses, including those in the financial services industry, to devise unique training courses tailored to their specific needs. Participants who successfully complete their course are then guaranteed an interview with the relevant company. In addition, the Futures Programme gives Northern Ireland graduates accredited training in Investment Administration followed by an eleven month placement overseas. This allows them to enhance their employability in the industry and gain valuable experience of working in a major financial centre.

Invest Northern Ireland actively targets companies within the Financial Services (FS) industry for inward investment projects that offer highly skilled, high-productivity jobs for graduates in finance related subjects. Financial Services is a sector that offers considerable growth potential. Northern Ireland has already established success in retail Financial Services and Financial Services technology and is developing propositions to respond to the needs of the sector.

Current investors Allstate, Liberty Mutual, HBOS and Abbey form a significant element of the existing Financial Services sector in Northern Ireland. In addition to attracting the world's top financial institutions, Northern Ireland businesses are providing ground-breaking financial software to firms such as Morgan Stanley, JP Morgan, HSBC, IF.com, Egg and Lloyd's TSB. Recently, Citi, already a significant investor with technology and operations groups at its Centre of Excellence in Belfast, announced plans to establish a Legal & Compliance Division in Northern Ireland. Bank of Ireland have also recently announced plans to establish a specialist funds administration business in Belfast.

One of the most important reasons for this level of investment has been the ability of investors to tap into a brand new, skilled, educated and motivated talent pool.

The Skills Expert Group has established a Financial Services Future Skills Action Group to determine and respond to the specific future skills needs for the sector. It is expected that this sub group will report in 2008.

Sector Skills Councils are very aware of the need to work on the attractiveness of careers in their sectors including Finance Services Sector Skills Council and they are building in measures to address this in their Sector Skills Agreements.

My Department will continue to work with Invest NI, the Sector Skills Councils and employers to

address these issues and through the Careers Service, to provide graduates with impartial information, advice and guidance based on up to date labour market information.

Labour Force Survey

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people aged (i) 16; (ii) 17-21; (iii) 21-29; (iv) 30-40; (v) 41-50; and (vi) 50-55, who are in neither education, employment or training, broken down by constituency. (AQW 1736/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The table below contains Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates of the number of people in Northern Ireland that are not in employment, participating in government training schemes, or in full-time education by relevant age group. Due to LFS methodology, it is not possible to include those in part-time education or non-government sponsored training; and sample size is too small to provide estimates at parliamentary constituency area level.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN NI NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, PARTICIPATING IN GOVERNMENT TRAINING SCHEMES, OR IN FULL-TIME EDUCATION BY AGE, APRIL-JUNE 2007

| Age of Person | Number not in Employment, Participating in Government Training Schemes or in Full-time Education |
|--------------------|--|
| 16 | 2,000 ¹ |
| 17-21 | 17,000 |
| 21-29 | 38,000 |
| 30-40 | 41,000 |
| 41-50 | 54,000 |
| 50-55 | 38,000 |
| 16-55 ² | 181,000 |

1 This estimate is based on a small sample size and is therefore subject to a higher than usual degree of sampling variability. It should therefore be treated with caution.

2 Age-groups quoted are not mutually exclusive therefore they will not add to total.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the cost to his department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1778/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The right to request information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FoI) came into effect on 1 January 2005. Since then, no fees for providing information have been charged by the Department for

Employment and Learning (DEL), and the Department does not hold information on the cost of dealing with FoI requests. This is for the following reasons:

- a fee for providing information is not calculated unless the fee itself is likely to be above the prescribed appropriate limit of £600;
- in calculating a fee, only certain activities can be taken into account, e.g. the search for, and the retrieval of information;
- the time taken on other activities which do not count towards fee calculation, e.g. time to consider the application of exemptions or consulting with others before disclosure of information, is not recorded.

This practice is common to all NI Departments and is in line with that in Whitehall Departments.

Advertising Expenditure

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the amount his department has spent on the 'gremlins' advertising campaign, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1802/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department gave a commitment in the Essential Skills for Living Strategy to launch a major promotional campaign in 2003 to significantly increase the number of adults engaging in learning to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. It was decided to adopt the 'Gremlins' brand which had been developed for the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) Skills for Life campaign in England.

Expenditure on the campaign since inception is as follows:

| | |
|-------------------------|-------|
| April 2003 – March 2004 | £481k |
| April 2004 – March 2005 | £444k |
| April 2005 – March 2006 | £454k |
| April 2006 – March 2007 | £195k |
| April 2007 – March 2008 | £150k |

These figures relate to television, radio, cinema, outdoor and press advertising.

In March 2007 the Department met, and exceeded, its PSA target to support 18,500 Essential Skills qualifications. To date, over 30,000 qualifications have been achieved and 60,000 enrolments recorded across the sector. Whilst a number of factors have contributed to this success, including the efforts of individual providers, ongoing research has confirmed that the Gremlins promotional campaign has achieved a high level of awareness and is a powerful influencer and motivator to potential learners.

‘Gremlins’ Hotline

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of telephone calls the ‘gremlins’ hotline has received each month, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1803/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The ‘Gremlins’ promotional campaign raises awareness of the help available for people with literacy and numeracy problems and advertises a telephone hotline number which allows potential learners to speak to an adviser about enrolling on an Essential Skills course in their local area. In September 2006 the helpline number was supplemented with the facility to text message an adviser.

The advertising campaign is only one of a number of mechanisms through which people can access information on enrolling in Essential Skills courses. The success of the overall campaign is reflected in the increase, year on year, in enrolments, with 60,000 recorded to date across the sector.

There were 3166 calls to the helpline, including text messaging, since the campaign began. The figures are set out on a monthly basis in the table below.

| | | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | |
|---------------|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| PHONE CALLS | January | | 151 | 295 | 18 | 71 | |
| | February | | 13 | 70 | 7 | 8 | |
| | March | | 4 | 27 | 6 | 10 | |
| | April | | 3 | 18 | 11 | 2 | |
| | May | 417 | 36 | 29 | 6 | 4 | |
| | June | 147 | 13 | 13 | 10 | 3 | |
| | July | 6 | 12 | 5 | 1 | 6 | |
| | August | 95 | 99 | 52 | 54 | 6 | |
| | September | 117 | 283 | 111 | 139 | 56 | |
| | October | 13 | 31 | 17 | 33 | 17 | |
| | November | 2 | 12 | 7 | 13 | 4 | |
| | December | 2 | 29 | 2 | 4 | | |
| TEXT MESSAGES | January | | | | | 187 | |
| | February | | | | | | |
| | March | | | | | | |
| | April | | | | | | |
| | May | | | | | | |
| | June | | | | | | |
| | July | | | | | | |
| | August | | | | | | |
| | September | | | | 212 | 147 | |
| | October | | | | | | |
| | November | | | | | | |
| | December | | | | | | |
| Totals | | 799 | 686 | 646 | 514 | 521 | 3166 |

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of school leavers from Northern Ireland enrolled in (i) Queen’s University; (ii) the University of Ulster; and (iii) the Open University, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1872/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department does not hold information on the number of school leavers that have enrolled at individual Higher Education Institutions. However, first year student enrolments aged 20 and under whose highest qualification includes an A Level or A Level equivalent has been used as a proxy for school leaver.

On that basis, the number of these enrolments at the Queen’s University of Belfast, the University of Ulster and the Open University, in each of the last 5 available years is given in the table below:

| | Queen’s University of Belfast | University of Ulster | The Open University |
|---------|-------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 2001/02 | 3,095 | 3,090 | 25 |
| 2002/03 | 3,030 | 3,600 | 25 |
| 2003/04 | 2,915 | 3,820 | 25 |
| 2004/05 | 2,985 | 3,465 | 35 |
| 2005/06 | 3,285 | 4,010 | 20 |

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

School Leavers with a Disability

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of school leavers from Northern Ireland with a disability who are enrolled in (i) Queen’s University; (ii) the University of Ulster; and (iii) the Open University, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1874/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department does not hold information on the number of school leavers that have enrolled at individual Higher Education Institutions. However, first year student enrolments aged 20 and under whose highest qualification includes an A Level or A Level equivalent has been used as a proxy for school leaver.

On that basis, the number of these enrolments who had a disability (based on the student’s self-assessment) at the Queen’s University of Belfast, the University of Ulster and the Open University, in each of the last 5 available years is given in the following table:

| | Queen's University of Belfast | University of Ulster | The Open University |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 2001/02 | 175 | 150 | 0 |
| 2002/03 | 100 | 180 | 0 |
| 2003/04 | 120 | 250 | 0 |
| 2004/05 | 90 | 180 | 0 |
| 2005/06 | 125 | 300 | 0 |

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

John Luke Mural

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the date the John Luke mural was removed from the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education complex at Millfield and the current location and ownership of the mural.
(AQW 1923/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The John Luke mural was removed from the Belfast Metropolitan College's Millfield site on 2 February 2003. It is owned by John Eastwood and Sons Ltd and is currently in storage at Walter Graham Haulage Ltd, Airport Road West, Belfast.

Closure of Reid Transport

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his department has to assist workers who lost their jobs as a result of the closure of Reid Transport.
(AQW 2134/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, has been providing advice on employment opportunities, jobsearch, training and further education opportunities to employees of Reid Transport.

As at 28th November, 70 employees had already attended their local JobCentre or Jobs and Benefits Office for assistance. In addition, the Department for Employment and Learning, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and Invest Northern Ireland, held a redundancy clinic in Cloughmills on 28th November which more than 20 people attended.

As at 28th November 2007, 36 applications from ex-employees of Reid Transport Ltd had been received by my Department for statutory redundancy and insolvency payments under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. All claims received are being vetted to establish entitlement to statutory

redundancy and insolvency payments under the Order. Payments of eligible claims will be made within the normal timescales but every effort is being made to have redundancy and arrears of pay payments made before Christmas.

Redundancy Payments

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what regulations are in place to safeguard the right to statutory benefits for those workers supplied to companies through employment agencies; and what action he will take to close any loopholes, whereby companies can absolve themselves of any liability to provide redundancy payments to agency workers.
(AQO 889/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Agency workers are a relatively small but important part of our labour market and are protected by a range of employment laws. They are not employees of the hiring company but are contracted individually to perform work or services. Agency work provides flexibility for workers and employers without which Northern Ireland would be at a competitive disadvantage compared to other EU countries. I agree that the fact that agency workers are not entitled to redundancy payments, as with Seagate, is a problem. There are currently no plans to change the law in this area however discussions are ongoing at EU level on a Temporary Agency Workers Directive.

Community Training Organisations

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the role that community training organisations can take in working alongside further education colleges; and what action he is taking to ensure that community training organisations are adequately funded.
(AQO 892/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department recognises the merit of community training organisations working alongside further education colleges, in supporting adult learners. The Department will shortly bring forward proposals to further encourage this collaboration. Voluntary and community organisations are also engaged directly in the delivery of the Department's Training for Success programme.

The Department does not provide core funding for community training organisations. However where appropriate, it may enter into or, facilitate contractual arrangements with these organisations, directly or, through the Further Education sector.

Carter and Carter and the Donnelly Group

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the nature of the training relationship between Carter and Carter and the Donnelly Group; to detail whether or not the matter is being investigated; and what action he will take in relation to this issue. (AQO 930/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My officials undertook an investigation on whether there was a training relationship between Carter and Carter plc and the Donnelly Group and have concluded that a verbal interim agreement, which was brokered locally, was based on a 'as and if required basis', until suitable provision was made by Carter and Carter to meet the needs of learner numbers. A signed agreement was not entered into. Therefore, no further action is required.

Ards College, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to upgrade and modernise the facilities in Ards College, Victoria Road, Newtownards. (AQO 894/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Approval to the development of a new Construction Centre at the Ards campus of the South Eastern Regional College was given at October 2005. The project is currently at design development stage and it is planned that a contract for the construction phase will be signed in early 2008, with an anticipated completion date of 2009.

Springvale Site

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration he will give to developing the Springvale site as an educational centre; and if he will bring forward proposals in relation to the achievement of this objective over the lifetime of the current Assembly. (AQO 951/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A Ministerial announcement for a £13.5 million Workforce and Economic Development Centre at Springvale, sited adjacent to the existing Community Outreach Centre, was made at April 2006. The Centre will comprise Advanced Technology and Workforce Development, providing business support and training in areas such as manufacturing, electronics, software engineering and multi-media. The project is at design development stage with an estimated completion date of 2009.

Applicants to the Open University

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he will take to ensure that Northern Ireland-domiciled applicants to the Open University who hold a primary degree will not be disadvantaged, compared to their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQO 988/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: At present students with a primary degree studying for an equivalent or lower qualification are generally not eligible for support under the Education (Student Support) Regulations. This applies to Northern Ireland students in the same way as their counterparts in England and Wales.

The current consultation on equivalent or lower qualifications by the Higher Education Council for England, is about funding for institutions including the Open University. Unlike other universities, the Open University is funded by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) and it is unclear, as yet, the implications of the proposed consultation.

Open University and Skills Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the proposals for the Open University to participate in skills strategy and development, highlighted in the draft Programme of Government, in light of the fact that the Open University is involved in skill strategy and development in the Republic of Ireland, through the relevant expert group. (AQO 913/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Open University has been actively involved throughout the development and subsequent implementation of Success through Skills – the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. The University was a key respondent in the original consultation process and it continues to be involved in the delivery of three key themes; raising the skills of the workforce; enhancing the quality of those entering the workforce; and addressing the employability skills of those not in employment.

The Open University is also involved at individual project delivery level within the Strategy through its participation on a working group which informed recommendations contained in the recently launched consultation document "Review of Higher Education in Further Education policies, including Foundation Degrees".

Success through Skills is due for review in 2008. As part of this process, the Department will be consulting with all of our major stakeholders, including the Open University, to seek their views on how the Strategy should be taken forward.

Careers Guidance Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the need for a fully independent careers guidance service.

(AQO 887/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am committed to the provision of a fully independent careers guidance service and this is provided by the Department's Careers Service. The Careers Service is staffed by professionally qualified staff who provide impartial careers information, advice and guidance to young people and adults. Proposals for the enhancement of careers guidance service are contained in "Preparing for Success – A Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy for Northern Ireland", which issued for consultation on 22 October 2007.

Lifelong Learning

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to ensure that the Further Education Means Business strategy has a sufficient focus on lifelong learning.

(AQO 971/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Under Further Education Means Business, the FE sector continues to be at the heart of lifelong learning in order to strengthen economic and workforce development, to enhance social cohesion and to advance individuals' skills and learning.

To meet this aim, it is important that colleges strike the most appropriate balance between provision that meets the needs of employers and the Northern Ireland economy, and provision that meets the needs of individual learners and supports social inclusion. I believe that the best form of social inclusion is to provide the skills training for individuals to get well-paid, sustainable jobs.

My Department has recently launched a public consultation on proposals for the curriculum to be provided by colleges. The outcome of this consultation, which closes on 7 January 2008, will help to inform future curriculum policy for the FE sector in Northern Ireland. Within this policy, FE colleges will continue to provide a wide variety of courses to adults of all ages.

Workers Educational Association and the Ulster Peoples' College

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail whether or not his department will, as a matter of urgency, fund the Workers

Educational Association and the Ulster Peoples' College beyond August 2008, in order to enable full consideration and review of funding of the community education sector, following the unsuccessful bid to the Comprehensive Spending Review.

(AQO 914/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department is currently considering how best voluntary and community groups, such as the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College, might support adult learners, through partnerships with Further Education colleges within the resources currently available.

University Students with Disabilities

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people with disabilities who attended Queen's University, Belfast, or the University of Ulster, in each of the last three years.

(AQO 957/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on disability is collected on the basis of a student's self assessment. The number of students with disabilities enrolled on higher education courses at Queen's University, Belfast, or the University of Ulster in each of the last three available years is detailed below:

| Year | QUB | UU | Total |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2003/04 | 1,000 | 1,625 | 2,625 |
| 2004/05 | 1,040 | 1,755 | 2,795 |
| 2005/06 | 1,065 | 2,180 | 3,245 |

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Community Education

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will make a statement on the future of community education, in light of the proposed end of funding to the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, the Workers' Educational Association and the Ulster People's College.

(AQO 980/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department currently provides core funding to the Educational Guidance Service for Adults to introduce adults to learning and provide them with educational guidance. In line with government procurement policy, the Department proposes to tender for this service from 1 April 2008 and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults will be in a position to tender for the service.

The Department contracts with the Workers Educational Association and the Ulster People's College for the purchase of a limited range of provision. Both contracts are due to expire in August 2008. The Department will shortly bring forward proposals to enable community education providers to better collaborate with Further Education colleges in supporting adult learners.

The Further Education statutory sector will, of course, continue to deliver a wide range of community education through its extensive network of premises including some 850 Outreach Centres across Northern Ireland.

Training for Success

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the inspection schedule to be undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate, in relation to new and existing training organisations awarded contracts for Training for Success, following the procurement exercise completed this year.

(AQO 910/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Education and Training Inspectorate is undertaking visits between September 2007 and April 2008 to each training organisation to assess the effectiveness of the organisation's self-evaluation, and the resultant action plan.

The Department agrees a schedule of inspection visits with the Education and Training Inspectorate on an annual basis; the schedule from 1 April 2007 to March 2008 was agreed before the awarding of contracts for Training for Success. Seventeen Training Organisations, delivering Training for Success, have, or are, scheduled to be inspected, or to receive a follow-up inspection between September and April of the 2007/08 business year.

I will arrange for a full list of these to be placed in the library.

The Department is currently working with the Inspectorate to establish a similar programme of inspections for the 2008 – 09 business year.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Economic Forecasts

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his department's forecasts for percentage changes in real terms of (i) Northern Ireland's gross domestic product; (ii) employment; and (iii)

unemployment, over the lifespan of the Budget 2008-2011. (AQW 1711/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

(Mr Dodds): Northern Ireland's GVA is forecast to further increase over the PfG/budget period, growing by approximate annual average rate of 3.3%. Employment growth in Northern Ireland will grow at an estimated average rate of 0.9%. Northern Ireland's unemployment rate has more than halved over the past decade and is currently the lowest of all the UK regions. It is projected that the unemployment rate will remain unchanged at 3% over the budget period.

Business Start Programme

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to change the Business Start programme, following its success in recent years. (AQW 1804/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Start a Business Programme has been very successful since its launch in September 2001 with over 44,000 individuals accessing some elements of the training it offers. 17,000 people have completed the full programme and started their own business, resulting in the creation of approximately 22,000 new jobs. We also know that 78% of the businesses started are still trading 3 years after they receive the initial support; this compares favourably to the UK average of 73%.

Despite the considerable success of the current programme, a recent independent evaluation has concluded that improvements can be made which will deliver even greater value for money and provide a more flexible support package for the client.

The main changes planned as result of this review are as follows:

- More flexibility will be offered enabling clients to access only those elements of the support package which is appropriate for their needs
- A Core offering will be available for all, but with additional resources skewed to those start-ups with growth potential
- An initial on-line diagnostic will be used to differentiate the level of support appropriate for each client
- Enhanced on-line support options will be offered at all stages of the start-up journey.
- Disadvantaged and under-represented groups will continue to be targeted as they are least likely to start a business of their own accord.
- A role for Further Education colleges in delivering some of the training will be considered.

- The universal grant element (currently £400 per start-up) will be withdrawn and reinvested in training and mentoring as this will be a better use of the resources available.

It is envisaged that the new programme will be launched in autumn 2008 but some of the changes may be phased in over the coming months

Invest NI Grants

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the Invest Northern Ireland grants paid to Regency Spinning Limited in Newtownards in each of the last five years and if the potential that exists for the clawback of public funds. (AQW 1882/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A total of £9750 of grant assistance was paid directly to Regency Spinning Ltd by Invest NI in 2005. No other Invest NI grants were paid directly to the company during the past five years.

As part of an offer to Regency Carpets Manufacturing Ltd in 2005, a total of £30,000 was paid against the costs of employing a Managing Director in Regency Spinning.

Invest NI is currently assessing the level of clawback that is likely to arise following the appointment of an Administrator to the company.

Social Economy Projects

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what level of priority will be given to the development of Social Economy projects, particularly to those new enterprises or businesses setting up in New Targeting Social Need areas, and what overall targets his department has set for Social Economy Projects. (AQW 1925/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Government remains committed to developing the social economy and social economy/community enterprises. Invest Northern Ireland recognises the important role the social economy has to play in the context of the economic development of Northern Ireland as a whole.

Invest NI delivers a suite of programmes and initiatives aimed at promoting the concept of Social Economy, supporting new Social Economy business start ups and increasing the business strength of the Social Economy sector.

To this end, Invest NI's Social Entrepreneurship Programme offers a range of assistance to help new and existing social economy enterprises to develop and grow sustainable and viable businesses.

There has been a very high level of demand for the Programme which started in June 2006, the targets across the four strands are now complete and the programme had to be closed to new applicants in September 2007. Over 80 applications have been received under the Core strand of the Programme and 51 projects have been approved for assistance so far.

Feedback from participants on the Programme has been extremely positive to date with the one to one mentoring elements proving to be particularly beneficial.

Redundancy Packages

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the terms of redundancy packages offered by TYCO, and on other large scale private sector redundancy announcements, made in the last three years. (AQW 1960/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The terms of any redundancy package are a matter for a company to agree in consultation with its employees; the statutory minimum requirements are laid down in Employment Rights Legislation (Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996). It is my understanding that this process of consultation is currently ongoing between the Tyco Healthcare (UK) Manufacturing Ltd management and its workforce. I would suggest that any requests for information concerning the structure of the proposed redundancy package should be addressed directly to the company.

Invest NI

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the size of the land bank held by Invest NI in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 1999/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI currently holds 2,793 acres of land across Northern Ireland, of which 1,982 acres are let to its client companies. 811 acres are available for clients with growth plans.

The attached table shows the breakdown of the 811 available acres by parliamentary constituency area.

From its formation in 2002, until the end of the most recent financial year, Invest NI has sold 357 acres of land to its client companies. The last two years have seen a large increase in demand for Invest NI land.

Invest NI has estimated that by the end of the current financial year it will have sold a further 130 acres. Should this level of demand continue, and it shows no sign of abating, the land bank will be fully

let within the next 5 to 7 years. Invest NI is currently seeking to replenish its diminishing land holding.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI LAND BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT OCTOBER 2007

| Parliamentary Constituency | Land Holding | Land Available |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Total Acres | Total Acres |
| Belfast East | 0 | 0 |
| Belfast North | 16.45 | 2.9 |
| Belfast South | 6.92 | 0 |
| Belfast West | 189.95 | 32.7 |
| East Antrim | 143.76 | 24 |
| East Londonderry | 125.7 | 66.9 |
| Fermanagh and South Tyrone | 216.6 | 92.2 |
| Foyle | 419.19 | 107.1 |
| Lagan Valley | 239.44 | 11.6 |
| Mid Ulster | 110.47 | 16.6 |
| Newry and Armagh | 37.25 | 2.5 |
| North Antrim | 99.95 | 39.2 |
| North Down | 62.8 | 20.1 |
| South Antrim | 393.64 | 128.7 |
| South Down | 224.75 | 52.5 |
| Strangford | 44.75 | 4.1 |
| Upper Bann | 385.38 | 202.7 |
| West Tyrone | 75.97 | 6.9 |
| Total at October 2007 | 2792.97 | 810.70 |

Closure of Reid Transport

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans his department has to assist workers who lost their jobs as a result of the closure of Reid Transport. (AQW 2105/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DEL took the lead in organising an advisory clinic for employees of the company on 28th November 2007 at a facility provided by Cloughmills Reformed Presbyterian Church.

Represented at this clinic were:

- Department of Employment & Learning – providing advice on training options & job vacancies.
- Social Security Agency – providing advice on benefits and assistance with form filling.
- Invest NI – providing advice on self employment options and starting a business.

- A driver hire & recruitment agency – providing advice on job vacancies for drivers and warehouse staff.

Invest NI is actively engaged with businesses in the region to encourage the growth that will create additional job opportunities.

ENVIRONMENT

Prehen Woods

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) her department's assessment of the environmental and ecological importance of the Prehen Woods; and (ii) what steps will be taken to ensure that there is no further erosion of the woods and buffer zone, resulting from various forms of development. (AQW 1601/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

- Prehen Wood is of significant local importance in terms of nature conservation, landscape and amenity value. These values are reflected in its designation as an Area of Local Nature Conservation and Amenity Importance in the Derry Area Plan. The site and surrounding area have also been designated as an Area of High Scenic Value and an Area of Constraint on Mineral Developments. My Department has also made a Tree Preservation Order to protect the woodland.
- My Department is obliged to consider all applications for development on their own merits and to make a determination having due consideration of current plans and policies and all other material considerations.

The buffer zone identified in the Derry Area Plan 2011 related to Housing Zoning H33. There are no other housing zonings adjacent to the woodland.

National Park for the Mourne

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment on any proposed plans for a National Park for the Mournes.

(AQW 1606/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Should we decide to progress any plans for a National Park, my officials will consider the full range of impact assessments, including environmental impact assessment, to see which need to be carried out.

CO₂ Emissions

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for 2006/07, (i) the total greenhouse gas emissions resulting from agricultural land use in Northern Ireland, broken down by each component gas group and as a CO₂ equivalent; (ii) the total emissions as a percentage of Northern Ireland's total CO₂ emissions; and (iii) whether or not these figures are included in the Kyoto related regional target figures for greenhouse gas reductions. (AQW 1608/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The latest year for which greenhouse gas figures are available is 2005. All of the figures have been sourced from the Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 1990-2005.

There is no specific sector labelled 'agricultural land use' in the greenhouse gas inventories. The inventories contain a category called Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) and this category contains 11 sub-categories, 7 of which are related to agriculture. For 2005 the emissions in these categories are:

| Agriculture Sub-Categories | K.Tonnes of CO ₂ |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cropland - Liming | 4.7 |
| Cropland Remaining Cropland | -25.1 |
| Land Converted to Cropland | 1138.2 |
| Grassland - Biomass Burning | 0.0 |
| Grassland - Liming | 31.6 |
| Grassland Remaining Grassland | 101.5 |
| Land Converted to Grassland | -1371.6 |
| Total | -120.7 |

Emissions from other component gases for the same period were nil.

The agriculture related LULUCF categories listed above represent a carbon sink of 120.7 kilotonnes of CO₂ per annum, which is less than 1% of Northern Ireland's total CO₂ net emissions in 2005.

The inventories also contain an additional category entitled 'Agricultural Soils'. The emissions from this category in 2005 were 6.5 kilotonnes of nitrous oxide, which is equivalent to 2002.0 kilotonnes of CO₂, or 13.2% of the CO₂ net emissions for Northern Ireland (10% of total greenhouse gas emissions).

In summary, net emissions from LULUCF and Agriculture Soils categories in 2005 were 1881.3 kilotonnes of CO₂ equivalent. (The calculation being 2002.0 kilotonnes for agricultural soils less the 120.7 kilotonnes in the carbon sink of LULUCF). This equates to 12.4% of the net CO₂ emissions, and 9.1% of the total greenhouse gas emissions.

More general information on agricultural emissions is available from the greenhouse gas inventories accessed at: http://www.airquality.co.uk/archive/reports/cat07/0709180907_DA_GHGI_report_2005.pdf

There is no regional Northern Ireland Kyoto target. Northern Ireland figures are included in the UK's Kyoto greenhouse gas emissions reduction target.

Planning Approval for Apartments

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of apartments in (i) Newcastle; (ii) Downpatrick; (iii) Warrenpoint; (iv) Ballynahinch; (v) Rostrevor; (vi) Castlewellan; (vii) Killyleagh; and (viii) Saintfield, that have received planning approval in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1610/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I regret the current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20 – does not differentiate apartments from other residential developments and we therefore do not have information readily available on the number of apartments approved. To provide accurate figures for the years in question could only be done by manual search of the application files and this would not be available in the time and would incur disproportionate costs.

It may be helpful to note that the new electronic system - ePIC – which is due to be introduced during 2008 will be able to store and retrieve such data.

Planning Regulations

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what action her department can take when building work commences prior to the issue of planning approval; and what steps she will take to ensure that there is more effective enforcement of planning regulations in relation to this issue. (AQW 1637/08)

The Minister of the Environment: If a landowner/developer carries out development without the appropriate planning approval, this may constitute a breach of planning control. If there is a breach, my Department will take the appropriate enforcement actions to remedy it and regularise the situation.

In terms of more effective enforcement of planning regulations, there are dedicated enforcement teams in each Divisional Office and Headquarters who investigate any alleged breach of planning control. I consider that the Planning Service's enforcement system is effective however I accept that there is always room for improvement and this issue of planning enforcement will be included in the review of the planning system.

Divisional Planning Offices

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the procedures that are in place to ensure that queries to Divisional Planning Offices are responded to within specified times; and (ii) the complaints process, in cases where these time limits are not adhered to. (AQW 1639/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Procedures to ensure that the Planning Service responds to (i) queries are set out in the Agency's Charter Standards Statement. They stipulate that anyone contacting the Service will be responded to within 15 working days. Current practice is to acknowledge the matter within 3 working days and to issue a substantive response within 15. Where that is not possible, a holding reply will be issued after 15 working days, followed by a full response as soon as possible thereafter.

In relation to (ii) complaints, Planning Service has issued a leaflet "Making a complaint – A Guide to our Complaints Procedure" and this is available on www.planningni.gov.uk. It details the 3-stage complaints procedures, with similar timescales as above, which are in place and the ultimate right of a complainant to receive a response from the Chief Executive.

Road Safety

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with the Minister of Education in relation to ensuring that road safety is a core element of the National Curriculum. (AQW 1640/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Detailed discussions have taken place between my Department, the Department of Education (DE) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) as part of the development of the revised curriculum which is currently being phased in. The new curriculum provides for a considerable element of road safety education, as outlined below.

Primary Schools

The new curriculum for primary schools contains a number of short general statements of "minimum entitlement", which are a statutory requirement. While there is no mandatory requirement to teach road safety, my Department's efforts have ensured that the official guidance notes published by CCEA contain many direct references to road safety topics thereby enhancing opportunities for their delivery in the classroom. This is particularly evident within the areas of Personal Development and the World Around Us.

Post-Primary Schools

The new curriculum again provides increased opportunity for the delivery of road safety through Personal Development/Personal, Social and Health Education. For the first time, there is a mandatory element of road safety for Key Stage 3 within the area of Learning for Life and Work. Although a very small element of the curriculum and generic in content, this is still significant. At Key Stage 4, there is greater timetabling flexibility with very few compulsory subjects which should allow greater opportunity for road safety.

The new curriculum provides enhanced road safety opportunities on a scale not seen before and which do not exist in GB.

It is also worth mentioning other benefits of the regular liaison involving my Department, DE and CCEA. Over the years, this has secured opportunities for road safety within the curriculum including the development and introduction of a GCSE Syllabus in Motor Vehicle and Road User Studies (MVRUS) which was first examined in 1988. This GCSE is the only one of its kind in the UK and is also followed by students in England and Wales.

My Department was also involved in discussions leading to the recognition by DE of MVRUS as an Applied subject within the context of the Entitlement Framework. The Entitlement Framework proposes that schools provide access to no less than 24 subjects at Key Stage 4 with one third of these at applied or vocational level. There are already indications that this recognition will lead to a greater take-up of the subject by schools and students. My Department is endeavouring to capitalise on this further by organising seminars for teachers to raise awareness of the subject and its enhanced status.

It is also worth noting that the Department of Education has appointed a Schools Inspector with responsibility for road safety education. My Department's officials meet with the Inspector on a regular basis to review developments and keep road safety to the fore.

My Department will continue to liaise with DE and CCEA on the provision of road safety education in schools.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost to her department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1648/08)

The Minister of the Environment: For clarity, those Parts of the Freedom of Information Act which

relate to the making of requests for information only came into operation on 1 January 2005. However, the Department does not hold information on the total cost of dealing with requests under the Act. There is provision under the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004 to allow a public authority to charge fees where the costs of responding to a request exceed £600. Under these rules, my Department has been able to charge a fee only in a very small number of cases. This is because the method of calculating fees allows only some of the costs involved in dealing with a request to be taken into account.

Government proposals to amend the fees legislation were recently abandoned and they announced on 25 October that they will bring forward a package of administrative measures aimed at improving the way the Act works. Obviously I will have to wait to see the detail, but I would hope that these measures will help reduce costs.

Pollution in the Dibney River

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what organisation is responsible for dealing with pollution in the Dibney River, with specific reference to pollution caused by animal products from the tannery adjacent to the river. (AQW 1692/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It is the role of the Water Management Unit (WMU) of EHS to conserve, protect and where possible improve both the freshwater and marine aquatic environment in Northern Ireland. The WMU protects the aquatic environment through a variety of activities including taking action to combat or minimise the effects of pollution.

WMU is keen to work with local interested parties to address water pollution problems throughout Northern Ireland. WMU has formed Catchment Stakeholder Groups (CSG's) in all water catchment areas in Northern Ireland. The aim of these groups is to work closely with partners to explore methods and techniques for engaging regional and local stakeholders in dealing with water quality issues. The CSG's comprise representatives of all major local and regional stakeholder sectors/groups brought together to support and encourage active involvement of stakeholders in resolving water quality issues.

The Dibney River Trust is one such grouping that WMU has been in communication with over recent weeks. WMU Officers are currently undertaking a water quality data capture study in preparation for a meeting with the Dibney River Trust and Environmental Health Officers from Down District Council with the aim of providing resolutions to the issues that they

have raised. This meeting will take place within the next two weeks. In support of this work EHS is taking specialist technical advice on dealing with historic discharges from tannery operations and the long term effects of such discharges in rivers and river beds.

Street Signage

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, if she will review Article 11 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Order 1995 to allow for two thirds of respondents to give approval for a change to street signage, as opposed to the current provision, where two thirds of the population of a street must give approval for such a change. (AQW 1707/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to review the provisions of Article 11 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 1995 which sets out the powers that district councils have in relation to street naming and signage.

Article 11 provides district councils with powers to erect nameplates at or near each end, corner or entrance of any street in its district. The nameplate must be expressed in English but it may also express the name in any other language.

If a nameplate is erected which expresses the name of the street in English only, the council may, immediately adjacent to the first nameplate, erect a second nameplate expressing the name of the street in a language other than English.

Article 11 also provides that in deciding whether and, if so, how to exercise its powers in relation to providing either:

- a nameplate which is expressed in both English and any other language, or
- a second nameplate in any other language,
- a council must have regard to any views on the matter expressed by the occupiers of premises in that street.

The legislation makes no provision as to the number or percentage of occupiers in any street who must give approval for a change in signage. The procedures for canvassing the views of occupiers and making decisions on whether, taking their views into account, to change the signage is appropriately a matter for district councils.

Carbon Reduction Targets

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the consequences for Northern Ireland of any failure to achieve its Kyoto-related carbon reduction targets. (AQW 1749/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Northern Ireland does not have a Kyoto target. Within the EU, Kyoto targets are set at Member State level. The UK has a Kyoto target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5% (below 1990 levels) by 2008-2012 which Northern Ireland contributes to. In 2005, the latest year for which disaggregated data is available, Northern Ireland accounted for 3% of the UK total greenhouse gas emissions¹.

The latest figures show that the UK is well on course to meet its Kyoto greenhouse gas emissions reduction target (15.8% below 1990 levels)².

Biodegradable Waste

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the performance of each district

¹ Source: Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; 1990-2005

² Source: Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; 1990-2005

council against targets for biodegradable waste, in compliance with the Landfill Allowance Scheme, in 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 1759/08)

The Minister of the Environment: All District Councils have achieved their landfill allowance obligations for the first 2 years (2005/06 and (2006/07) of the scheme.

The amount of Biodegradable Municipal Waste (BMW) sent to landfill in 2006/07 was 536,063 tonnes compared with 558,009 tonnes in 2005/06, a reduction of almost 22,000 tonnes.

In 2005/06, District Councils utilised 83.7% of their allocated landfill allowances. However, in 2006/07 the amount of allowances utilised fell to 81.8 %.

Five of the 26 District councils utilised less than 70% of their allocated allowances.

Details of performance by each District Council is shown in Table 1 below.

| District Council: | BMW sent to landfill for scheme year 2005/06 (As reported) | Allocation 2005/06 | % of 2005/06 Allocation utilised | BMW sent to landfill for scheme year 2006/07 (As reported) | Allocation 2006/07 | % 2006/07 Allocation utilised | % Difference between 06/07 and 05/06 scheme years for BMW landfilled |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------------|----------------------------------|--|--------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Antrim Borough Council | 12,635 | 17,288 | 73.08% | 12,402 | 18,936 | 65.49% | -1.84% |
| Ards Borough Council | 25,851 | 31,842 | 81.19% | 25,046 | 28,862 | 86.78% | -3.11% |
| Ballymena Borough Council | 19,355 | 21,453 | 90.22% | 18,439 | 22,835 | 80.75% | -4.73% |
| Belfast City Council | 106,509 | 116,877 | 91.13% | 96,063 | 102,992 | 93.27% | -9.81% |
| Carrickfergus Borough Council | 14,935 | 17,114 | 87.27% | 14,116 | 14,843 | 95.10% | 5.48% |
| Castlereagh Borough Council | 15,496 | 23,103 | 67.07% | 14,450 | 25,385 | 56.92% | 6.75% |
| Down District Council | 17,262 | 25,736 | 67.07% | 17,382 | 25,344 | 68.58% | 0.70% |
| Larne Borough Council | 11,345 | 13,526 | 83.88% | 10,259 | 11,862 | 86.49% | -9.57% |
| Lisburn City Council | 37,242 | 48,719 | 76.44% | 34,186 | 42,207 | 81.00% | -8.21% |
| Newtownabbey Borough Council | 27,599 | 31,180 | 88.52% | 28,024 | 30,901 | 90.69% | 1.54% |
| North Down Borough Council | 28,503 | 33,588 | 84.86% | 25,257 | 29,606 | 85.31% | -11.39% |
| Arc21 – Total: | 316,732 | 380,426 | 83.26% | 295,622 | 353,773 | 83.56% | -6.66% |
| Ballymoney Borough Council | 8,119 | 12,968 | 62.61% | 8,724 | 9,059 | 96.3% | 7.45% |
| Coleraine Borough Council | 22,604 | 28,812 | 78.45% | 23,411 | **23,417 | 99.97% | 3.57% |
| Derry City Council | 27,909 | 36,273 | 76.94% | 33,509 | 41,103 | 81.52% | 20.07% |
| Limavady Borough Council | 8,016 | 12,255 | 65.41% | 9,200 | 13,074 | 70.37% | 14.77% |
| Magherafelt District Council | 10,445 | 14,230 | 73.40% | 10,977 | 15,863 | 69.20% | 5.09% |

| District Council: | BMW sent to landfill for scheme year 2005/06 (As reported) | Allocation 2005/06 | % of 2005/06 Allocation utilised | BMW sent to landfill for scheme year 2006/07 (As reported) | Allocation 2006/07 | % 2006/07 Allocation utilised | % Difference between 06/07 and 05/06 scheme years for BMW landfilled |
|--|--|--------------------|----------------------------------|--|--------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Moyle District Council | 6,043 | 6,889 | 87.72% | 5,739 | 6,334 | 90.61% | -5.03% |
| Strabane District Council | 12,345 | 17,412 | 70.90% | 12,697 | 14,896 | 85.24% | 2.85% |
| NWRWMG – Total: | 95,481 | 128,839 | 74.11% | 104,258 | 123,745 | 84.25% | 9.19% |
| Armagh City & District Council | 14,296 | 17,790 | 80.36% | 13,715 | 21,394 | 64.11% | -4.06% |
| Banbridge District Council | 10,213 | 12,896 | 79.20% | 9,110 | 16,824 | 54.15% | -10.80% |
| Cookstown District Council | 10,402 | 11,681 | 89.05% | 10,324 | 12,920 | 79.91% | -4.09% |
| Craigavon Borough Council | 27,624 | 30,961 | 89.22% | 24,191 | 31,763 | 76.16% | -12.43% |
| Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council | 16,694 | 18,375 | 90.85% | 16,223 | 18,793 | 86.33% | -2.82% |
| Fermanagh District Council | *21,740 | 21,740 | 100.00% | 21,117 | 22,557 | 93.62% | -2.87% |
| Newry & Mourne District Council | 28,105 | 28,720 | 97.86% | 27,608 | 34,731 | 79.49% | -1.77% |
| Omagh District Council | 16,722 | 19,155 | 87.30% | 13,894 | 19,047 | 72.94% | -16.91% |
| SWaMP – Total: | 145,796 | 161,318 | 90.38% | 135,835 | 178,028 | 76.30% | -6.83% |
| Northern Ireland – Total: | 558,009 | 670,583 | 83.21% | 535,715 | 655,545 | 81.72% | -4.00% |

* includes 699 allowances¹ transferred from Armagh City & District Council.

** includes 1,830 allowances transferred from Ballymoney Borough Council.

¹ One allowance equals one tonne of Biodegradable Municipal Waste (BMW) which can be sent to landfill.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the Chief Executive of Belfast City Airport's statement that the airport intends to extend the length of the main runway, to detail what communications she has had with Ryanair, the Belfast City Airport and local residents' groups in relation to this issue. (AQW 1765/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Neither my Department nor I, as Minister, have had any formal communications with George Best Belfast City Airport, Ryanair, or any local residents group on the issue of a proposed runway extension. I understand, however, that an official from the Airport recently contacted the Divisional Planning Office in Belfast and was informed that a planning application would need to be submitted if an extension to the existing runway was being proposed.

All-Ireland Paper Pulp Mill

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the progress that has been made in relation to the development of an all-Ireland paper pulp mill. (AQW 1780/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The North South Ministerial Council commissioned the North South Market Development Steering Group to conduct a feasibility study into the establishment of a paper mill that would service both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The study is being carried out in two phases – the first dealing with the identification of sources and quantities of waste paper, the demand for paper products and the development and assessment of various paper mill options, before a full economic appraisal in phase 2.

The phase 1 report was published in August 2006 and stated that a financially viable tissue mill could be supported by the market in both countries.

Following this, a “market sounding” survey was commissioned to gauge the level of interest of stakeholders. Although the initial findings from this survey show favourable interest in exploring the establishment of a tissue mill, it is considered that some further work is required to test the level of interest amongst the key industrial players before moving to a full economic appraisal.

Rural Communities

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the effect of second homes and holiday lets on the social cohesion of small rural communities. (AQW 1784/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I appreciate that there is growing concern that second homes and holiday lets can impact upon the availability of housing to meet local needs, with consequent adverse effects upon local communities.

However, as acknowledged in the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, there are limitations on the ability of the land use planning system to regulate on these matters. This is because the system cannot exert control over who may purchase new or existing properties or over how they occupy them.

My Department has nevertheless recently attempted to indirectly exercise some greater control of second homes through the development plan process predominantly through inclusion of policy provisions on the location of new apartment developments.

Legal Action

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not she will be taking legal action against any MLAs in relation to comments made about the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 1837/08)

The Minister of the Environment: You will be aware that I am seeking legal advice on a statement that you made on 8 November 2007. I am unwilling to comment further on this at this stage.

Departmental Legal Advisers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the number of times she has used her departmental legal advisers since taking up her appointment; and to list the purpose of the advice sought. (AQW 1840/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that I seek advice from my departmental legal advisers as and when it is required for the purposes of the

proper discharge of my duties as Minister of the Environment.

Noise Pollution

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of complaints relating to noise that were received by district councils; (ii) the number that were the subject of court proceedings; and (iii) the number of these that were successfully prosecuted in the courts, for the years 2005, 2006 and 2007.

(AQW 1847/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment reports the number of noise complaints received and legal action taken by district councils between 1 April and 31 March annually.

The table below has been derived from the last three such reports and illustrates statistics from all 26 council areas.

| Year | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| No. of Noise Complaints | 10,047 | 11,337 | 11,923 |
| No. of Prosecutions | 17 | 8 | 8 |

The outcome of each prosecution is not recorded by the Department.

The Noise Complaint Statistics for Northern Ireland reports are available from the Assembly Library, or may be viewed in full at

http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/protect_the_environment/local_environmental_issues/noise/complaint_statistics_for_ni.htm

Departmental Solicitors

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the grounds on which she is seeking legal advice from her departmental solicitors in relation to statements made by Sinn Féin on the Giant's Causeway. (AQW 1915/08)

The Minister of the Environment: You will be aware that I am seeking legal advice on a statement that you made on 8 November 2007. I am unwilling to comment further on this at this stage.

Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what capacity studies have been undertaken in relation to Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks, to assess the potential for

further housing development within the urban footprints across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1917/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks does not apply in Northern Ireland. My Department has, however, published Urban Capacity Studies, as required by 'Planning Policy Statement 12 - Housing in Settlements', with all draft area plans published since the publication of the Regional Development Strategy. These studies identify housing capacity within defined urban footprints. So far urban capacity studies have been published for the 15 District Council areas covered by the draft Ards/Down Area Plan, Magherafelt Area Plan, Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, Northern Area Plan and the Banbridge/Newry/Mourne Area Plan. Work is currently in progress on a further six districts. Capacity studies for the remaining five District Council areas will be carried out as part of the relevant Area Plan preparation process.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Freedom of Information requests received by her Department in relation to an application for a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway in (i) September 2007; (ii) October 2007; and (iii) November 2007; and to detail how many of these have been granted and completed. (AQW 1940/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Eight requests were received in September. Final responses have been issued to three requestors. Interim responses were issued to four requestors, extending the timescale for response as permitted under regulation 7(1) of the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. Final replies in these cases, together with the response to the remaining requestor, will issue shortly.

No requests were received in October.

Three requests have been received in November and these are being considered.

Waste Management

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the proposals submitted by Arc21 in relation to their future plans for dealing with waste management. (AQW 1957/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In common with the two other Waste Management Groups, arc21 submitted a revised Waste Management Plan for the Department's consideration in 2006. The revised plan, which is a substantial and detailed document, was formally approved by the Department in December

2006, and can be viewed on the arc21 website (www.arc21.org.uk).

All three Waste Management Groups have since then followed up on their Waste Management Plans by submitting draft Strategic Outline Cases (SOCs) to the Department, setting out and comparing the available technological options for meeting their Waste Management Plan objectives in respect of waste arisings. The draft SOC's are currently being evaluated on behalf of the Department.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to give a timescale within which the Ards and Down Area Plan will be completed; and to advise whether or not it will be completed on schedule, in December 2007/January 2008. (AQW 2008/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is still awaiting the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Report on the Public Inquiry held to consider objections to the Ards and Down Area Plan. While the PAC had originally indicated that its Report would be available by the end of 2007, it has just recently advised that the report would be available no later than 31 March 2008. Despite the delay, it is still my Department's intention to publish the adopted Area Plan as soon as possible following receipt of the Report but without yet knowing the Report's contents, it is difficult to be precise about a timescale.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to indicate which planning condition she was considering using to secure the removal of the existing Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre, as mentioned in a departmental memo from a Planning Service official to her in September 2007. (AQW 2031/08)

The Minister of the Environment: When I met with my officials on 5 September we discussed in general terms the possible use of conditions, attached to an approval for development, to secure the removal of the existing centre facilities. No decisions were taken pending further discussion and consideration.

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1617/08 to provide details of the improvements Ulster Farm By-Products have instigated to reduce the odour impacts of their operations. (AQW 2043/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Ulster Farm By-Products operation is regulated by the Environment and Heritage Service through a permit issued under the Pollution Prevention and Control (NI) Regulations 2003.

The following actions have been undertaken by Ulster Farm By-Products Ltd since July 2005 to improve the odour impact of their operation:

- Installation of two thermal oxidisers units, one for each production line, to destroy the highly odorous gases arising from the process (at a cost of £2.2 million);
- Increasing the thermal oxidisers' chimney height from 15 metres to 30 metres to improve dispersion of residual emissions;
- Introduction of in-line condensers to reduce the odour loading on the thermal oxidisers, improve dispersion of residual emissions and reduce visible emissions;
- Introduction of improved procedures to deal with intake and storage of odorous material at weekends and public holidays when there can be a delay in processing thereby increasing the risk of odour;
- Replacement of Plant 1 roof, as a result of a smoke test, to reduce fugitive emissions of odour;
- Extension to the raw material intake on Plant 2, to ensure longer vehicles are totally enclosed within the building prior to delivery of odorous material;
- Installation of a lid to enclose the raw material reception bin on Plant 2 to minimise odorous emissions;
- Installation of self closing mechanisms on all personnel doors;
- Replacement of four slow opening roller shutter vehicular doors with rapid opening/ closing doors to minimise the escape of air from the buildings on delivery of odorous material;
- Interlocking of the rapid opening doors to the raw material bins to prevent both doors and bins being open at the same time;
- Replacement of bellows pieces, which were subject to failure and the release of odorous emissions, with more robust stainless steel versions;
- Installation of a back venting system on both blood and tallow storage tanks to prevent odorous air escaping during delivery and dispatch;
- Enclosure of meal reception area at Plant 2 with three roller shutter doors to minimise escape of fugitive odorous air from the building;
- Re-routing of odorous air from the meal cooling system on Plant 1 from chemical scrubbers to the more effective thermal oxidiser;

- Connection of odorous emissions from tallow and blood storage tanks to either the thermal oxidisers or boilers;
- Regular assessment of the destructive efficiency of the thermal oxidisers to maintain an optimum efficiency of destruction at +99%; and
- Appointment of independent consultants to review the entire operation in order to seek further improvements in odour control (Report expected early 2008).

Senior Managerial Posts

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of (i) women; and (ii) men, who hold senior managerial posts in each division within her Department. (AQW 2053/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are 17 members of the Senior Civil Service in the Department of the Environment. The breakdown is shown below:

| Agency/Division | Female | Male |
|--|----------|-----------|
| The Planning Service | 2 | 2 |
| Environment & Heritage Service | 0 | 4 |
| Driver Vehicle Agency | 0 | 1 |
| Local Government Policy Division | 0 | 2 |
| Planning & Environmental Policy Group | 1 | 1 |
| Road Safety Division | 0 | 1 |
| Corporate Services | 0 | 1 |
| Permanent Secretary & Deputy Secretary | 0 | 2 |
| Total | 3 | 14 |

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Staff Annual Reports

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of staff in each Northern Ireland Government Department who failed to achieve an acceptable grade in their annual report, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1628/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The following table details the number of staff in each Northern Ireland Government Department who failed to achieve an acceptable grade in their annual report, in each of the last three reporting years:

| Department | 2006/07 | 2005/06 | 2004/05 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Education | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Finance & Personnel | 8 | 5 | 10 |
| Agriculture & Rural Development | 2 | 2 | 12 |
| Regional Development | 5 | 6 | 0 |
| Office of the First Minister & Deputy First Minister | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Social Development | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| Enterprise, Trade & Investment | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| Environment | 3 | 8 | 6 |
| Culture, Arts and Leisure | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| Employment & Learning | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Reporting Year Total | 26 | 32 | 41 |

Staff Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of staff in each Northern Ireland Government department, who are currently undergoing disciplinary procedures as a result of an unacceptable sick record. (AQW 1629/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: For the purpose of answering this question the term 'disciplinary procedures' has been interpreted as those staff in receipt of a live written warning or under notice of dismissal. This information is subject to change on a day-to-day basis and represents only a snap shot.

The information requested is set out in the attached table.

| Department | Number of staff with a live warning or under notice of dismissal at November 2007 |
|----------------|---|
| DETI | 46 |
| DSD | 35 |
| DHSSPS | 12 |
| DRD | 35 |
| DE | 21 |
| DCAL | 17 |
| OFMDFM | 13 |
| DOE | 9 |
| DEL | 153 |
| DARD | 202 |
| DFP | 58 |
| Overall | 601 |

Government Contracts

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the policies and practices in place to encourage small and medium sized enterprises to tender for Government contracts; and what is his assessment of the success of these policies and practices. (AQW 1642/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy tasked the Procurement Board with providing assistance to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to compete more effectively for Government business.

The Central Procurement Directorate and Centres of Procurement Expertise, with the agreement of the Procurement Board:

- have developed guidance for SMEs seeking to do business with the Northern Ireland public sector;
- publish current tender opportunities on their websites;
- regularly engage with the supply base through 'Meet the Buyer Events' and 'Workshops' to provide encouragement for SMEs to tender, either as individual entities, where this is possible, or as part of a supply chain;
- provide comprehensive debriefing to unsuccessful tenderers to improve future performance in tender competitions; and
- promote innovation through procurement.

These practices and the increased use of technology have improved the ability of SMEs to source and compete for public sector tendering opportunities and created the capacity to trade in wider markets.

Draft Budget

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, broken down by Government Department, (i) all bids that were made in the process of establishing the draft Budget; (ii) those that were successful; and (iii) those that were unsuccessful. (AQW 1652/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland Departments put forward over 270 current expenditure spending proposals as part of the draft Budget 2008-11 process. While summary details are set out in the table below, I have placed a list in the Assembly Library of all the draft Budget resource spending proposals put forward by Departments.

The proposals set out in the draft Budget documents are at a strategic level, and it is for individual Ministers to determine how the additional resources from the Budget will be distributed within their respective Departments, in the context of their competing needs

and priorities and taking into account the public consultation responses. In view of this, it is not possible to indicate which proposals have been successful and which were unsuccessful.

TABLE 1: DRAFT BUDGET 2008-11 DEPARTMENTAL SPENDING PROPOSALS £000S

| | 2008-09 | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | No of Proposals |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| DARD | 42,000 | 44,000 | 46,000 | 50 |
| DCAL | 52,000 | 68,000 | 75,000 | 14 |
| DE | 397,000 | 576,000 | 678,000 | 32 |
| DEL | 118,000 | 173,000 | 203,000 | 27 |
| DETI | 40,000 | 39,000 | 40,000 | 23 |
| DFP | 5,000 | 3,000 | 3,000 | 14 |
| DOE | 49,000 | 68,000 | 66,000 | 10 |
| DHSSPS | 377,000 | 696,000 | 1,096,000 | 40 |
| DRD ¹ | 315,000 | 347,000 | 369,000 | 24 |
| DSD | 26,000 | 35,000 | 47,000 | 21 |
| OFMDFM | 18,000 | 18,000 | 19,000 | 15 |
| FSA | 1,000 | 1,000 | 2,000 | 4 |
| Total Value of Spending Proposals | 1,441,000 | 2,068,000 | 2,645,000 | 274 |

Civil Service Staff Transfers

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the procedures that are in place to enable employees of the United Kingdom Civil Service to transfer to the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQW 1829/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) are made on the basis of merit in fair and open competition and in accordance with the Northern Ireland Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code.

The Recruitment Code provides for a number of "Exceptions" to the merit principle including "Transfers into the Northern Ireland Civil Service of persons holding a post in another Civil Service of the Crown". The Code makes clear that Exceptions to the merit principle should be rare and there must be strong and compelling grounds as to why it is not reasonably practical to make the appointment in question in accordance with the merit principle.

Anyone wishing to be considered for a transfer on exceptional grounds should contact Recruitment Policy and Marketing Branch of DFP through the NICS

recruitment gateway at www.nicsrecruitment.gov.uk. They will be invited to complete an application form which will be considered by officials in the Branch, in consultation with Departments as necessary.

Health Budget

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the increase in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's budget in cash terms, since 2000. (AQW 1875/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since 2001-02 departmental budgets have been produced on a Resource Accounting and Budgeting basis and all budget information is now presented in this way. The budget for DHSSPS has increased by £0.9 billion from 2003-04 to 2007-08.

Although the budgets are no longer allocated on a cash basis, Departments require authority from Parliament to spend resources including cash. This shows that, in cash terms, DHSSPS spent some £1.4 billion more in 2007-08 than in 2000-01.

Civil Service Salaries

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service that are paid in excess of £100,000 per annum, in terms of salaries, bonuses and expenses; and to detail the percentage pay increase that these individuals have received over the past two years. (AQW 1954/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 1 April 2007 there were 25 individuals within the Northern Ireland Civil Service with salaries, including bonuses, in excess of £100,000.

The consolidated percentage increases for these 25 individuals arising from the 2006 and 2007 pay awards respectively were as follows:

TABLE 1.

| 2006 Pay Award | | 2007 Pay Award | |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| No. of Individuals | Percentage Increase | No. of Individuals | Percentage Increase |
| 1 | 2.5% | 13 | 2.25% |
| 12 | 3.0% | 1 | 3.27% |
| 1 | 3.25% | 10 | 3.75% |
| 1 | 4.0% | | |
| 8 | 4.5% | | |

Table 1. - Represents those officers in receipt of a pay increase in the 2006 (23) and 2007 (24) pay award. The remaining officers did not join the NICS in time to receive both the pay awards.

The question of expenses is not covered as it is a departmental issue requiring considerable research and co-ordination.

Economic Development

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on his projections for economic development, arising from the draft Budget 2008-2011. (AQO 992/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's strategic priorities and key plans for 2008-11 are set out in the draft Programme for Government, published alongside the draft Budget. In relation to economic development, the key goal is to halve the private sector productivity gap with the UK average (excluding the Greater South East) by 2015. I believe this is an ambitious but achievable goal against an appropriate benchmark. It also takes into account the limited policy levers available to the NI Executive.

Northern Ireland Direct

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the benefits arising from the Northern Ireland Direct project. (AQO 901/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: NI Direct is one of the priorities set out in the Programme for Government and is intended to deliver simple, high quality and efficient access to government services through a single three digit number. The main benefits, which are still being assessed, will include a service that is accessible, responsive and socially inclusive and ultimately more efficient. It will also allow us to respond much more effectively to incidents such as the flooding earlier this year which will be a major benefit to the public generally. For many people call waiting times will be reduced and they will be able to experience a "one and done" service where queries will be dealt with at the first point of contact.

The public will also be able to use different means of contacting government, whether on-line or by telephone, that will be available outside the traditional working day.

Transfer of Policing and Justice Powers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on the financial

implications that the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Executive will have on the Northern Ireland block grant. (AQO 896/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The financial implications of the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Executive will form an important strand of the negotiations on the devolution of these functions.

A key issue must be that the funding mechanism for the transfer must have no negative implications for the funding available for other devolved services, either in the short or long term.

A satisfactory resolution of all matters concerned must be reached before the powers will be devolved.

Rating System

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on the means through which the rating system can be used to encourage a more environmentally friendly use of resources. (AQO 928/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The package of measures I announced earlier includes proposals for rate relief for ratepayers who undertake improvement works, such as double glazing and cavity wall insulation. My officials, with advice from DETI, are examining in detail proposals from the Worldwide Fund for Nature which emerged from the public consultation. This was for a rate discount scheme to reward those who spend money to conserve energy. Their proposals are modelled on schemes which have been operating successfully in some parts of England, part funded through schemes which use contributions from the power generating companies.

There are issues to be addressed about how such a initiative could best be funded in NI and also how it would align with other schemes already in existence for low income groups. If it stacks up, however, I aim to bring forward legislation next year.

I also want to encourage the development of housing that is environmentally friendly and am also proposing a rates holiday on the first purchase of new zero carbon houses. There are issues to be addressed in relation to establishing and administering an appropriate, clear and above all, a realistic standard, but I believe this can be achieved.

Both measures offer potential to align with my Department's objectives for sustainable development but also make a modest though effective contribution to what is now a pressing global issue.

Persons of Compulsory School Age

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the projected increase in the numbers and percentage of persons of compulsory school age in the population of Northern Ireland over the next five years. (AQO 989/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: From a baseline of 290,000 in 2006, the latest population projections shows that the number of children aged 4 to 15 years inclusive is projected to fall to 280,000 in 2011. This is a fall of 3.5% over this five-year period.

Economic Vision for Northern Ireland

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on the economic vision for Northern Ireland within the draft Budget 2008-2011. (AQO 991/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's overarching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland supported by a vibrant and dynamic economy.

To achieve this, the leading priority of the draft Budget, and associated draft Programme for Government, is to grow a dynamic, competitive, highly skilled, enterprising and innovative economy.

Public Procurement

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to utilise public procurement as part of the Budget 2008-2011, in order to meet the aims of the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 950/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Each Department is accountable for its own budget and how that budget is spent. However, my Department and the Procurement Board will work with the other Departments to assist them to obtain Best Value for Money and deliver their Programme for Government commitments through the application of procurement policy and best practice in procurement and will encourage them to take due cognisance of the Sustainable Development Strategy, where appropriate.

Equality Impact Assessments

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of equality impact assessments carried out by his Department in the last 12 months. (AQO 948/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In the last 12 months my Department has carried out one Equality Impact Assessment and this has been on Workplace 2010.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of funding allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in each of the last five years; and the amount allocated to it in the draft Budget 2008-2011. (AQO 893/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The amount of funding allocated in the last five years is as follows: In 2003-04, £3.04 billion; in 2004-05 £3.23 billion; in 2005-06 £3.52 billion; in 2006-07 £3.77 billion and £3.99 billion in 2007-08.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public safety have been allocated over 50% of the increase in funding from 2007-08 to 2010-11 proposed in the draft Budget

This corresponds to a total budget of £4.14 billion in 2008-09; £4.27 billion in 2009-10 and 4.47 billion in 2010-11.

This draft Budget was agreed unanimously by the Executive.

Mandatory Microgeneration

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will make a statement on mandatory microgeneration. (AQO 915/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In July 2006 the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain, announced that the Building Regulations would be amended to require microgeneration in all new buildings from April 2008.

At the time of this statement, officials were preparing to introduce an amendment to the Building Regulations that would improve standards by approximately 40%, with a corresponding reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. This amendment came into operation in November 2006. The methodology introduced by the amendment allows designers to meet the new standards in a manner best suited to the specific circumstances of each building. Indeed, supporting documents provide solutions to encourage and facilitate the integration of microgeneration in buildings.

I have re-examined the former Secretary of State's proposals and have concluded that the flexibility which the methodology in the current Regulations

affords to designers and developers should not be compromised by the introduction of such a prescriptive requirement. I have therefore decided not to proceed with the policy set out by the former Secretary of State that all new buildings should incorporate microgeneration. I consider that this decision better serves the interests not only to the construction industry, but also the wider general public and, in particular, the needs of first-time buyers.

Industrial De-Rating

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is his assessment of the report on industrial de-rating, produced by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland. (AQO 945/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The report provides a very useful assessment on the impact of the policy to phase out industrial de-rating. Along with representations I have had with industry and my own Department's views, it has helped to inform the announcement I made in the draft Budget. The report points to much lower risks to employment than had been suggested in some quarters and suggests that industrial rates should go no further than 50% over the next five years. Their conclusions are based on the expert modelling they have undertaken, on a range of scenarios. However, ERINI does qualify its conclusions by pointing to a distinct lack of empirical evidence available at this time.

As part of the draft Budget I proposed erring on the side of caution by holding the current level of rates at 30% over the CSR period, ie until April 2011. My reasons for doing so are to do with competitive pressures and a growing realisation of the difficulties we face in offering alternative financial support measures for business, particularly our manufacturing base. I believe that this is entirely in keeping with the Executive's priority to promote economic development. It is a pragmatic approach, rather than an attachment to industrial de-rating per se. Its value lies in the protected status it has enjoyed thus far but if you could choose, no one would choose to introduce this today as part of economic policy.

I have the support of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for this position and I am hopeful of securing the support of my ministerial colleagues when the matter is put to them for endorsement shortly.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Fire Alarms

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by

district council area, the number of fire alarms that were installed in homes by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1623/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The information requested is not held in the form requested. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) does not install fire alarm systems. The information provided in the table indicates the number of battery operated smoke alarms fitted in homes by NIFRS staff from June 2006 to November 2007 by each Area Command. Prior to June 2006 NIFRS did not record the number of smoke alarms fitted each year.

SMOKE ALARMS FITTED BY EACH NIFRS AREA COMMAND

| Area | Year | | Area Total |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| | 06/07 | 07/08 | |
| Eastern | 1531 | 1720 | 3251 |
| Northern | 738 | 865 | 1603 |
| Southern | 1767 | 2542 | 4309 |
| Western | 795 | 1127 | 1922 |
| Period Total | 4831 | 6254 | 11085 |

Fire Alarms

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service of installing (i) single fire alarms in homes; and (ii) all fire alarms in homes, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1625/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) does not install fire alarm systems. It does install domestic smoke alarms that each cost £6.74 to the NIFRS. Prior to June 2006 smoke alarms were donated to NIFRS free of charge from various organisations. These smoke alarms were fitted to households free of charge to the public as part of the Service's community fire safety remit.

The following table outlines the purchase costs of smoke alarms incurred by NIFRS since June 2006.

| Year | Smoke Alarms fitted | Total cost fitted smoke alarms |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| June 06-Mar 07 | 4,831 | £32,560.94 |
| Apr-Sept 07 | 6,254 | £42,151.96 |

Productivity Within the Health Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he has taken to increase productivity within the Health Service in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1636/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Good progress has been made on improving productivity and I am committed to ensuring that productivity is further increased across the CSR period. Some of the actions that my Department has taken to make better use from existing resources are:

- **Efficiency savings** - over the period 2005-06 to 2007-08, the Department has realised total annual efficiencies of £260 million of which at least £146 million were resource releasing. Improved productivity has also enabled the Department to meet the non-resource releasing efficiency target of £115m by 2007/08.
- **Reform and modernisation** - across a wide range of healthcare activity. This has facilitated the significant improvements in waiting times and is making radical changes in how clinics are managed and how patients are booked into hospital, all aimed at increasing the number of patients that can be seen within existing resources.
- **Introduction of Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services (ICATS)** – this provides new integrated multi-disciplinary teams of health care professionals to better manage the interface between GPs and the secondary care sector.
- **Reform of A&E** – a programme of changes to A&E services has meant that trolley waits are being eradicated and by March 2008, 95% of patients who attend A&E should be either treated or admitted within four hours of their arrival in the department.
- **Benchmarking** - Trusts are currently expected to identify, in a register now embedded within each Trust's Delivery Plan (planning document), the full range of benchmarking activity planned or ongoing, whether initiated as a result of highlighted reference unit cost variations or otherwise.
- **Acute Hospital Portfolio** - The Acute Hospital Portfolio is a performance information and improvement tool consisting of a collection of audits of key services areas allowing detailed comparison against information systematically collected and validated from GB and NI Trusts.
- **Departmental value for money audit strategy** – The Department has in place a value for money audit strategy and has conducted 2-3 studies each year on a range of topics such as maternity services and statutory residential care. Trusts must take action to deal with the issues arising from these reports.

- **Reduced absenteeism and staff turnover** – targets have been set to reduce staff turnover, costs of locum staff and absenteeism levels.
- **Consideration of new finance regime** – the current finance regime is being reviewed to consider how to facilitate and incentivise reform and increased productivity. An example of this is the “final offer” scheme which is used to move resources from one Trust to another should a waiting time breach be unmanageable within the original Trust.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of whether or not accident and emergency departments should provide separate waiting areas for young children, in order to ensure their safety. (AQW 1650/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trusts should ensure the safety and security of all patients, particularly children, attending hospital accident and emergency departments. However, it is for individual Trusts to decide how this is best delivered in light of the particular circumstances at their hospitals.

I am advised that the majority of hospitals do provide separate waiting and treatment areas for children at their A&E Departments and that the management of children is determined according to clinical need.

Hospital Travel Costs Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people in West Tyrone in receipt of payments from the hospital travel costs scheme in 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 1654/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The systems operated in Trust facilities do not hold the information in the format requested.

The information asked for could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Locally-Based Commissioning of Health Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the need for locally-based commissioning of health services. (AQW 1689/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I am absolutely clear that we must have a patient-led service which understands the needs of patients and clients through strong local involvement. I also want to see resources used in a way which maximises the benefits to the people by continually driving up quality and standards without compromise. I am currently considering how the future commissioning arrangements can help deliver on this.

Health Sector Commissioning Function

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the importance of separating the commissioning function from those organisations delivering services in the health sector. (AQW 1690/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I am absolutely clear that we must have a patient-led service which understands the needs of patients and clients through strong local involvement. I also want to see resources used in a way which maximises the benefits to the people by continually driving up quality and standards without compromise. I am currently considering how the future commissioning arrangements can help deliver on this.

Music Therapy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the benefits of the provision of music therapy for children and young people with special educational needs and mental health problems. (AQW 1691/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: It is the role for professional research to assess the benefits of music therapy for children and young people with special educational needs and mental health problems.

Currently, under the Arioso Project, the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust delivers music therapy services to 17 special schools for children with severe learning difficulties.

In April 2006 the Department of Education, through their Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), evaluated the work of the Arioso Project over the preceding two years. The main findings of ETI were that music therapy provided an important and valued addition to the curriculum of special schools, that it makes an important positive contribution, as an allied health provision, to special schools and that it enhances the lives of some distressed young people who have learning disabilities.

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance his Department has given to the Northern Ireland branch of Diabetes UK in each of the last three years. (AQW 1694/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Diabetes UK (NI) has not sought financial assistance from my Department in the last three years. However, my Department has been working closely with the organisation through a regional steering group for diabetes to implement the recommendations of the joint CREST/Diabetes UK (NI) Report "A Blueprint for Diabetes Care in NI in the 21st Century" (2003).

Breast Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average time taken for women referred to the Ulster Hospital with suspected breast cancer to receive (i) an examination; and (ii) an operation. (AQW 1697/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been advised that the Ulster Hospital does not routinely record the information requested. However, the Trust is required to ensure that all patients with suspected breast cancer who are urgently referred for outpatient assessment must be seen within 14 days. The Trust has confirmed that during the past three months over 98% of such referrals have been seen within two weeks.

In addition, the Trust must ensure that by March 2008 75% of patients diagnosed with cancer, including breast cancer, must be treated within 62 days from initial referral by the GP. The Trust's performance against this standard over the past three months has been 98.2%.

My Department will continue to work closely with Health and Social Care bodies and the Northern Ireland Cancer Network to ensure patients here have timely access to diagnosis and treatment.

Crest/Diabetes United Kingdom Taskforce Report

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in relation to the framework document that was to be produced following the joint Crest/Diabetes United Kingdom Taskforce report. (AQW 1721/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The joint CREST/Diabetes UK

Taskforce was established in 2001. The taskforce published a framework for the development of services for people with diabetes in 2003. The Taskforce envisaged that a 5-10 year programme would be needed to implement the framework. Currently each of the four HSS Boards have local groups in place to take forward the detailed planning and implementation of the recommendations made by the taskforce and the Department has in place a Regional Diabetes Steering Group to oversee progress.

Since the Taskforce Report was published an additional £2.5m has been invested in services for people with diabetes. Over 70 additional staff including 20 specialist diabetic nurses and 40 podiatrists and dieticians have been recruited to provide services for people with diabetes.

Drug and Alcohol Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the progress of the Drug and Alcohol Strategy. (AQW 1723/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The implementation of the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) began in October 2006, and its overall aim is to reduce the level of alcohol and drug related harm in Northern Ireland.

Progress to date includes:

- the establishment of the cross-sectoral NSD Steering group which is overseeing and driving forward the implementation of the NSD and supported by four advisory groups (Treatment and Support, Children Young People and Families, Binge Drinking, and Law and Criminal Justice);
- a total of £6.8 million has been allocated to the implementation of the NSD in 07/08;
- regional alcohol and drug public information campaigns are being taken forward in particular a regional campaign which aims to tackle the culture of binge drinking, supported by local activities;
- work is also being taken forward regionally on developing action plans to tackle cocaine misuse, alcohol misuse among children and young people and "Hidden Harm" (ie the additional risks faced by children born to, and living with, parental/carer alcohol and drug misuse);
- the four local Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs) are implementing their own Local Action Plans. These have been developed in response to local need and in support of the NSD outcomes, one such outcome is the provision of mentoring and counselling services for young

people in respect of alcohol and drug misuse in each of the four Board Areas.

Pathology Services at Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to retain and expand the provision of pathology services at Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 1757/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Appropriate clinical pathology services will be provided at Altnagelvin Area Hospital to support local clinical needs.

On 28 November 2006 the Department issued for public consultation the recommendations of a review of clinical pathology laboratory services in Northern Ireland. The pathology review report makes 23 recommendations which aim to ensure the sustainability of high quality hospital laboratory services across Northern Ireland.

The consultation ended on 28 February 2007. 289 responses were received and my Department has been considering these in detail. I expect to make an announcement in the near future regarding the final recommendations for the future of pathology services, including those provided at Altnagelvin.

Diabetes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's targets in relation to the retinal screening of patients with diabetes; and to confirm whether his Department is currently meeting these targets. (AQW 1758/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department's target, published in Priorities for Action 2007-08, is that Boards and Trusts should begin rolling out a diabetic retinopathy screening programme from April 2007, with full coverage being achieved across Northern Ireland by March 2008. The number of eligible people with diabetes to be invited for annual screening was estimated to be 50,000.

Roll out is progressing well and all GP practices are actively supporting and participating in the Northern Ireland programme. Based on throughput to date, it is estimated that 35,000 people will have been invited for screening by 31 March 2008. Full coverage may not be achieved in 2007/8 due to recruitment difficulties, staff retention, and subsequent training requirements.

During the programme rollout, it was agreed that those people with diabetes but at low risk of developing sight-threatening retinopathy in the next three to four

years would not be invited for screening. This is an interim measure and applies to approximately 7,000 individuals who were screened in 2006/7 and who will be screened again in 2008/9.

Diabetes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to increase awareness of diabetes; and what advice is provided to carers of people with diabetes.
(AQW 1760/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department has a range of public health and health promotion strategies in place to underpin efforts to tackle diabetes. These strategies seek to raise public awareness of the importance of good nutrition, physical activity and smoking cessation in preventing diabetes and in slowing down the onset of complications, such as eye, renal and heart disease, which people with diabetes may develop. The Health and Social Services Boards have also undertaken a number of initiatives with community pharmacies to raise awareness and they are also developing exercise and healthy eating initiatives to reinforce the public health message on diabetes.

Most people with diabetes are able to live with and manage their own condition effectively. However, those who develop other serious conditions as a result of diabetes may require further assistance and support from a range of health and social care professionals and this would include the provision of advice and support for their carers. The parents or guardians of children with diabetes will also receive support and advice from specialist paediatric diabetic teams.

Respite Care

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that there is adequate provision for equitable respite care for people who are suffering from mental health problems and their families in the Newcastle area; and in the South Down constituency.
(AQW 1761/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently the South Eastern Trust does not provide respite in residential accommodation or in hospital for people who are suffering from mental health problems and their families in the Newcastle area and in the South Down constituency.

However, respite is provided for carers through the Carers Development Officer who was employed as a result of the Caring for Carers Strategy. This respite

takes the form of Carers Awaydays and Pamper Days. Carers can also apply for a grant to help fund short breaks. Complementary therapies are also available for carers and they have access to a Cause Carer Advocate who can also access Awaydays, support groups and education sessions.

Diabetes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that people with diabetes have free access to blood testing strips; and to outline his current policy in relation to this matter.
(AQW 1762/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Blood testing strips are currently available on the Drug Tariff for Health Service prescription in Northern Ireland. Patients who suffer from diabetes, except where treatment is by diet alone, are currently exempt from prescription charges and therefore do not pay for blood testing strips. There is currently a review of prescription charges for all in Northern Ireland.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what services are specifically tailored for children who have Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.
(AQW 1774/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders may require access to a range of services. While there are no dedicated services for this group of children their management will be tailored to their individual needs and circumstances, the severity of their condition and their responsiveness to interventions.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what specific training is given to paediatricians with regard to diagnosing and treating Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.
(AQW 1775/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Within the paediatric specialty there are three levels of competence that must be achieved before completion of training. From the outset of training in the specialty, doctors are trained to recognise the features of dysmorphic syndromes (birth defects). As part of the approved specialty curriculum, doctors in training are made aware of the

environmental factors which may affect pre-natal development, including drugs and alcohol and the appropriate treatment regimes.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what specific training is given to midwives with regard to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. (AQW 1776/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are several courses provided for midwives within which the subject of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is included.

- BSc in Midwifery Sciences at Queen's University, three year programme. Although this topic is not covered specifically within the programme, information about lifestyle choices including alcohol use and misuse are covered both antenatal, intranatal, post natal and neonatal elements of the course. The Public Health module also covers the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and strategies to promote responsible alcohol use.
- BSc in Midwifery Studies at Queen's University, 18-month programme. Specific training about FAS is included in the first module of this course.
- Post registration Midwifery programmes at Queen's University. In the Special Care of the Newborn module, the topic of FAS is discussed as part of the lecture on congenital abnormalities. This module is attended by midwives and neo-natal nurses. The Midwifery Examination of the Newborn introduces FAS when discussing facial abnormalities.
- Post registration study day at Beeches Management Centre. A study day on 'Drug and Alcohol Misuse in Pregnancy' includes a lecture on the effects of drugs and alcohol on the foetus and clinical manifestations, delivered by a Consultant Neonatologist. This course has been in delivered since 1998 on 20 occasions with a total of 431 participants having attended.

Seymour House Nursing Home, Dunmurry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will make a statement on the future of Seymour House Nursing Home in Dunmurry, County Antrim. (AQW 1782/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As a result of the findings of a detailed audit, my Department instructed HSS Boards to carry out a comprehensive review of all their statutory residential provision. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board consequently reviewed the status of

Seymour House Nursing Home, Dunmurry. After a consultation process involving residents, their relatives as well as local people and their representatives, Seymour House was deemed to be suitable for closure. A final decision on the future of Seymour House has yet to be taken by the Board.

Cervical Cancer Tests

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to offer cervical cancer tests to children, similar to those offered in Great Britain; and to give a timescale within which these measures will be implemented.

(AQW 1787/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would like to be in a position to confirm that I will be introducing a human papilloma virus vaccination programme in 2008/09 aimed at reducing the number of deaths from cervical cancer. This decision, however, will be subject to the final figures that emerge from the budgetary process.

Cervical Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with cervical cancer who (i) have received treatment; (ii) have not received treatment; and (iii) have survived the disease; in each of the last four years.

(AQW 1788/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Table 1 below, details the number of females diagnosed with cervical cancer (ICD -10 C53) and whether they had received treatment or not.

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF CERVICAL CANCER IN NORTHERN IRELAND BY YEAR OF DIAGNOSIS AND WHETHER TREATMENT WAS RECEIVED OR NOT

| | No treatment received | Treatment received | Total |
|------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------|
| 2002 | 5 | 77 | 82 |
| 2003 | 6 | 71 | 77 |
| 2004 | 9 | 64 | 73 |
| 2005 | 15 | 72 | 87 |

Note

Treatment with respect to these figures refers to surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy and makes no distinction between palliative and curative intent. Receipt of treatment is measured from diagnosis up to mid-2006. The increasing numbers of patients having received no treatment in 2005 are likely a result of treatment occurring after that point.

Survival figures for any one year are not meaningful, however the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry calculates survival rates for various

cancers. The five year survival rate for cervical cancer for patients diagnosed between 1997 and 2000 was 67.8%. Alternatively, of the 968 patients that were diagnosed with cervical cancer between 1993 and 2004, 613 (63.3%) were still alive at the end of 2005.

This information has been provided by the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (established in 1994) and is the most up to date currently available.

Ambulance Cover

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will confirm that there is only one ambulance available in Newtownards on Monday and Tuesday nights, when the target is to have two ambulances available. (AQW 1789/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has confirmed that one Accident and Emergency ambulance operates from Newtownards Ambulance Station on Monday and Tuesday nights. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board, which is responsible for commissioning ambulance services in the Ards Peninsula, considers that this level of cover is appropriate to deal with emergency calls in the area on those nights.

Ambulance Response Times

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will confirm that ambulance response times will be improved; and to detail, in respect of ambulance call outs in Newtownards and Strangford, (i) the location from which the ambulance is discharged; and (ii) the length of time

taken for each ambulance to reach its destination, in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 1790/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The target in my 2007/08 Priorities for Action for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is to respond to a monthly average of 65% of Category A, life threatening calls within eight minutes rising to 70% for the month of March 2008. In addition, my Department's Public Service Agreement framework, which supports the Executive's draft 2008-11 Programme for Government, includes a target for NIAS to respond to 75% of life-threatening calls within eight minutes by 2011.

NIAS's performance has improved in recent years by initiatives such as the introduction of paramedic Rapid Response Vehicles, new tactical response locations and the imminent introduction of Automatic Vehicle Location and Satellite Navigation technology. The Department will continue to work with NIAS and the Health and Social Services Boards to secure performance improvement.

NIAS has advised that the ambulance call-out data requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost. However, the following tables set out the Trust's performance against the current targets for the three categories of emergency calls in the Newtownards and Strangford areas during the period requested. Normally ambulances responding to these calls would have based at Newtownards and Bangor stations or the Donaghadee deployment point. However, it should be borne in mind that if ambulances at these locations were already attending calls the next nearest available ambulance would have been despatched from another area.

NEWTOWNARDS NOV 06 - OCT 07

| RESPONSES | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|---------|---------|------------|-----------|---------|------------|-----------|---------|-------------|
| Month | A | | A Total | B | | B Total | C | | C Total | Grand Total |
| | <= 8 Min | > 8 Min | | <= 18 Mins | > 18 Mins | | <= 18 Mins | > 18 Mins | | |
| November | 73 | 20 | 93 | 78 | 5 | 83 | 19 | | 19 | 195 |
| December | 57 | 22 | 79 | 89 | 8 | 97 | 41 | 1 | 42 | 218 |
| January | 75 | 25 | 100 | 103 | 2 | 105 | 23 | | 23 | 228 |
| February | 70 | 18 | 88 | 69 | 4 | 73 | 19 | 1 | 20 | 181 |
| March | 48 | 22 | 70 | 85 | 1 | 86 | 18 | 1 | 19 | 175 |
| April | 64 | 23 | 87 | 93 | 2 | 95 | 33 | 3 | 36 | 218 |
| May | 54 | 19 | 73 | 87 | 3 | 90 | 20 | | 20 | 183 |
| June | 58 | 14 | 72 | 87 | 2 | 89 | 15 | | 15 | 176 |
| July | 48 | 13 | 61 | 80 | 1 | 81 | 26 | 1 | 27 | 169 |
| August | 56 | 9 | 65 | 69 | 2 | 71 | 22 | 1 | 23 | 159 |
| September | 66 | 16 | 82 | 77 | 2 | 79 | 27 | | 27 | 188 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-------------|------------|----------|------------|-------------|
| October | 49 | 18 | 67 | 76 | 1 | 77 | 34 | | 34 | 178 |
| Grand Total | 718 | 219 | 937 | 993 | 33 | 1026 | 297 | 8 | 305 | 2268 |

STRANGFORD NOV 06 - OCT 07

| RESPONSES | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|-------------|
| Month | A | | A Total | B | | B Total | C | | C Total | Grand Total |
| | <= 8 Min | > 8 Min | | <= 18 Mins | > 18 Mins | | <= 18 Mins | > 18 Mins | | |
| November | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 1 |
| December | | | | 3 | | 3 | | | | 3 |
| January | | 2 | 2 | 1 | | 1 | | | | 3 |
| February | | | | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| March | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 1 |
| April | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | 1 |
| May | | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | | 1 | 4 |
| June | | | | 2 | | 2 | | | | 2 |
| July | | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | | 1 | 4 |
| August | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | 1 |
| October | | | | 2 | 1 | 3 | | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Grand Total | | 6 | 6 | 15 | 1 | 16 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 26 |

Note:

Emergency 999 ambulance calls are categorised as follows:

Category A: life threatening (target response within 8 minutes)

Category B: serious but not immediately life threatening (target response within 18 minutes); and

Category C: not life threatening and not serious (target response within 18 minutes).

Ambulance Cover

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to restore full ambulance cover in Newtownards on Monday and Tuesday nights. (AQW 1791/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has confirmed that one Accident and Emergency ambulance operates from Newtownards Ambulance Station on Monday and Tuesday nights. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board, which is responsible for commissioning ambulance services in the Ards Peninsula, considers that this level of cover is appropriate to deal with emergency calls in the area on those nights.

Deaths From Misuse/Abuse of Drugs

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, broken down by constituency, the number of deaths attributed to the misuse or abuse of drugs in each of the last five years. (AQO 890/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The table gives the number of deaths registered by parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland each year between 2002 and 2006, where the underlying cause was “drug poisoning”¹. The figures include deaths due to legal drugs (e.g. a paracetamol overdose), illegal drugs or a combination of both.

1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes:

F11-F16, F18-F19 - Mental and behavioural disorders related to drug use.

X40-X44 - Accidental poisoning by drugs.

X60-X64 - Intentional self-poisoning by drugs.

X85 - Assault by drugs.

Y10-Y14 - Undetermined and other poisoning by drugs.

TABLE: NUMBER OF DEATHS REGISTERED EACH YEAR BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY IN NORTHERN IRELAND WHERE THE UNDERLYING CAUSE OF DEATH WAS “DRUG POISONING”

| Constituency | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 ^p |
|---------------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|
| Belfast East | 2 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 8 |
| Belfast North | 6 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 10 |

| Constituency | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 ^P |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Belfast South | 4 | 4 | 4 | 12 | 6 |
| Belfast West | 13 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 5 |
| East Antrim | 3 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| East Londonderry | 0 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Fermanagh And South Tyrone | 3 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 3 |
| Foyle | 9 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 14 |
| Lagan Valley | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 8 |
| Mid Ulster | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 4 |
| Newry And Armagh | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 4 |
| North Antrim | 4 | 10 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| North Down | 4 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| South Antrim | 5 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 3 |
| South Down | 2 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| Strangford | 4 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Upper Bann | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 1 |
| West Tyrone | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 68 | 52 | 48 | 84 | 91 |

P 2006 data is provisional until the publication of the Registrar General Annual Report in December 2007.

Arson Related Incidents

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on how many occasions has the Cadogan fire station on Lisburn Road, Belfast, dealt with arson related incidents in each of the last 24 months.

(AQW 1792/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recorded Arson-Related Incidents for Cadogan Fire Station by month from 1 November 2005 up to 20 November 2007 are shown in the table below:

| Month | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|-------|------|------|------|
| Jan | | 55 | 25 |
| Feb | | 78 | 37 |
| Mar | | 44 | 51 |
| Apr | | 96 | 112 |
| May | | 81 | 84 |
| Jun | | 95 | 70 |
| Jul | | 168 | 96 |

| Month | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|-------|------|------|------|
| Aug | | 77 | 77 |
| Sept | | 60 | 84 |
| Oct | | 57 | 65 |
| Nov | 66 | 52 | *35 |
| Dec | 44 | 51 | |

* Part of month

Arson Related Incidents

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service policy of reporting arson to the police. (AQW 1793/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service policy on arson requires that where arson is suspected or evident as the cause of fire, the Officer-in-Charge of the incident will normally request the attendance of PSNI at the scene, if not in attendance already. PSNI will be advised at the time that arson is suspected or confirmed.

Nurse Cover

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of nurse cover per head of population in Northern Ireland, compared to England, Scotland and Wales.

(AQW 1805/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Tables 1 and 2 below give details of the numbers of qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff per 1000 population for September 2006 (the latest date for which information is available) for Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

TABLE 1.
QUALIFIED NURSING, MIDWIFERY AND HEALTH VISITING STAFF PER 1000 POPULATION, NI, ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND WALES - SEPTEMBER 2006, HEADCOUNT

| | NI | England | Scotland | Wales |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Qualified nursing staff | 15,777 | 374,538 | 47,873 | 31,887 |
| Population | 1,741,600 | 50,762,900 | 5,116,900 | 2,965,900 |
| Per 1000 pop. | 9.1 | 7.4 | 9.4 | 10.8 |

TABLE 2.
QUALIFIED NURSING, MIDWIFERY AND HEALTH VISITING
STAFF PER 1000 POPULATION, NI, ENGLAND, SCOTLAND
AND WALES - SEPTEMBER 2006, WHOLE-TIME EQUIVALENT

| | NI | England | Scotland | Wales |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Qualified nursing staff | 13,457.74 | 307,447.00 | 41,239.60 | 20,980.30 |
| Population | 1,741,600 | 50,762,900 | 5,116,900 | 2,965,900 |
| Per 1000 pop. | 7.7 | 6.1 | 8.1 | 7.1 |

Sources: NI - Human Resources Management System, England - Department of Health, Scotland - Department of Health, Wales - Statistics for Wales

Population figures: Office for National Statistics mid-year estimates 2006

Clostridium Difficile

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of hospitals in Northern Ireland that have had outbreaks of clostridium difficile since 2004. (AQW 1814/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Defining an outbreak is a complex issue, therefore it is not an appropriate measure for monitoring the incidence and prevalence of Clostridium difficile infection. A mandatory Clostridium difficile surveillance programme is in place to monitor trends in patients aged 65 years and over with Clostridium difficile associated disease (CDAD) by hospital.

The table below gives the number of hospitals reporting outbreaks of Clostridium difficile, 2004-2006.

| Year | Number of hospitals |
|------|---------------------|
| 2004 | 0 |
| 2005 | 0 |
| 2006 | 4 |
| 2007 | 4 |

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.

Clostridium Difficile

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases of clostridium difficile that (i) have been diagnosed in Northern Ireland since 2004; and (ii) were contracted in hospital by patients who were admitted for other causes. (AQW 1815/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) Until 2005 the procedure for reporting Clostridium difficile patient episodes was voluntary. Therefore, data for 2004 is available, but can only be presented by diagnostic laboratory and can not be disaggregated to individual hospitals. In that year 1381 patient episodes, in all age groups, were reported. This is detailed in the table below.

| Diagnostic Lab. | GP | Inpatients | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Altnagelvin | 5 | 106 | 111 |
| Antrim | 12 | 103 | 115 |
| Belfast City | 17 | 612 | 629 |
| Causeway | 0 | 85 | 85 |
| Craigavon | 12 | 246 | 258 |
| Ulster | 2 | 181 | 183 |
| Total | 48 | 1333 | 1381 |

Data for the number of Clostridium difficile episodes in patients aged 65 years and over have been recorded for each Trust, and where possible by hospital, in Northern Ireland in 2005 and 2006. This information is presented in the following table which refers to the Trust configuration at that time.

| 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 |
| Greenpark | Forster Green Hospital | 0 | 0 |
| | Musgrave Park Hospital | 12 | 22 |
| Mater | Mater Infirmorum Hospital | 32 | 88 |
| Newry & Mourne | Daisy Hill Hospital | 31 | 18 |

| Trust | Hospital | 2005* | 2006 |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 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 |

(ii) The number of patient episodes of *Clostridium difficile* that were contracted in hospital by patients who were admitted for other causes is not available. The current system of reporting makes no differentiation between community and hospital acquired infections of *Clostridium difficile*. Thus, whilst some patients may develop *Clostridium difficile* after admission, this does not imply that the infection has been acquired in that hospital. Therefore, for any patient episode, it is important to note that the infection may have been acquired in the community or in another healthcare facility and the patient subsequently transferred to the reporting hospital.

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

Paramedics

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of trained paramedics working in ambulance stations in West Tyrone. (AQW 1830/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 16 trained paramedical staff working in ambulance stations in West Tyrone. West Tyrone consists of both Omagh and Castlederg Ambulance Stations.

Rapid Response Cars

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current number of rapid response cars operational in West Tyrone, and the average period of time that each car is operational per day. (AQW 1831/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently, one Rapid Response Vehicle operates from Omagh Ambulance Station between 8.00am to 8.00pm seven days a week.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline why the staff in one Belfast Accident and Emergency Department are paid more than other staff working in the Accident and Emergency Department of another Belfast hospital. (AQW 1832/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a single Job Evaluation Scheme to cover all non-medical jobs in the Health Service. This scheme ensures that staff are paid on the basis of the job that they are doing and the skills and knowledge they apply to that job. It is not possible to be more specific in this reply without details of the actual jobs/professions and the locations to which the member is referring.

Nursing Students

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that nursing degree students at Queens University, Belfast, are not eligible for student loans; and to detail what action he is taking to ensure that this facility is available to nursing students in order to ensure that students are not discouraged from taking up places. (AQW 1876/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that nursing students in Northern Ireland are not eligible for student loans, whether they study at degree or diploma level. The reason for this is that degree or diploma students who undertake pre-registration nursing courses either at Queen's University Belfast, or the University of Ulster, receive a non means-tested bursary of £5770 per annum; in addition their course fees are met by DHSSPS and therefore they do not make a contribution to their fees, unlike other students.

Nursing Students

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that nursing degree students at Queens University, Belfast, are not eligible for childcare funding support that is available to other degree students; to outline what other childcare support is available to nursing students and how this compares with that provided to other degree students, and to outline the action he proposes to take to ensure nursing degree students are treated equally.

(AQW 1877/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently nursing students in Northern Ireland are not eligible for any childcare funding support; however my Department has recently carried out a review of student support for nursing students in Northern Ireland and one of the issues considered by the Review Group was the lack of childcare support for student nurses in Northern Ireland.

The recommendations from the report are currently out to public consultation, which is due to end 11 January 2008. Subject to the outcome of the consultation, it is anticipated that a new childcare allowance will be introduced for nursing students in the new year.

Respite Care

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what facilities are available in the Mid Ulster area for all types of respite care.

(AQW 1906/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Respite care can be provided in a range of different settings depending on the needs and preferences of the service user and/or their carer. In Mid Ulster the Northern Health and Social Care Trust provides respite care in Hollybank and Westlands, both statutory units, and in private residential and nursing homes as well as three day centres. Alongside these facilities, the Trust has 16 family based respite carers in the Mid Ulster area and a range of contracts with domiciliary care providers to provide respite care in a peoples own homes.

Hospital Trust Complaints Procedure

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to specify the time limits within which Hospital Trusts are required to respond to complaints received from patients or their families.

(AQW 1933/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: HSC Trusts are required to provide a full response within 20 working days of receipt of a complaint.

Children's Fund

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not funding will continue to be allocated to the Children's Fund after March 2008, to assist delivery of health and well-being, promoting tolerance and tackling inequalities through programmes run by agencies such as Home Start.

(AQW 1958/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Funding has been identified in the draft Budget to continue the work of the Children's Fund beyond March 2008, although not as much as I would have liked. As a result, I cannot guarantee that all existing projects will be supported in the future, or to the level that they have been in the past. It will not be possible to make firm decisions about individual projects until consultation on the draft Budget has been completed, and it has been finalised.

I know how important it is that existing projects, such as the four locally-based Home Start schemes that are being supported, are given early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I can assure you that this will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Health and Care Centre at the Braid Valley Site, Ballymena

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the provision of a new Health and Care Centre at the Braid Valley site in Ballymena.

(AQW 1990/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The provision of a Level 2 Health and Care Centre on the Braid Valley site in Ballymena is included in the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme. This project has been identified as a high priority by the Northern Board and Trust. The business case for the project is currently being assessed by the Department and this process is expected to be completed by January 2008. Approval of the business case would allow the project to progress to the procurement stage, subject to the availability of the requisite capital and revenue resources to be confirmed in the current Comprehensive Spending Review and the review of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Renal Technologists

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timescale within which Renal Technologists (Medical Technical Officer grade) will be awarded the recruitment and retention premium, as outlined in the Agenda for Change, and already awarded to other medical groups. (AQW 2074/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no evidence of recruitment or retention difficulties for the Medical Technical Officer grade in Health and Social Care Trusts and consequently there are no plans to introduce a recruitment and retention premium for this staff group. No recruitment and retention premium has been awarded to other medical groups under Agenda for Change.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Undulating Roads

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he will take in relation to roads in the Comber area that are undulating, as a result of rocky outcrops and the roads being constructed on a poor sub-base. (AQW 1660/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I understand that you raised this matter recently with officials in my Department's Roads Service, with particular reference to the (unclassified) Burn Road, Comber.

There are many roads in the Comber area with similar undulating characteristics, due to the topography of the County Down landscape, and many of these roads are unclassified. The undulations are due in part to the roads having been constructed on poor ground conditions and the fact that there are many rocky outcrops which create the crests in the longitudinal profile.

Many of these unclassified roads carry very low levels of traffic, when compared to classified roads. Funding for road maintenance/improvements is limited and it is normal to direct funding, in the main, to those roads which are more heavily trafficked and where there is a greater perceived need.

Unfortunately I am unable to commit to a programme of works to remove the undulations from the roads in the greater Comber area. In the meantime, I can assure you that the roads will continue to be inspected and repairs carried out in accordance with Roads Service's maintenance guidelines.

Traffic/Pedestrian Safety Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the place occupied by Greyabbey Primary School on the list of safety schemes for traffic and pedestrians in the vicinity of primary schools. (AQW 1695/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: All requests for the inclusion of a school on the "Safer Routes to School" priority list are subject to an assessment procedure which allocates scores against pre-determined criteria.

I am pleased to report that Greyabbey Primary School is among the top four schools in the Ards Borough Council Area being considered for treatment in the next financial year, however this is subject to circumstances remaining the same at the schools on the list and the necessary finance being available.

A1 Dual Carriageway Upgrade

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the A1 dual carriageway to a motorway, to link with the motorway in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 1704/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advise me that, at present, there are no plans to upgrade the A1 from dual carriageway to motorway standard. This is due to the requirement for additional provision of an alternative route to provide for non-motorway traffic, a significant amount of additional land take, increased community and farmland severance and much greater environmental effects.

However, Roads Service is implementing a substantial programme of major improvement works on the A1 Sprucefield to the Border road, as indicated in the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (RSTN TP).

Advance works have commenced for the dualling of 9km of the A1 between Beech Hill and Cloghogue. Scheduled to be finished by 2010, this will complete a minimum standard of dual carriageway on the Belfast to the Border corridor. The final sections of this route, between Beech Hill and the Border, will have been designed to a standard similar to that of a motorway. Advanced site clearance works have also been undertaken for the construction of four grade separated junctions between Hillsborough and Loughbrickland.

The consultation document 'Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement Programme 2015' highlighted additional schemes that were proposed for inclusion within the current programme. This included a project to upgrade the A1 to a higher standard between Sprucefield and Loughbrickland by the grade separation of

an additional four junctions and the erection of central median safety fencing, thus eliminating at grade crossings. The document also included a major junction improvement at the A1/M1 junction at Sprucefield.

The Draft Investment Strategy 2008 – 2018 (ISNI 2) presents the funding levels envisaged for improvements to the Strategic Road Network over the next 10 years. This will determine how quickly proposed schemes can be brought forward into the current Programme. The outcome of ISNI 2 is expected to be known early next year.

The plans that I have highlighted above will address the current bottlenecks and most significant safety issues along the route. On their completion the high standard dual carriageway will provide significantly improved road safety, a marked decrease in journey times and a greatly improved reliability of journey times, whilst also providing the best value for money.

Speed Limit Reduction

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the impact of reducing the speed limit in housing estates and high population density areas from 30 miles per hour to 20 miles per hour, in terms of road safety. (AQW 1716/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware of research carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) in England which indicates that, generally speaking, each 1 mph reduction in average speed is expected to reduce collision frequency by 5%.

Reducing speed limits on their own can have some impact on reducing speeds. However, when combined with traffic calming measures good speed reductions can be achieved.

A further TRL study found that, in a review of 250 traffic calming schemes across England, Scotland and Wales, average speeds fell by 9 mph, collisions fell by 60%, collisions involving children fell by 67% and collisions involving cyclists fell by 29%.

Clearly, therefore, there is a strong link between vehicle speeds and the risk and severity of collisions.

Over the last 25 years, my Department's Roads Service has effectively implemented many traffic calming schemes to reduce speeds and the number and severity of collisions on our roads. Roads Service will continue to give a high priority to the introduction of traffic calming, especially in residential areas.

Parking Tickets

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Portadown; (ii) the offences for which these tickets have been issued; (iii) the number of these that have been rescinded; and (iv) the reasons for this, since November 2006. (AQW 1746/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to all three AQW's, my Department's Roads Service became responsible for on-street parking enforcement in October 2006. Traffic Attendants, employed by NCP Services Ltd, began issuing Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) on 13 November 2006.

- (i) From 13 November 2006 to 16 November 2007, a total of:
 - 5183 PCNs were issued in Portadown,
 - 3704 PCNs were issued in Lurgan, and
 - 2113 PCNs were issued in Banbridge.
- (ii) The PCN processing system does not report on the type of contraventions per town, however the most common contraventions for all PCNs issued, with indicative percentages are:
 - Illegal parking on yellow lines 46%,
 - Pay and Display tickets in car-parks 18%, and
 - Limited Waiting (parked longer than permitted) 10%.
- (iii) From 13 November 2006 to 16 November 2007 the number of PCNs rescinded was:
 - 394 in Portadown
 - 292 in Lurgan, and
 - 204 in Banbridge
- (iv) The PCN processing system does not report on the reasons for PCNs being rescinded per town, however, for all PCNs issued, the main reasons are:
 - subsequent production of a valid blue-badge or
 - subsequent production of a valid Pay and Display ticket.

Parking Tickets

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Lurgan; (ii) the offences for which these tickets have been issued; (iii) the number of these that have been rescinded; and (iv) the reasons for this, since November 2006. (AQW 1747/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to all three AQW's, my Department's Roads

Service became responsible for on-street parking enforcement in October 2006. Traffic Attendants, employed by NCP Services Ltd, began issuing Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) on 13 November 2006.

- (i) From 13 November 2006 to 16 November 2007, a total of:
 - 5183 PCNs were issued in Portadown,
 - 3704 PCNs were issued in Lurgan, and
 - 2113 PCNs were issued in Banbridge.
- (ii) The PCN processing system does not report on the type of contraventions per town, however the most common contraventions for all PCNs issued, with indicative percentages are:
 - Illegal parking on yellow lines 46%,
 - Pay and Display tickets in car-parks 18%, and
 - Limited Waiting (parked longer than permitted) 10%.
- (iii) From 13 November 2006 to 16 November 2007 the number of PCNs rescinded was:
 - 394 in Portadown
 - 292 in Lurgan, and
 - 204 in Banbridge
- (iv) The PCN processing system does not report on the reasons for PCNs being rescinded per town, however, for all PCNs issued, the main reasons are:
 - subsequent production of a valid blue-badge or
 - subsequent production of a valid Pay and Display ticket.

Parking Tickets

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of parking tickets that have been issued in Banbridge; (ii) the offences for which these tickets have been issued; (iii) the number of these that have been rescinded; and (iv) the reasons for this, since November 2006. (AQW 1748/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to all three AQW's, my Department's Roads Service became responsible for on-street parking enforcement in October 2006. Traffic Attendants, employed by NCP Services Ltd, began issuing Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) on 13 November 2006.

- (i) From 13 November 2006 to 16 November 2007, a total of:
 - 5183 PCNs were issued in Portadown,
 - 3704 PCNs were issued in Lurgan, and
 - 2113 PCNs were issued in Banbridge.
- (ii) The PCN processing system does not report on the type of contraventions per town, however the

most common contraventions for all PCNs issued, with indicative percentages are:

- Illegal parking on yellow lines 46%,
 - Pay and Display tickets in car-parks 18%, and
 - Limited Waiting (parked longer than permitted) 10%.
- (iii) From 13 November 2006 to 16 November 2007 the number of PCNs rescinded was:
 - 394 in Portadown
 - 292 in Lurgan, and
 - 204 in Banbridge
 - (iv) The PCN processing system does not report on the reasons for PCNs being rescinded per town, however, for all PCNs issued, the main reasons are:
 - subsequent production of a valid blue-badge or
 - subsequent production of a valid Pay and Display ticket.

Traffic Congestion in Towns

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether or not research has been carried out in relation to traffic congestion in towns across Northern Ireland, since the Roads Service assumed responsibility for parking enforcement.

(AQW 1763/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for on-street parking enforcement on 30 October 2006. The objective of the new parking enforcement operation is to reduce the amount of illegal parking in our towns and cities.

In order to measure the change in the level of illegal parking, initial compliance surveys were carried out before 30 October 2006. Post-contract surveys were completed in June 2007 and September 2007, with final surveys planned for February 2008.

Initial findings from the completed surveys indicate that the level of illegal parking has reduced by more than 20%. This will undoubtedly improve traffic flow and reduce congestion in our towns and cities.

Water Supply Pipe

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will take to ensure that the lead water supply pipe to numbers 1 - 37 James Street, Coleraine, is replaced at public expense; and if he will confirm that his department has carried out eleven repairs to this system in the previous ten years.

(AQW 1785/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is not responsible for the supply pipe that runs from the customer's tap to the property boundary. The supply pipe belongs to the individual property owner and responsibility for any maintenance or replacement rests with them. However, if a property owner agrees to replace their private supply pipe then Northern Ireland Water would be prepared to replace, free of charge, the lead communication pipe which runs from the property boundary to the water main.

Northern Ireland Water has confirmed that eleven repairs were carried out to the water mains in James Street, Coleraine over the past ten years.

Road Schemes

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development to list any road schemes, planned or tendered in this financial year, which did not take place or were delayed due to lack of funding. (AQW 1794/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Roads Service Business Plan 2007-08 sets out the Key Performance Targets which I have agreed the organisation should seek to deliver during this year. One of these targets relates to the key milestones to be delivered within the Major Works Programme. There are eight milestones against schemes to be awarded, four of which relate to the second Public Private Partnership package, the contract for which has been signed, indicating commercial closure. It is anticipated the remaining contracts will be awarded in the course of this financial year, meeting all related targets.

You may be interested to know that by early in the New Year, Roads Service will have schemes under construction totalling over £370 million. This presents a significant investment in Roads infrastructure, which will greatly assist and benefit the economy, by reducing and providing certainty on journey times on the strategic road network.

Roads Construction

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to the use of recycled glass to be incorporated into any public procurement process in relation to roads construction. (AQW 1795/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the design and procurement of all road construction work is directed by UK national standards. These standards give detailed guidance on conservation techniques and the use of recycled materials (including glass).

Recycled glass is permitted in pipe bedding, bulk fill for embankments, sub bases for pavement construction and bitumen bound surfacing layers.

During the procurement process Roads Service takes into consideration how suppliers propose to deliver sustainable methods of construction, including the use of recycled materials.

I can also advise that Roads Service, in partnership with the Quarry Products Association (NI), is currently conducting a study on the use of secondary and recycled aggregates across the local industry, consulting with surfacing contractors, and suppliers of concrete and aggregates.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what his assessment is in relation to whether or not the sum of £2.7 million, spent by Northern Ireland Water since its inception, represents value for money. (AQW 1807/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is content with the performance of Pricewaterhousecoopers and it is confident that the sum of £2.7 million represents value for money.

The consultants were appointed in accordance with Northern Ireland Water's procurement procedures which required a business case to establish the need, a competitive tender and a selection process, taking account of quality and price.

The performance of any consultants appointed is monitored on a regular basis.

A26 Frosses Road

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his answer to AQW 1421/08, what priority he will give to undertaking a reappraisal of the timetable for the commencement of the dualling of the A26 Frosses Road. (AQW 1810/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I advised in my previous answer (AQW 1421/08), it is not possible, at present, to provide a start date, for construction of the proposed dualling of the A26 Frosses Road from Glarryford Crossroads to its junction with the A44 Drones Road for the reasons outlined previously. However, it is likely to be within the latter half of the present Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (RSTN TP 2015) period.

A detailed assessment of the five routes under consideration is currently underway and the second stage

of the three-stage assessment process is expected by May 2008. This process will conclude with the selection of a preferred route, which I will publicly announce.

The commencement dates of schemes within the RSTN TP are kept under review as schemes are developed. A reappraisal of the commencement date would not be appropriate at this time.

Strangford Ferry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of (i) pedestrians; (ii) cars; (iii) vans; (iv) lorries; and (v) motorbikes carried by the Strangford Ferry in each of the last three years. (AQW 1913/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The number of pedestrians, cars and vans, lorries and motorbikes carried by the Strangford Lough Ferry Service in each of the last three financial years is shown in the table below:

| | 2004/5 | 2005/6 | 2006/7 |
|---------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Pedestrians | 166,838 | 167,357 | 167,392 |
| Cars and Vans | 185,724 | 181,837 | 182,791 |
| Lorries | 5,364 | 4,635 | 4,224 |
| Motorbikes | 3,430 | 3,606 | 3,435 |

The above table refers to those charged for voyages. Separate figures for cars and vans are not available, as the fares charged are the same.

Roads Service operates a concession fare scheme, whereby children under five are not charged and holders of either of a Senior Citizens', War Disablement or Registered Blind SmartPass are not charged when travelling as foot passengers or as an additional car passenger.

Parking Enforcement Staff

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a breakdown of the religious composition of Parking Enforcement Unit/ National Car Parks Limited staff in overall terms and by district area. (AQW 1914/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to your first question, the Parking Enforcement Unit within the Department for Regional Development is staffed with employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which holds the monitoring information for these staff. This information is gathered to enable the NICS to monitor the effectiveness of its Equal Opportunities policies. Under data protection

legislation, any further processing of monitoring information must not be incompatible with that purpose. With the exception of the Child Support and Social Security agencies, monitoring of Equal Opportunities policies is not carried out below departmental level, and consequently the further processing of monitoring information to the level requested would be inconsistent with the data protection principles.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold any information on the religious breakdown of NCP Services Ltd staff.

In answer to your second question, the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit within my Department's Roads Service receives revenue in respect of payments of penalty charge notices and off and on-street parking income. All revenue received is retained by Roads Service.

With regard to your third question, I can inform you that Roads Service staff in the Parking Enforcement Unit fall within the pay arrangements for all NICS staff below Senior Civil Servants. These pay arrangements have a performance related element. Under the current pay agreement any member of staff with a performance marking higher than satisfactory receive a bonus - £50 for box 2 performance and £150 for box 1 performance.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold information on any performance related remuneration schemes for NCP Services Ltd staff, however the Department has been assured that there are no payments based on the number of tickets issued.

There are no ticket targets or quotas in the contract with NCP Services Ltd and payments are not related to the numbers of tickets issued.

I can inform you that in answer to your fourth question, responsibility for on-street parking enforcement transferred to my Department at the end of October 2006. Following a short period of issuing Warning Notices, the commencement date for issue of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) was 13 November 2006. To 10 November 2007 (first 12 months of operation), the amount of penalty charges paid to Roads Service is £4.09 million.

In answer to your final question, the table below outlines the number of penalty charge notices issued, by council area, since my Department took responsibility for traffic management.

| Council Area | PCNs |
|--------------|------|
| Antrim | 2674 |
| Ards | 3804 |

| Council Area | PCNs |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Armagh | 4183 |
| Ballymena | 6208 |
| Ballymoney | 2194 |
| Banbridge | 2289 |
| Belfast/Castlereagh | 43897 |
| Carrickfergus | 2885 |
| Coleraine | 7128 |
| Cookstown | 2579 |
| Craigavon | 8824 |
| Derry | 20038 |
| Down | 4233 |
| Dungannon and South Tyrone | 3433 |
| Fermanagh | 10815 |
| Larne | 1028 |
| Limavady | 1954 |
| Lisburn | 5565 |
| Magherafelt | 3585 |
| Moyle | 315 |
| Newry and Mourne | 6671 |
| Newtownabbey | 2130 |
| North Down | 5636 |
| Omagh | 6759 |
| Strabane | 4673 |

Parking Enforcement Processing Unit

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what percentage of the total revenue secured by the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit is returned to the public purse. (AQW 1927/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to your first question, the Parking Enforcement Unit within the Department for Regional Development is staffed with employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which holds the monitoring information for these staff. This information is gathered to enable the NICS to monitor the effectiveness of its Equal Opportunities policies. Under data protection legislation, any further processing of monitoring information must not be incompatible with that purpose. With the exception of the Child Support and Social Security agencies, monitoring of Equal Opportunities policies is not carried out below departmental level, and consequently the further processing of monitoring information to the level

requested would be inconsistent with the data protection principles.

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With regard to your third question, I can inform you that Roads Service staff in the Parking Enforcement Unit fall within the pay arrangements for all NICS staff below Senior Civil Servants. These pay arrangements have a performance related element. Under the current pay agreement any member of staff with a performance marking higher than satisfactory receive a bonus - £50 for box 2 performance and £150 for box 1 performance.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold information on any performance related remuneration schemes for NCP Services Ltd staff, however the Department has been assured that there are no payments based on the number of tickets issued.

There are no ticket targets or quotas in the contract with NCP Services Ltd and payments are not related to the numbers of tickets issued.

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| Ballymoney | 2194 |
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| Council Area | PCNs |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Carrickfergus | 2885 |
| Coleraine | 7128 |
| Cookstown | 2579 |
| Craigavon | 8824 |
| Derry | 20038 |
| Down | 4233 |
| Dungannon and South Tyrone | 3433 |
| Fermanagh | 10815 |
| Larne | 1028 |
| Limavady | 1954 |
| Lisburn | 5565 |
| Magherafelt | 3585 |
| Moyle | 315 |
| Newry and Mourne | 6671 |
| Newtownabbey | 2130 |
| North Down | 5636 |
| Omagh | 6759 |
| Strabane | 4673 |

Parking Enforcement Officers

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to clarify whether Parking Enforcement Officers operate on a performance related pay basis and if so, to provide details of how this operates in practice. (AQW 1929/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to your first question, the Parking Enforcement Unit within the Department for Regional Development is staffed with employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which holds the monitoring information for these staff. This information is gathered to enable the NICS to monitor the effectiveness of its Equal Opportunities policies. Under data protection legislation, any further processing of monitoring information must not be incompatible with that purpose. With the exception of the Child Support and Social Security agencies, monitoring of Equal Opportunities policies is not carried out below departmental level, and consequently the further processing of monitoring information to the level requested would be inconsistent with the data protection principles.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold any information on the religious breakdown of NCP Services Ltd staff.

In answer to your second question, the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit within my Department's Roads Service receives revenue in respect of payments of penalty charge notices and off and on-street parking income. All revenue received is retained by Roads Service.

With regard to your third question, I can inform you that Roads Service staff in the Parking Enforcement Unit fall within the pay arrangements for all NICS staff below Senior Civil Servants. These pay arrangements have a performance related element. Under the current pay agreement any member of staff with a performance marking higher than satisfactory receive a bonus - £50 for box 2 performance and £150 for box 1 performance.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold information on any performance related remuneration schemes for NCP Services Ltd staff, however the Department has been assured that there are no payments based on the number of tickets issued.

There are no ticket targets or quotas in the contract with NCP Services Ltd and payments are not related to the numbers of tickets issued.

I can inform you that in answer to your fourth question, responsibility for on-street parking enforcement transferred to my Department at the end of October 2006. Following a short period of issuing Warning Notices, the commencement date for issue of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) was 13 November 2006. To 10 November 2007 (first 12 months of operation), the amount of penalty charges paid to Roads Service is £4.09 million.

In answer to your final question, the table below outlines the number of penalty charge notices issued, by council area, since my Department took responsibility for traffic management.

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| Ballymena | 6208 |
| Ballymoney | 2194 |
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| Carrickfergus | 2885 |
| Coleraine | 7128 |
| Cookstown | 2579 |
| Craigavon | 8824 |
| Derry | 20038 |
| Down | 4233 |

| Council Area | PCNs |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Dungannon and South Tyrone | 3433 |
| Fermanagh | 10815 |
| Larne | 1028 |
| Limavady | 1954 |
| Lisburn | 5565 |
| Magherafelt | 3585 |
| Moyle | 315 |
| Newry and Mourne | 6671 |
| Newtownabbey | 2130 |
| North Down | 5636 |
| Omagh | 6759 |
| Strabane | 4673 |

Parking Enforcement Unit

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount of revenue that has been secured by the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit through penalty charge notices since its inception. (AQW 1930/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to your first question, the Parking Enforcement Unit within the Department for Regional Development is staffed with employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which holds the monitoring information for these staff. This information is gathered to enable the NICS to monitor the effectiveness of its Equal Opportunities policies. Under data protection legislation, any further processing of monitoring information must not be incompatible with that purpose. With the exception of the Child Support and Social Security agencies, monitoring of Equal Opportunities policies is not carried out below departmental level, and consequently the further processing of monitoring information to the level requested would be inconsistent with the data protection principles.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold any information on the religious breakdown of NCP Services Ltd staff.

In answer to your second question, the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit within my Department's Roads Service receives revenue in respect of payments of penalty charge notices and off and on-street parking income. All revenue received is retained by Roads Service.

With regard to your third question, I can inform you that Roads Service staff in the Parking Enforcement Unit fall within the pay arrangements for all NICS staff below Senior Civil Servants. These pay arrangements

have a performance related element. Under the current pay agreement any member of staff with a performance marking higher than satisfactory receive a bonus - £50 for box 2 performance and £150 for box 1 performance.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold information on any performance related remuneration schemes for NCP Services Ltd staff, however the Department has been assured that there are no payments based on the number of tickets issued.

There are no ticket targets or quotas in the contract with NCP Services Ltd and payments are not related to the numbers of tickets issued.

I can inform you that in answer to your fourth question, responsibility for on-street parking enforcement transferred to my Department at the end of October 2006. Following a short period of issuing Warning Notices, the commencement date for issue of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) was 13 November 2006. To 10 November 2007 (first 12 months of operation), the amount of penalty charges paid to Roads Service is £4.09 million.

In answer to your final question, the table below outlines the number of penalty charge notices issued, by council area, since my Department took responsibility for traffic management.

| Council Area | PCNs |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Antrim | 2674 |
| Ards | 3804 |
| Armagh | 4183 |
| Ballymena | 6208 |
| Ballymoney | 2194 |
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| Coleraine | 7128 |
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| Down | 4233 |
| Dungannon and South Tyrone | 3433 |
| Fermanagh | 10815 |
| Larne | 1028 |
| Limavady | 1954 |
| Lisburn | 5565 |
| Magherafelt | 3585 |
| Moyle | 315 |
| Newry and Mourne | 6671 |

| Council Area | PCNs |
|--------------|------|
| Newtownabbey | 2130 |
| North Down | 5636 |
| Omagh | 6759 |
| Strabane | 4673 |

Parking Enforcement Unit

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a breakdown, on a district council area basis, of the number of penalty charge notices issued to motorists since the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit took responsibility for traffic management. (AQW 1931/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regard to your first question, the Parking Enforcement Unit within the Department for Regional Development is staffed with employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which holds the monitoring information for these staff. This information is gathered to enable the NICS to monitor the effectiveness of its Equal Opportunities policies. Under data protection legislation, any further processing of monitoring information must not be incompatible with that purpose. With the exception of the Child Support and Social Security agencies, monitoring of Equal Opportunities policies is not carried out below departmental level, and consequently the further processing of monitoring information to the level requested would be inconsistent with the data protection principles.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold any information on the religious breakdown of NCP Services Ltd staff.

In answer to your second question, the Parking Enforcement Processing Unit within my Department's Roads Service receives revenue in respect of payments of penalty charge notices and off and on-street parking income. All revenue received is retained by Roads Service.

With regard to your third question, I can inform you that Roads Service staff in the Parking Enforcement Unit fall within the pay arrangements for all NICS staff below Senior Civil Servants. These pay arrangements have a performance related element. Under the current pay agreement any member of staff with a performance marking higher than satisfactory receive a bonus - £50 for box 2 performance and £150 for box 1 performance.

NCP Services Ltd is a private company contracted by the Department to provide a parking enforcement service. The Department does not hold information on any performance related remuneration schemes for

NCP Services Ltd staff, however the Department has been assured that there are no payments based on the number of tickets issued.

There are no ticket targets or quotas in the contract with NCP Services Ltd and payments are not related to the numbers of tickets issued.

I can inform you that in answer to your fourth question, responsibility for on-street parking enforcement transferred to my Department at the end of October 2006. Following a short period of issuing Warning Notices, the commencement date for issue of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) was 13 November 2006. To 10 November 2007 (first 12 months of operation), the amount of penalty charges paid to Roads Service is £4.09 million.

In answer to your final question, the table below outlines the number of penalty charge notices issued, by council area, since my Department took responsibility for traffic management.

| Council Area | PCNs |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Antrim | 2674 |
| Ards | 3804 |
| Armagh | 4183 |
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| Newtownabbey | 2130 |
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National Car Parks

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking tickets that have been issued in (i) Newtownards; (ii) Comber; (iii) Ballygowan; and (iv) Saintfield since the inception of the National Car Parks contract. (AQW 1949/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for on-street parking enforcement in October 2006. Traffic Attendants employed by National Car Parks Services Ltd began issuing Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) on 13 November 2006. The table below details the number of PCNs issued in Newtownards, Comber, Ballygowan and Saintfield, between 13 November 2006 and 22 November 2007.

| Town | Total Parking Tickets issued from 13 November 2006 to 22 November 2007 |
|-------------|--|
| Newtownards | 3627 |
| Comber | 128 |
| Ballygowan | 5 |
| Saintfield | 93 |

Parking Penalties

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people who have received penalty charge notices for not parking wholly within the markings of the bay/space in his department's car parks, since National Car Parks have been responsible for issuing penalty charge notices. (AQW 2041/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: NCP Services Ltd became responsible for the enforcement of off-street car parks operated by Roads Service on 30 October 2006.

Up to 26 November 2007, a total of 5,006 Penalty Charge Notices have been issued to vehicles "not parked wholly within the markings of the bay/space" in Roads Service car-parks.

Road Safety Barriers

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1503/08 to provide details of the criteria Roads Service use to decide whether or not safety barriers should be provided. (AQW 2044/08)

| | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed |
|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|
| Armagh | 55 | 92 | 35 | 85 | 36 | 64 | 126 | 241 |
| Banbridge | 19 | 47 | 18 | 66 | 10 | 46 | 47 | 159 |

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is directed by road safety standards which form the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges. The criteria used for the design of Road Restraint Systems uses a risk based framework called the "Road Restraint Risk Assessment Process" (RRRAP). The criteria which are considered are listed below:

1. Likelihood of risk.

This takes account of the:

- probability of a vehicle leaving the road;
- road type, road alignment, traffic flow and type, accident history; and
- probability of an errant vehicle reaching the area to be protected.

2. Consequences of risk.

This takes account of the:

- Speed of an errant vehicle, the aggressiveness of the hazard and whether others may be involved, eg, houses or railways.

3. Total Risk.

This takes account of the risk to occupants and risk to others.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disability Living Allowance Appeals

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, broken down by social security area, the total number of Disability Living Allowance appeals; and the number that were (i) upheld; and (ii) dismissed, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1644/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): My Department's Appeals Service can only provide the information requested broken down by Tribunal Centre, as opposed to social security area. Appeals are allocated to a Tribunal Centre based on the geographical area the appeal arises in, although this does not necessarily correspond to where the local Social Security Office is situated. On this basis, the total number of Disability Living Allowance appeals and the number that were upheld and dismissed in each of the last three years are set out in the following table.

| | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed |
|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|
| Armagh | 55 | 92 | 35 | 85 | 36 | 64 | 126 | 241 |
| Banbridge | 19 | 47 | 18 | 66 | 10 | 46 | 47 | 159 |

| | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed | Upheld | Dismissed |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Belfast | 582 | 1544 | 584 | 1570 | 501 | 1165 | 1667 | 4279 |
| Ballymena | 72 | 213 | 93 | 227 | 62 | 175 | 227 | 615 |
| Ballymoney | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 12 | 29 | 13 | 33 |
| Cookstown | 31 | 52 | 30 | 43 | 36 | 49 | 97 | 144 |
| Craigavon | 107 | 239 | 99 | 181 | 96 | 182 | 302 | 602 |
| Coleraine | 54 | 211 | 83 | 259 | 58 | 147 | 195 | 617 |
| Dungannon | 55 | 125 | 58 | 104 | 48 | 88 | 161 | 317 |
| Downpatrick | 36 | 141 | 48 | 143 | 49 | 122 | 133 | 406 |
| Enniskillen | 41 | 111 | 59 | 123 | 69 | 95 | 169 | 329 |
| Londonderry | 162 | 335 | 165 | 261 | 232 | 215 | 559 | 811 |
| Limavady | 28 | 65 | 13 | 42 | 51 | 54 | 92 | 161 |
| Magherafelt | 43 | 79 | 20 | 59 | 29 | 52 | 92 | 190 |
| Newtownards | 57 | 166 | 69 | 193 | 105 | 197 | 231 | 556 |
| Newry | 65 | 172 | 85 | 236 | 71 | 161 | 221 | 569 |
| Omagh | 45 | 97 | 49 | 80 | 43 | 49 | 137 | 226 |
| Strabane | 36 | 101 | 34 | 76 | 52 | 95 | 122 | 272 |
| Total | 1488 | 3790 | 1543 | 3752 | 1560 | 2985 | 4591 | 10527 |

Housing Benefit

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in West Tyrone in receipt of Housing Benefit in 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 1655/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The tables below detail the number of claimants in receipt of Housing Benefit within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Omagh and Strabane district office administrative areas. The information is available only in respect of financial years.

TABLE 1.
HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIMANTS 2004/05

| | NIHE | Housing Association | Private rented | Total |
|--------------|--------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Omagh | 2,077 | 355 | 1,068 | 3,500 |
| Strabane | 1,574 | 250 | 1,576 | 3,400 |
| Total | 3,651 | 605 | 2,644 | 6,900 |

TABLE 2.
HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIMANTS 2005/06

| | NIHE | Housing Association | Private rented | Total |
|--------------|--------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Omagh | 1,985 | 353 | 1,176 | 3,514 |
| Strabane | 1,548 | 258 | 1,605 | 3,411 |
| Total | 3,533 | 611 | 2,781 | 6,925 |

TABLE 3.
HOUSING BENEFIT CLAIMANTS 2006/07

| | NIHE | Housing Association | Private rented | Total |
|--------------|--------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Omagh | 1,929 | 376 | 1,375 | 3,680 |
| Strabane | 1,493 | 268 | 1,662 | 3,423 |
| Total | 3,422 | 644 | 3,037 | 7,103 |

Housing Executive Land Bank

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the value and extent of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive land bank in (i) Ballymoney Borough Council area; (ii) Ballymena Borough Council area; and (iii) Moyle District Council area. (AQW 1668/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The extent and value of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive land bank in the three areas is as follows:

- Ballymoney Borough Council – 23.86 hectares currently valued at £33.7m.
- Ballymena Borough Council – 6.26 hectares currently valued at £14.8m.
- Moyle District Council – 5.03 hectares currently valued at £1.4m.

Community and Voluntary Organisations

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of community and voluntary organisations funded by her department.

(AQW 1677/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In 2007/08, my Department is directly funding a total of 605 voluntary and community sector organisations through 23 separate programmes. A further 4 funding programmes are delivered through Intermediary Funding Bodies. Further information on grants awarded to voluntary and community sector organisations is publicly available on the Government Funding Database, at www.volcomgrantsni.org.uk

Funding for Community Organisations

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of funding schemes or streams administered by her department; and to give a breakdown of the community and voluntary organisations funded by each scheme or stream.

(AQW 1678/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department directly administers a total of 23 funding programmes, supporting 605 voluntary and community sector organisations. Details of these programmes and a breakdown of the organisations funded in 2007/08 have been placed in the Library.

Funding for Community and Voluntary Organisations

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average turnaround time for processing applications for funding from community and voluntary organisations, from the time of the first letter of offer, in relation to funding schemes or streams administered by her department.

(AQW 1679/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The average turnaround time for processing applications for funding from date of receipt in the Department to the date of the first contract for funding, is 112 working days. All applications for funding from the voluntary and community sector are processed in line with common procedural guidance to ensure that all audit and accountability requirements are satisfied. This often requires significant follow-up actions with applicants which impacts on the overall turnaround time.

Funding for Community Organisations

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average turnaround time for processing

quarterly payments in relation to funding schemes or streams for voluntary and community organisations, which are administered by her department.

(AQW 1680/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In 2007/08 the average turnaround time for processing quarterly payments for voluntary and community sector organisations is 21 working days. DSD has a target of 30 working days to process a payment request, once all the required documentation and monitoring information is received from the organisation. Staff often spend a significant amount of time in follow-up action to ensure that all relevant information is in place. All grant claims are processed in accordance with the Department's risk based approach to payment verification. This involves the Department making an assessment of the risk of awarding public funds to an organisation based on the organisation's management structure, systems, governance and financial capabilities.

When an organisation is considered 'high risk' it is required to provide all supporting documentation with the application for payment, which is then fully verified before payment is made. If an organisation is considered to be 'medium risk' or 'low risk' they may submit quarterly requests for payment without supporting documentation and payment will be made quickly. Where a 'medium risk' assessment is in place, vouching/ verification is carried out on documentation from two quarterly payments per year on a pre-payment basis. Where the risk is considered 'low', vouching/ verification is carried out on one quarterly payment per year on a post- payment basis.

The shortest time recorded for processing a payment is two days. The longest time recorded is 66 working days. In this instance, the queries related to eligible expenditure within a project. The organisation was not at risk and their core funding was unaffected. The Department also has a system in place to process emergency payments and this can be expedited in one working day.

Funding for Community Organisations

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) longest; and (ii) shortest time for processing quarterly payments from funding schemes or streams for voluntary and community organisations, administered by her department.

(AQW 1681/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In 2007/08 the average turnaround time for processing quarterly payments for voluntary and community sector organisations is 21 working days. DSD has a target of 30 working days to process a payment request, once all the required documentation and monitoring information is received from the organisation. Staff often spend a

significant amount of time in follow-up action to ensure that all relevant information is in place. All grant claims are processed in accordance with the Department's risk based approach to payment verification. This involves the Department making an assessment of the risk of awarding public funds to an organisation based on the organisation's management structure, systems, governance and financial capabilities.

When an organisation is considered 'high risk' it is required to provide all supporting documentation with the application for payment, which is then fully verified before payment is made. If an organisation is considered to be 'medium risk' or 'low risk' they may submit quarterly requests for payment without supporting documentation and payment will be made quickly. Where a 'medium risk' assessment is in place, vouching/verification is carried out on documentation from two quarterly payments per year on a pre-payment basis. Where the risk is considered 'low', vouching/verification is carried out on one quarterly payment per year on a post-payment basis.

The shortest time recorded for processing a payment is two days. The longest time recorded is 66 working days. In this instance, the queries related to eligible expenditure within a project. The organisation was not at risk and their core funding was unaffected. The Department also has a system in place to process emergency payments and this can be expedited in one working day.

Voluntary and Community Organisations

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the voluntary and community organisations that have been awaiting a quarterly payment for more than (i) one month; (ii) three months; (iii) six months; (iv) nine months; and (v) one year, in relation to funding schemes or streams administered by her department. (AQW 1682/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below shows the number of quarterly grant payment requests awaiting completion in the Department within the timescales requested. Delays in payments can arise with particular issues of eligibility of expenditure, availability of relevant information or scheduling of verification visits. A full list of the community

organisations awaiting payments has been placed in the library.

| 1 month | 3 months | 6 months | 9 months | 1 year |
|---------|----------|----------|----------|--------|
| 60 | 14 | 6 | 0 | 0 |

Social Housing

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she will give to carrying out a social housing scheme in Glenavy village; and if she will investigate the reasons why no social housing has been provided in this area to date. (AQW 1700/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A need for 20 units in Glenavy has been identified but no scheme has as yet been brought forward by Housing Associations. Should any Housing Association identify a suitable site within Glenavy a scheme will be included in the Social Housing Development Programme, subject to the availability of funding.

Land supply and competition from private developers have historically impacted adversely on the ability of Housing Associations to secure suitable development sites. Two potential sites have however been identified and Housing Associations have work underway to determine the feasibility of developing them with a view to acquisition.

Relocation of Tenants

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of cases of intimidation in social housing developments in the Lisburn area that have been investigated by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the last ten years; and the number of these cases that have resulted in the relocation of tenants. (AQW 1708/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Data on the reasons for applicants presenting as homeless is only available from the financial year 2000/01. The table below details the total number of homeless applicants for the Lisburn area who cited intimidation as the reason between the financial years 2000/01 and 2006/07.

| | 2000/01 | 2001/02 | 2002/03 | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Homeless Presenters* | 116 | 106 | 176 | 92 | 80 | 76 | 62 |
| Awarded FDA status** | 54 | 67 | 115 | 53 | 46 | 38 | 30 |
| FDA applicants rehoused*** | 41 | 43 | 56 | 37 | 41 | 34 | 30 |

* The number of applicants presenting as homeless citing the reason as intimidation.

** The number of applicants accepted as statutorily homeless and awarded Full Duty Applicant (FDA) status on the basis of intimidation.

*** The number of applicants rehoused from the common waiting list with FDA status (on the basis of intimidation).

There is not necessarily a correlation between those who presented as homeless, were awarded FDA status or were rehoused in any given year. For example, an applicant may have presented in one financial year and been awarded FDA status, or rehoused, in another year.

Neighbourhood Renewal: Small Pockets of Deprivation Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, broken down by constituency, all projects funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal: Small Pockets of Deprivation Programme in each of the last two years. (AQW 1726/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is detailed in the table below:

| Neighbourhood Renewal: Small Pockets of Deprivation | Number of Awards | 2006/07 £ | 2007/08 £ |
|---|------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Belfast North | | | |
| White City | 1 | £32,013 | £0 |
| Bawnmore | 1 | £42,496 | £18,885 |
| Subtotal | 2 | £74,509 | £18,885 |
| Belfast South | | | |
| Benmore, Finaghy | 1 | £16,699 | £10,000 |
| Belfast West | | | |
| Andersonstown, Belfast | 1 | £46,707 | £0 |
| East Antrim | | | |
| Larne | 3 | £113,110 | £2,431 |
| Sunnylands | 2 | £7,519 | £11,260 |
| Greenisland | 4 | £46,493 | £4,454 |
| Subtotal | 9 | £167,122 | £18,145 |
| Fermanagh & South Tyrone | | | |
| Kilmacormick, Fermanagh | 1 | £22,962 | £0 |
| Drumcoo, Dungannon | 1 | £4,415 | £14,313 |
| Subtotal | 2 | £27,377 | £14,313 |
| Foyle | | | |
| Strathfoyle | 4 | £24,258 | £14,000 |
| North Antrim | | | |
| Carnany, Ballymoney | 1 | £27,185 | £19,380 |
| Castle, Ballymoney | 1 | £30,760 | £0 |
| Glebeside, Balymoney | 1 | £23,863 | £17,000 |
| Subtotal | 3 | £81,808 | £36,380 |
| North Down | | | |
| Rathgill | 1 | £29,902 | £11,112 |
| Harbour | 1 | £25,016 | £25,630 |
| Subtotal | 2 | £54,918 | £36,742 |

| Neighbourhood Renewal: Small Pockets of Deprivation | Number of Awards | 2006/07 £ | 2007/08 £ |
|---|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| South Antrim | | | |
| Glenvarna, Newtownabbey | 3 | £19,144 | £14,453 |
| Strangford | | | |
| Glen, Newtownards | 1 | £19,448 | £7,891 |
| West Winds | 1 | £36,128 | £20,000 |
| Bowtown | 1 | £21,954 | £2,684 |
| Subtotal | 3 | £77,530 | £30,575 |
| Totals | 30 | £590,072 | £193,493 |

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of neighbourhood renewal partnerships that have constituted voluntary or community groups as the lead partner; and whether or not such groups are encouraged to become the lead partner. (AQW 1743/08)

The Minister for Social Development: 21 out of 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships have constituted voluntary or community groups as the 'lead partner'. The appointment of a lead partner must be decided by the individual Neighbourhood Partnerships. A 'lead partner' may be a Local Strategy Partnership, District Council, or a properly constituted community or voluntary organisation capable of receiving, managing and accounting for public money.

Housing Executive Waiting Lists

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people (i) currently on the waiting list for a Northern Ireland Housing Executive property in Larne; Carrickfergus; and Newtownabbey, and (ii) on the waiting list for each of these areas in each of the last five years. (AQW 1769/08)

The Minister for Social Development: At September 2007, the waiting list in the areas in question was as follows:

- **Larne**
541 of which 215 were in housing stress
- **Carrickfergus**
1,015 of which 539 were in housing stress
- **Newtownabbey**
1,660 of which 956 were in housing stress

Housing Stress applicants have 30 points or more.

The following table details the historical waiting list for the areas over the last five years.

| | Larne | | Carrickfergus | | Newtownabbey | |
|------------------|-------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Year to 31 March | Total | Housing Stress | Total | Housing Stress | Total | Housing Stress |
| 2003 | 368 | 147 | 842 | 410 | 1310 | 698 |
| 2004 | 370 | 143 | 839 | 394 | 1293 | 655 |
| 2005 | 390 | 144 | 849 | 409 | 1313 | 688 |
| 2006 | 380 | 145 | 916 | 445 | 1459 | 825 |
| 2007 | 505 | 193 | 1007 | 532 | 1578 | 929 |

Housing Allocation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses allocated by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in Killyleagh/Shrigley since November 2006, providing a breakdown by house type and the number of points held by the successful applicant. (AQW 1770/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The tables below detail all social housing allocations by house type and the number of points held by the successful applicant for Killyleagh/Shrigley since November 2006.

ALLOCATIONS TO HOUSING APPLICANTS

| | House type | | | |
|----------------|------------|-------|----------|---------------------|
| | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes |
| <100 points | | | 2 | |
| 100-149 points | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| >150 points | 2 | 1 | 1 | |

ALLOCATIONS TO TRANSFER APPLICANTS

| | House type | | | |
|----------------|------------|-------|----------|---------------------|
| | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes |
| <100 points | 1 | 2 | 4 | |
| 100-149 points | | | 2 | |
| >150 points | | | 1 | |

Wood Chip Heating Systems

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail whether or not tenants of properties

under her department's responsibility will be offered the option of installing wood chip heating systems, instead of oil fired heating systems. (AQW 1783/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are no plans to install wood chip heating systems in social housing because of the installation costs involved. However, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has installed 4 wood pellet boilers on a trial basis on sites outside the gas area. These sites are being monitored to establish if they provide a viable alternative to oil-fired heating and consideration is being given to extending the trial.

Caravan Owners

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the protection her Department intends to give to caravan owners to prevent them from being financially exploited by site owners. (AQW 1808/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer to the reply I gave to the Honourable Member for North Down in AQW 1261 on 9 November 2007.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what plans her Department has to increase the level of winter fuel payments to meet the increased costs of fuel, particularly oil. (AQW 1809/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Winter Fuel Payment is intended to provide a significant contribution towards winter heating bills. It is not intended to cover the total cost of fuel bills. Winter fuel payments increased from £20 in 1997-98 to the current value of £200 for households with someone aged 60 to 79 years of age and to £300 for households with someone aged 80 or over.

Fuel prices are volatile and can fall as well as rise. It would not be sensible for the rate of winter fuel payments to track the upward and downward movement of fuel prices. There are no plans to increase the current amounts paid.

Warm Homes Scheme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of the effectiveness of the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQW 1813/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme is the Department's main instrument in tackling fuel poverty in private sector housing in Northern Ireland. The number of households which have been able to benefit from the measures under the

scheme has increased from 4,250 in 2001 to 10,000 in the current financial year. This is a significant achievement and has improved the quality of life for some of those people most in need.

Fuel Poverty

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons why there is no priority streamlining or reference to the critical care register when assessing the situation of those most in need from fuel poverty under the EAGA home heating scheme. (AQW 1891/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme has been very successful and is now over subscribed. EAGA currently operates a limited prioritisation system. This includes a number of applicants with critical health conditions. I have asked my officials to review this system with EAGA to ensure that those people in greatest need get help first.

EAGA Heating Schemes

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to address the backlog in delivering home heating improvements through the EAGA heating schemes in South Antrim. (AQW 1892/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme, managed by EAGA on behalf of the Department, is the main instrument used by the Department to address fuel poverty. The scheme has been very successful, however, it is now over subscribed. With limited funding available, I have asked officials to review the delivery of the scheme and look at

introducing prioritisation of applications to ensure that those people in greatest need get help first.

Fuel Poverty

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of funding that has been made available to address fuel poverty schemes within the South Antrim area, within the last year. (AQW 1893/08)

The Minister for Social Development: From March 2006 to April 2007 through the Department for Social Development's Warm Homes Scheme there were 226 heating installations (£846,549) and 618 house insulations (£296,590) completed in private housing in South Antrim, a total investment of £1,143,139.

In the same period NIHE invested £1,570,377 in the installation of more efficient heating systems in its stock of social housing in South Antrim.

Housing Allocation

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses allocated by the Housing Executive in each of the West Belfast sub-areas in each of the last three years; and to detail, for each successful applicant, the number of points they held and the house type allocated. (AQW 1904/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The tables below details all social housing allocations, by house type and the number of points held by the successful applicant, in the areas covered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Belfast Districts 1 and 3 for the period requested.

ALLOCATIONS TO HOUSING APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 1 2004/05

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | | 3 | | 1 | 12 | 16 |
| 100-149 | | 4 | 1 | 2 | 14 | 21 |
| >150 | 4 | 2 | 1 | | 40 | 47 |
| Total | 4 | 9 | 2 | 3 | 66 | 84 |

ALLOCATIONS TO TRANSFER APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 1 2004/05

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 5 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 26 |
| 100-149 | | | | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| >150 | | | | | | |
| Total | | | | | | 31 |

ALLOCATIONS TO HOUSING APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 3 2004/05

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| 100-149 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 13 |
| >150 | 24 | 15 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 47 |
| Total | 25 | 19 | 2 | 6 | 11 | 63 |

ALLOCATIONS TO TRANSFER APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 3 2004 / 2005

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 9 | 11 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 25 |
| 100-149 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 5 |
| >150 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 10 | 12 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 31 |

ALLOCATIONS TO HOUSING APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 1 2005/06

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 17 |
| 100-149 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 21 | 24 |
| >150 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 17 | 28 |
| Total | 8 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 50 | 69 |

ALLOCATIONS TO TRANSFER APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 1 2005/06

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 4 | 12 | 2 | 3 | 11 | 32 |
| 100-149 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| >150 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 4 | 13 | 2 | 4 | 11 | 34 |

ALLOCATIONS TO HOUSING APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 3 2005/06

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 100-149 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 9 | 15 |
| >150 | 35 | 21 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 64 |
| Total | 35 | 26 | 1 | 3 | 14 | 79 |

ALLOCATIONS TO TRANSFER APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 3 2005/06

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | 5 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 4 | 20 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 35 |
| 100-149 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| >150 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 5 | 20 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 38 |

ALLOCATIONS TO HOUSING APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 1 2006/07

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 18 | 22 |
| 100-149 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 35 | 41 |
| >150 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 29 |
| Total | 3 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 78 | 92 |

ALLOCATIONS TO APPLICANTS DISTRICT 3 2006/07

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 100-149 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 8 | 13 | 26 |
| >150 | 36 | 25 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 65 |
| Total | 36 | 31 | 2 | 9 | 15 | 93 |

ALLOCATIONS TO TRANSFER APPLICANTS BELFAST DISTRICT 3 2006/07

| Points | 2 Bed | 3 Bed | 4 Bed | Bungalow | Flats / Maisonettes | Total |
|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <100 | 4 | 28 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 48 |
| 100-149 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 |
| >150 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 7 | 29 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 55 |

Maintenance Work on Properties

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties which have been allocated to applicants who are currently unable to move into the premises due to maintenance work being carried out. (AQW 1905/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are currently twenty four Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties which have been allocated but where the tenancy has not commenced due to major repairs being carried out. It is standard practice to allocate such properties when the work is nearing completion.

Social Security Office, Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current plans to upgrade the Social Security office in Cookstown to a Jobs and Benefits office. (AQW 1908/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency remains committed to the roll-out of a Jobs & Benefits service in Cookstown to ensure that clients benefit from the same enhanced work focused service which is available elsewhere in Northern Ireland. However, the Agency is also carrying out a Strategic Business Review to examine how best to

deliver services to the public in the future. The outcome of this Review will determine whether the Cookstown office will provide a Jobs and Benefits service only, or if it will also include a (back-office) benefits processing centre.

Closure of Reid Transport

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what plans her department has to assist workers who lost their jobs as a result of the closure of Reid Transport. (AQW 2135/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has been and continues to work closely with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to meet the needs of Reid Transport employees. Staff from the Social Security Agency (SSA) participated in a redundancy clinic set up by DEL in Cloughmills on 28 November. The Agency will provide comprehensive advice and information on social security benefits to all employees and assist with the completion of benefit claim forms where appropriate. Already over 60 urgent appointments have been arranged and priority will be given to processing these claims. Entitlement to benefit will depend on each individual's personal circumstances.

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